



## Colonial Era Threads and the Reweaving of Contemporary Times: A Gendered Discourse on Needlework

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### ABSTRACT

This paper traces the gendered discourse on needlework from its classical philosophical roots through its colonial re-inscription to its contemporary reweaving in arts practice and feminist design. Drawing on Wilkinson-Weber, Chambers, Chakravarty, Mukherjee, and Taşdizen, and on Indian legal scholarship by Balasubramanian, Nongmeikapam, and Bhat, this article argues that needlework is simultaneously an instrument of patriarchal containment and a vehicle of women's economic agency, aesthetic self-determination, and political voice. The paper reads the legal framework underpinning women's craft and domestic labour and concludes that meaningful reweaving of needlework requires legal recognition of craft as productive labour entitled to equal remuneration, social-security coverage, and intellectual-property protection, alongside cultural recognition that the gendered coding of needlework cannot be undone without dismantling the broader patriarchal coding of domestic work.

### Introduction

The word "needlework" may seem like a straightforward English term covering crochet, weaving, and stitching; but the same word carries with it complex ideologies, the most persisting of which is that it is

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exclusively a female activity (Das & Modak, 2014). Cultural, educational, and economic factors combined to ensure that individuals across classes believed women should be the ones doing household work in general, and needlework in particular. These norms spread globally through colonialism and remain embedded in the social and aesthetic structures of formerly colonised societies. In contemporary practice, however, the coding is being contested by feminist movements, by education reforms, by public media, and by the emergence of craft as art practice.

This paper has three goals: first, to identify the origins of the ideology that confines needlework to women; second, to analyse its dissemination through colonial practice and its persistence in post-colonial societies; and third, to examine the contemporary reweaving of needlework in arts practice and the law. The paper's central claim is twofold. That the patriarchal coding of needlework cannot be undone by cultural or pedagogical means alone, because the coding is sustained by economic structures that consistently undervalue women's domestic and artisanal labour; and that needlework's contemporary re-emergence as a vehicle of feminist voice, craftivist activism, and aesthetic self-determination will remain incomplete until law and policy formally recognise the labour it represents.

## Methodology

This paper adopts a doctrinal-analytical method combined with a literature review. The doctrinal framework draws on Balasubramanian's reading of gender inequality in India to provide the legal-analytical grammar of the present inquiry (Balasubramanian, 2023). The empirical and historical material is drawn from Wilkinson-Weber's reading of women, work, and the imagination of craft in South Asia, which provides the field-level evidence base for chikan embroidery and the broader South-Asian craft economy (Wilkinson-Weber, 2004). The arts-practice dimension is drawn from Taşdizen's contemporary reading of design education, in which the gendered hierarchy of design and craft is interrogated in a contemporary pedagogical setting (Taşdizen, 2026). The methodology is, accordingly, both doctrinal and qualitative-observational, in the spirit of feminist arts research that reads practice as evidence.

## Historical Context and Origins

Throughout history, thinkers and philosophers have attempted to entrench traditional gender norms that situate needlework within the feminine domain (Das & Modak, 2014). Aristotle articulated one of the foundational claims of the Western lineage, arguing that men and women have different virtues and roles by nature: men suited to public life, governance, and intellectual leadership; women suited to domestic roles, the raising of children, and the daily chores of the household. This distinction became the doctrinal anchor



of the Aristotelian claim that women's subordinate position is not contingent but natural, and that the activities appropriate to that position — including the production and maintenance of textiles — flow from this natural arrangement.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau extended the same line into educational theory (Das & Modak, 2014). In *Emile, or Education*, Rousseau argued that women's education should be oriented toward preparing them for their roles as wives and mothers; needlework, cooking, stitching, and housekeeping were the curricular core of this preparation. His approach cemented the perception that domestic accomplishment was the measure of a woman's worth, and that the absence of needlework competence was, by implication, a deficiency of feminine development. Confucius contributed the East Asian parallel: in the *Analects*, Confucian philosophy positioned the well-ordered household as the foundation of the stable society, and needlework was positioned as one of the essential skills women were expected to master (Das & Modak, 2014). The doctrinal convergence of Aristotelian, Rousseauian, and Confucian thought is significant: it shows that the gendered coding of needlework is not historically parochial but rather draws on multiple civilisational traditions that share the assumption of a public-male, private-female division of labour.

In the Indian context, the *Manusmriti* outlined strict rules for women's demeanour, reinforcing patriarchal norms through an elaborate framework of dependence: a woman should be under the protection of her father in childhood, her husband in youth, and her sons in old age (Das & Modak, 2014). This three-stage tutelage doctrine established the doctrinal reciprocity between male guardianship and female domestic labour — needlework included — that the orthodox Brahmanical tradition sustained into the early modern period. The convergence of these traditions shows that the gendered coding of needlework has been articulated as philosophical orthodoxy across cultures. The implication is that dismantling the coding cannot be left to pedagogy alone; it requires engagement with the philosophical and legal architectures that have historically sustained it (Balasubramanian, 2023). This is the gap that contemporary feminist legal scholarship has begun to identify: that formal equality provisions in constitutional text do not, on their own, dislodge the doctrinal encoding of woman-as-domestic, which is precisely why liberal-feminist provisions require radical-feminist and intersectional supplements.

### **Cultural and Educational Reinforcement**

The reinforcement of the gendered coding of needlework has not been left to abstract philosophy; it has operated through concrete cultural and educational institutions that shape the everyday behaviour of women and girls.



In the medieval and Renaissance periods across Europe, the household division of labour placed needlework squarely within the female sphere: men worked outside the home in farm work, trade, and civic affairs, while women managed domestic work, including sewing and knitting (Das & Modak, 2014). The historical literature on guilds in early modern Europe documents that even within artisanal economies where women were central producers, their work was institutionally coded as supplementary or lower-status, rather than as the principal economic activity.

In the Indian context, this pattern of cultural reinforcement took specific institutional form during the nineteenth century (Balasubramanian, 2023). Balasubramanian's reading of the constitutional settlement records that the nineteenth-century colonial education system for girls was very limited in its substantive range; even for girls from wealthy families, the schools available to them were oriented toward domestic preparation, with sewing, cooking, and childcare dominating the curriculum. The explicit belief was that the primary role of a female was to be a good wife and mother capable of managing the house. The nineteenth century too must be read through the lens of colonial education: missionary schools and colonial curricula imported the Western gendered division of curricular content, with girls receiving needlework and domestic-science instruction while boys received the academic subjects considered appropriate for future breadwinners, administrators, and traders (Balasubramanian, 2023).

The structural effect of these institutional choices was to constrain girls' productive capacities to the domestic sphere, while opening boys' productive capacities to the public sphere (Nongmeikapam, 2016). The legacy is clearly visible in the contemporary data on women's labour-force participation: educational pathways that excluded women from public-sphere skills and credentials produced generations of women whose only formal labour-market assets were the domestic skills they had been trained in. The legacy is also clearly visible in the contemporary commercial framing of needlework — in which advertising lines associate the needlework with feminine identity — indicating how durable the cultural coding remains even when legislative commitments to equality have been formally assumed. Nongmeikapam documents that Indian gender-equality reform has, since independence, formalised the equality principle in Articles 14, 15, and 16 of the Constitution; what remains unsettled, however, is the operational delivery of that principle to women whose working lives continue to be predominantly domestic (Nongmeikapam, 2016).

### **Economic Factors**

The economic structure of households has contributed to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes attached to needlework (Chambers, 2020). In working-class families worldwide, women have long used their needlework skills not only to maintain the household but also to contribute to its income: sewing and



mending clothes, producing textiles, embroidering tablecloths, and other saleable or barterable goods. The labour extended over many hours was counted, when it was counted at all, as supplementary rather than as economically productive.

In colonial India, the Great Depression of the late 1920s and 1930s, and the Bengal Famine of 1943, marked moments when needlework became more crucial than ever: with families needing to be self-sufficient and resourceful, women's ability to produce and mend fabric was essential for household survival (Chakravarty, 2021). In contemporary rural India, embroidery, textile weaving, and the creation of garments like saris and shawls remain common activities, with the cottage industry system permitting women to work from home while balancing domestic responsibilities with economic contributions (Chambers, 2020).

Two structural problems with this economic pattern recur across centuries and contexts. First, the skill was treated as natural rather than acquired — invisible as skill because the labourer was already doing similar work without pay inside the home. Second, the labour was treated as supplementary because it was performed within the domestic sphere, even when the economic value of what was produced met or exceeded the value of what the male head of household earned in cash (Wilkinson-Weber, 2004). Wilkinson-Weber's empirical work on chikan embroidery in Lucknow documents this pattern in granular detail: chikan production is widely portrayed as a leisure-time activity, but it actually employs poor, Muslim women workers on piece rates, with the embroiderers' distinctiveness used to shore up urban, middle-class ideals about tradition and heritage necessary to create demand for the handicraft products. The disguise of production as leisure; the coding of skilled labour as natural feminine aptitude; the pricing of the final commodity as artisan tradition rather than as the wage-effort of identifiable women — these are the three commercial operations through which women's craft work is structurally undervalued.

Chambers's reading of labour-force feminisation in Indian craft industries extends this analysis empirically (Chambers, 2020). The feminisation of zardozi embroidery work in Lucknow and in Bareilly has been paralleled by declining wages and declining occupational status. The same process is observable across textile stitching, loom operation, and keyboard work in other industrial contexts, where skills associated with female labourers are constructed as 'low', further justifying the gendered wage gap. The point Chambers makes is that feminisation and deskilling are not two separate phenomena but two names for the same process: as women enter artisanal occupations in greater numbers, wages fall and occupational status declines, regardless of the skill actually deployed. Mukherjee's recent work on the gendered labour differentials of zari craft in Bengal confirms the same dynamic at the craft-clusters she studies, where women home-based workers continue to remain unseen, unheard, and unrecognised in the wider discourse



of gendered labour policy, while male workers remain the pivot of industry (Mukherjee, 2026). The substantive economic question that follows is straightforward: if the labour is genuinely worth what the final product sells for, why does so little of that value reach the women who produced it?

### Spread Through Colonialism

The ideology that needlework is a gender-specific skill was not restricted to Western societies; it spread through the colonies across Africa, Asia, and the Americas during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries (Balasubramanian, 2023). These colonial powers imposed their values on the colonised societies, including the gender roles that prevailed in Europe, and missionary schools and colonial educational systems played a significant role in cementing the displacement. Girls in these schools were taught needlework and other domestic tasks while boys were prepared for administration, trade, or manual labour, importing and entrenching the divide across the colonies.

Chakravarty's reading of the embroidered quilted tradition of *nakshi kantha* in nineteenth-century Bengal demonstrates how complex the colonial imposition actually was (Chakravarty, 2021). The *sujni kantha* quilts she studies emerged in rural Bengal in a context of rapidly shifting sociopolitical fabric following the British takeover after the Battle of Plassey; the embroidered tableaux stitched into their surfaces bear witness to the changes, but they also, when later collected and museumised, became objects of a nationalist discourse that sought to foreground the spiritual autonomy of India through its long-standing traditions of art and craft.

Chakravarty's central observation is that a product of women's labour inscribed with women's unique perspectives on social change was thus de-historicised and reframed as an idealised example of women's service, patience, and cultural purity — values espoused by the nationalist elite of India. The colonial inheritance is doubled here: the British imposed a gendered curricular coding, and the post-colonial nationalist response re-aestheticised that coding as proof of indigenous cultural purity, leaving women's labour doubly invisible.

Chakravarty further argues that Partha Chatterjee's well-accepted thesis on the binaries of inside/outside that developed in the latter half of colonial rule — binaries that enjoined a restrictive, homebound life upon women

— requires qualification (Chakravarty, 2021). The *sujni kantha* specimens she examines challenge colonial stereotypes of native women relegated to the shadowy inner quarters of zenanas stuck in time, while also resisting the nationalist construct of idealised Indian womanhood. The point is that the same cloth object



carries, in its content, evidence of women's active perception of historical change, even when both colonial and nationalist discourses work to neutralise that evidence into an aestheticised femininity. This is the doubled operation that contemporary stitch-based feminist art continues to inherit, and it is what contemporary craftivist practice is in the process of unwinding.

The conjunction is doctrinally significant for the paper's argument about the law (Balasubramanian, 2023). The Indian constitutional settlement, which Balasubramanian traces through the work of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar as Chair of the Drafting Committee, did not directly dismantle the inside/outside binary that Chakravarty documents. It drafted Articles 14, 15, and 16 as transformative rather than merely protective, but the colonial curricular legacy that excluded women from public-sphere skills persists through the structure of women's labour, and the nationalist-aesthetic legacy that Chakravarty identifies persists through the cultural valuation of women's craft as timeless-tradition rather than as skilled-labour-in-the-present. Bhat's review of gender discrimination and women's development in India underlines that the formal architecture of equality is now in place across the constitutional text, the principal central statutes, and the relevant state-level instruments, but what remains unsettled is the operational delivery of that architecture to women whose working lives are predominantly informal and domestic (Bhat, 2025).

### **Contemporary Challenges and Evolution**

The view that needlework is solely a woman's domain is being challenged on multiple fronts in contemporary society.

First, feminist movements across the globe — through the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries — have played an enormous role in challenging the traditional gender norms (Nongmeikapam, 2016). These movements argued for the acknowledgment of domestic work done by women, including needlework, and promoted the idea of an equitable distribution of household responsibilities between men and women. The result is a slow but discernible erosion of the clear distinctions between men's work and women's work in the household, although the legal and economic apparatus that values those distinctions has not, in many jurisdictions, been formally rebuilt.

Second, dynamic economic structures have shifted the calculus (Nongmeikapam, 2016). As more women join the formal workforce and as dual-income households become the predominant pattern, the assumption that one adult in the household has the time to perform all unpaid domestic labour has become unsustainable in many contexts. The entry of women into paid work does not, on its own, undo the gendered coding of needlework — many women now do paid work outside the home and continue to perform needlework



inside it — but it does put pressure on the assumption that needlework is the natural condition of female labour.

Third, educational reforms have shifted the curricular landscape (Taşdizen, 2026). The contemporary educational system is more deliberately gender-neutral; all genders are welcome to participate in needlework-related extracurricular activities, and design schools and college programmes increasingly admit students of all genders into what were once female-coded arts programmes. Taşdizen's contemporary reading of design education documents that despite the historical marginalisation of women's crafts in both professional design and design education, a growing body of contemporary practice positions craftswomen as instructors and students as participants — providing a critical perspective on design education, interrogating assumptions of expertise and originality, and contributing to debates on inclusivity, creativity, and the recognition of non-professional knowledge in design practice. The reordering of expertise — where craftswomen teach rather than being seen as the object of study — is itself a feminist re-coding of needlework that the contemporary design school is only beginning to absorb.

Fourth, media representations have shifted (Nongmeikapam, 2016). The needlework has increasingly been portrayed with more egalitarian representation on blogs, on YouTube channels, and on television shows, with men and women engaging in stitching and crafting on a basis of equal recognition. Channels such as "Man Sewing" demonstrate that needlework and quilting are gender-neutral crafts in terms of skill and creative expression. The shift in media representation is important because it works at the level of everyday consumer culture, where most viewers form their assumptions about which activities are appropriate for which genders.

Fifth, professional and artistic recognition has re-classified needlework as a sophisticated design-driven art and craft, with careers in fashion design and textile arts open to men as much as to women (Taşdizen, 2026).

Designers renowned for their contributions to knitting and needlework demonstrate conclusively that skill at these crafts is not gender-determined.

Sixth, and most distinctive of contemporary development, the *craftivism* movement has emerged as a hybrid form in which activism and craft combine to challenge gender stereotypes related to needlework (Chakravarty, 2021). Organised movements and networks use needlework as a means of protesting social and political issues. The 2017 Women's March, in which thousands of women wore pink "pussyhats" knitted or crocheted for the occasion, stands as a high-visibility example of the revival of traditionally feminine crafts as a vehicle of mass political expression. Craftivism's analytical force, in the present context,



is that it re-positions needlework from being a marker of the feminine-domestic-natural sphere to being an instrument of public-sphere political voice; in doing so, it directly contests the inside/outside binary that Chakravarty identifies as the colonial legacy.

Whether the contestation is recognised in law, however, is a separate question — one that the road-ahead discussion below returns to.

### **The Road Ahead**

The road ahead requires more than continued personal transformation; it requires an explicit dismantling of the cultural coding; an explicit expansion of the curricular coding; an explicit restructuring of the economic valuation of crafts; and an explicit reconsideration of the legal status of domestic and artisanal labour (Balasubramanian, 2023). Specifically, the work that remains to be done includes:

- (a) curricular change that does not merely permit boys into needlework classes but actively foregrounds needlework as a valuable skill for everyone, irrespective of gender, and that integrates the history of the gendered coding into the curriculum so that the coding is not perpetuated unconsciously (Taşdizen, 2026);
- (b) market-facing change that acknowledges the skilled-labour content of women's craft production, that prices the final commodity at rates that allow the producer rather than only the intermediary to earn a living wage, and that recognises women's intellectual property in their designs through formal copyright and design-rights frameworks (Chambers, 2020);
- (c) representational change that does not stop at including men in needlework media but extends to challenging the underlying coding by which the activity itself is subordinated to other forms of practice (Chakravarty, 2021);
- (d) legal change that closes the operational gap between formal equality and the lived conditions of women whose working lives continue to be predominantly domestic, by extending equal-remuneration, social-security, and labour-rights coverage to women working in the cottage, household, and home-based craft sectors (Bhat, 2025).

The contemporary writing on this subject must continually try both to challenge and to dismantle these old gender-based perceptions of needlework as being only a female thing to do; and by embracing a more inclusive approach for needlework, the practice will not only be recognised but also have its historical importance appreciated and its creative and communal value acknowledged without gender constraints (Balasubramanian, 2023). The present paper's contribution is to argue that this genuine appreciation and



acknowledgement requires formal-legal as well as cultural change — that the reweaving of needlework cannot be left to arts practice alone.

## Conclusion

This paper has traced the gendered discourse on needlework from its philosophical and historical roots through its colonial dissemination to its contemporary re-emergence as a contested form of craft, art, and political voice (Das & Modak, 2014). Culturally, the philosophical convergence of Aristotelian, Rousseauian, Confucian, and Brahmanical traditions established needlework as a natural-feminine-domestic activity, and the cultural-educational reinforcement through colonial and post-colonial institutions entrenched that coding into the everyday behaviour of women across societies. Economically, the gendered coding facilitated the systematic undervaluation of women's craft labour, with wages and occupational status declining as feminisation increased (Chambers, 2020). The spread of this coding through colonialism was doubled in the post-colonial period by nationalist discourses that aestheticised women's labour as proof of indigenous cultural purity, simultaneously de-historicising the labour and invisibilising the women who performed it (Chakravarty, 2021). In the contemporary moment, the coding is being challenged through feminist movements, education reforms, media representation, professional recognition, and the craftivist turn in arts practice. These cultural and pedagogical shifts are substantive and important (Nongmeikapam, 2016). They are, however, incomplete without a corresponding shift in legal and economic structures that formally recognise needlework as productive labour entitled to equal remuneration, social-security coverage, and intellectual-property protection (Bhat, 2025). The stitched protest banner and the embroidery-hooked slogan will remain symbolic gestures unless the women who make them can earn a living wage, hold property in their own name, retain copyright in their designs, and access social security on equal terms with workers in any other sector.

The reweaving of needlework is therefore both an aesthetic project and a legal project, and the two must proceed together (Balasubramanian, 2023). The historical evidence shows that the patriarchal coding of craft cannot be dismantled by aesthetic means alone; the contemporary evidence shows that it is being dismantled by an emerging arts practice that fuses craft and activism. The unresolved question is whether law will follow practice. If the answer is to be affirmative, the legal architecture for women's domestic and craft labour will need to be re-engineered; if the answer is to be negative, the cultural and aesthetic re-coding will continue to operate on an unrecognised labour base, and the reweaving will remain visually impressive without being substantively equitable.

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