

**THE LOOM FALLS
SILENT: WEAVERS
RESPOND TO THE
PANDEMIC**

—

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Published by Zubaan Publishers Pvt. Ltd 2025

In collaboration with the Sasakawa Peace Foundation



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Typeset in Arno Pro 11/13

THE LOOM FALLS SILENT: WEAVERS RESPOND TO THE PANDEMIC

Whenever we visited my paternal grandmother in Thenzawl, a large village south of Aizawl, my mother always stopped to visit the puan shops that lined the streets in the town's centre. 'Puan' literally translates to 'cloth' and is the name for the traditional handwoven wrap in Mizoram. Stepping into each shop was like entering an art gallery, each puan with beautifully woven patterns, motifs, and unlikely colour interactions on display. The puan is not only used as a wrap, but also to design bags, blouses, and shawls. Thenzawl is well known as a centre for Mizoram's thriving traditional handloom industry—that is, until the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Today, the same streets seem nearly abandoned, with metal doors bolted shut and the streets themselves often empty. Behind these locked doors are the puan that represent the time, labour, and material that women spent to earn their livelihoods. Other than Thenzawl, handloom-weaving is also practised in Aizawl, creating a large informal economy of weavers made up mostly of women. With shops shut and lockdowns in place, women no longer have markets to sell their products. Even if they wanted to continue

their craft without any sales, yarn prices have increased and many have had to leave their looms, unable to continue weaving.

I have always admired the variety of puan that adorned my mom's closet, each design so intricate and eye-catching. Before the pandemic, I had rarely thought about the person behind each puan, the individuals who sat for hours, painstakingly turning yarn into cloth. Likewise, when Mizoram went into a strict lockdown in March 2020, the weavers were not the first people who came to mind. They did not immediately catch my attention, especially because they were already invisible even before the lockdown. Even in the public imagination of loss during the pandemic, handloom weavers rarely made headlines, despite being responsible for weaving the fabric of Mizoram's cultural identity. When I visited my grandmother in Thenzawl later, and saw the streets so devoid of their usual colour, I finally asked my mother, 'What happened to the weavers?' Thus began my attempts to better understand, and listen to, stories from the handloom weavers themselves.

Although I spoke to many weavers to get a better sense of the situation, I have recorded and written three stories, each person representing a different situation and reaction to the pandemic. First in this collection of stories is Niang, a Burmese immigrant and a mother of four, living on the outskirts of Aizawl. The second is Zaii, a young weaver who had to return to her village when the lockdown began. The last is Mami, a young mother in Thenzawl. I am grateful to each person who gave me their time and allowed me to listen to their stories, particularly these three women who agreed to have their stories written up and shared with the public. Keeping in mind the sensitivities in asking people to talk about their losses, I held unstructured conversations with each person, ensuring that they were able to leave the conversation whenever they wanted to. Talking without a clear roadmap allowed me to listen better. Each person was more willing to open up when they realised they could talk about their experiences without worrying about my expectations.

Before delving into what I learned from my conversations, it is important to first understand the role of handloom weavers, and the puan they weave in Mizo society. In Mizoram, the handloom industry is one of the biggest forms of employment in the informal sector, and an important source of income for people, particularly women, from rural parts of the state (Economic Survey, 2023). Handloom weavers are spread out in clusters across Aizawl, the capital city, and Thenzawl. While the introduction of large wooden handlooms is recent, handloom-weaving, particularly with back-strap looms, has always been deeply embedded in Zo culture. Before textiles were woven for commercial sale, each household had a back-strap loom, and women were all expected to master the craft before they came of marrying age. Woven cotton wraps were worn by everyone, with no distinctions made by gender, and the woven fabric was also used for other necessities such as shirts, shawls, or blankets. The arrival of missionaries in the small hill state brought the British ideals of dress and changed the style from cotton wraps to more Western styles of dress, especially for men, who had to conform to the ideal masculine fashion of pants and shirts (Pachau, 2014). Despite the rapid change in style, many women continued to don the puan in rural areas for a long time, but overall, Western clothing styles replaced these traditional textiles. However, the puan is still regularly worn during special occasions such as festivals (where both men and women wear traditional designs), weddings, and funerals. More notably, most women are expected to wear the puan to church every Sunday, especially after they are recognised as adults by the church. While there are definite gendered norms attached to this requirement, especially when most women do not have much of a choice about what they wear to church, there is no doubt that puan is the most noteworthy visual and material representation of our culture. Likewise, handloom weavers continue to be the backbone of our cultural heritage, weaving our past with our present context.

As the pandemic swept across the world, its ripples reached the cities and towns of Mizoram, home to a large population of traditional

handloom weavers. Among these weavers was Niang, a resilient Burmese immigrant and mother of four, whose looms fell silent as lockdowns shuttered markets and made yarn unaffordable. Zaii, a young weaver brimming with dreams, was forced to abandon her craft and return to her village, her aspirations put on indefinite hold. Then there was Mami, a determined young mother in Thenzawl, who found her livelihood hanging by a thread as the vibrant streets that once buzzed with the sounds of weaving and commerce became desolate. These women's stories are a testament to the cultural richness of the puan and to the profound impact of the pandemic, which not only threatened their economic stability but also challenged their dignity and independence. Through their voices, we glimpse the intricate tapestry of resilience and vulnerability that defines the lives of Mizoram's weavers, whose art and perseverance continue to shine even in the face of unprecedented adversity.

* * *

On March 24, 2020, Mizoram reported its first case of the novel coronavirus (Laltlanzovi et al., 2023). With the first report came a wave of panic and fear that has not been repeated since, even as cases climb beyond a thousand in a day. Immediate and total lockdown was put in place and with it, schools, shops, offices, and all public events were shut down, creating a ghost town out of Aizawl, and of larger villages such as Thenzawl. The handlooms fell silent. While puan is often woven for special occasions, regular sales are driven by weekly church services. Many of the women I spoke to recollected that when churches closed their doors due to the lockdown, sales came to a complete halt, and weavers lost their only means of income. Their recollections greatly shape my understanding of the subsequent events. With the transportation of material also disrupted, yarn became too expensive to procure throughout the lockdown, dealing a blow whose effects would be felt for a longer period (Shahi and Renthlei, 2024). While there are several actors in the handloom sector, the worst-hit were the weavers, the people who depended on their weekly sales

and usually did not make enough to save up for such uncertain times. With a lack of safety nets and formal financial institutions to borrow from, many struggled to find enough money for daily necessities. Even before the lockdown, most weavers made only about 1,500 rupees a week—enough for some single weavers to send money to family back home, but rarely enough for those who had to support an entire family of their own. The financial effects of the lockdown differed according to each person's situation, but overall, it led to losses that were difficult to recover from. Due to the lack of sales, some had to borrow money from their employers or simply risk going hungry. Additionally, while women from Myanmar make up a small percentage of handloom weavers in Mizoram, they lost so much during the pandemic and beyond the pandemic. Many are immigrants or refugees, and lost their physical connection to home due to the military coup in Myanmar. They are doubly marginalised, based on their citizenship (which comes with its own vulnerabilities and marginalities) and their loss of employment. Although I only spoke with one weaver from Myanmar living in Aizawl, she shared that conditions were mostly similar among the community. Many migrant weavers in her locality returned home when the pandemic first hit, afraid they would not survive the loss of employment and regular income. The military coup in February 2021 added a layer of adversity, as many who stayed in Mizoram lost all contact with people on the other side of the border. The deeper details of such losses are highlighted in Niang's story.

While the loss is financial at the surface, there are other layers of loss beneath—particularly of dignity, independence, and of course the loss of health and life due to the illness. This loss also exacerbates the vulnerabilities that the weavers already encounter in their everyday lives, beyond the pandemic—the loss of their voices and agency, the burdens and expectations they face in the domestic space, and lack of access to adequate healthcare, to name a few. One of the main losses that accompanied the financial one was the feeling of dignity that many women derived from their work. Although weaving may not lead to significant returns for the women, they gained respect

for what they did, even if it was from within. Endless hours on the wooden machines would lead to aching bones, but also allowed them to prove that they were hardworking and capable of earning their worth. It wasn't that the puan they weaved individually held much meaning, but rather they could see an amalgamation of their efforts and dedication in their products, which gave them a feeling of dignity. Whether one must work so much or be productive to receive respect and earn society's approval is another question altogether, but for the weavers, it mattered. However, the idleness that many had to endure for months came with a heavy price; some could no longer contribute to families far away while some could not provide for the ones right at home. This led to feelings of desperation and loss for the women I spoke with, who could no longer cling to their work for assurance of their contributions. The pandemic also brought fear and hopelessness in general. The women I spoke with were not unaffected by the same uncertainties that afflicted everyone during the pandemic. They feared that they or their family would lose their health, or never be able to earn for themselves again, and tried to find ways to ease the hopelessness of being stuck at home one day after the other. For some, it was a fear of where they would be in the next few weeks or months, whether they would still have food or a place to sleep, or if they would be able to afford healthcare if they caught the virus. While their losses, both economic and social, caused much suffering and even hopelessness at times, the weavers found ways to cope with their difficulties. In some cases, women found solace in their continued health, or with their families. For others, the pandemic highlighted community solidarity, which was what allowed them to survive the most difficult times. When I heard these personal narratives of strength and collective persistence, it was easy for me to admire their resilience and celebrate them for it. However, only celebrating their resilience, without trying to better understand the social structures that have put them through such unequal losses, would be short-sighted.

The closest term to resilience in Mizo is 'tuarchhelna' ('tuar' meaning adversity and 'chhel' meaning endurance), a word that

never came up in my conversations with weavers. No one ever called themselves *tuarchhel*, yet that is what I thought of them after listening to their stories—a label I had attached to them rather than one they embraced for themselves. Although they had found ways to cope with their situations, to call them resilient and leave it at that would be to perpetuate the systematic inequalities they are already subjected to. This is not to say that we should not admire their strength in finding ways to push through difficult times, but rather that it is important to not romanticise their resilience. In romanticising resilience, we run the risk of taking away the responsibility that the state, or we as a collective society, have towards people living at the margins.

While the pandemic worsened their situations, it also revealed how pre-existing social structures have already disadvantaged handloom weavers, leaving them more vulnerable during the global crisis. Adversity has always been unequally distributed, and the pandemic only further uncovered these inequalities. Perhaps most obvious is the lack of social safety nets for women working in the handloom sector, especially as loss of employment comes with immediate repercussions such as loss of any form of income, loss of access to healthcare, and sometimes a loss of means to afford meals. For weavers with families that depend on their income, this is even more difficult—especially with the loss of access to proper education for children. When the pandemic took away the weavers' livelihoods, women's groups and faith-based organisations made calls to the government to provide support and offer a minimum safety net to cover their basic needs. Unfortunately, the handloom weavers were not a priority for the government; no words were spoken by government officials to even acknowledge their plight, much less pledge monetary support for their needs. Despite arguably bearing the weight of preserving Mizoram's cultural heritage to a great extent, the government did not see *puan* as an essential commodity and did not attempt to support handloom weavers in any way. This lack of governmental support was not only borne out of the pandemic, but also from the continued negligence of a community that has always been at the margins.

Another failure to provide a support system came from the Mizoram Handloom & Handicraft Cooperative Society, a society established to uplift and empower handloom weavers that is mostly run by people who own handlooms or employ large groups of weavers. Although weavers themselves are sometimes a part of the Society, most rarely have the time to attend meetings or be a part of any initiatives that the society takes. During the lockdown and in later stages of the pandemic, society members were criticised for not taking any action to negotiate or control the prices of puan. Intermediaries and sellers controlled prices, without any opportunities for weavers to negotiate the price of their own crafts. The pandemic highlighted the flawed market structure that handloom weavers must engage with—without such control over prices, weavers were forced to sell their products at much lower prices after lockdown restrictions were lifted, further setting them back. This caused continued dissatisfaction for weavers who never had the upper hand, even pre-pandemic, in controlling the prices for their labour and craft.

In addition to such challenges, patriarchy is still deeply embedded in Mizo society, and revealed in the ways women carried more of the burden when it came to losses suffered during the pandemic. My conversations made me realise how women were still extensively burdened in domestic spaces; even in times of distress, they were forced to be resilient. Even though most of the women I spoke to worked almost ten hours a day before the pandemic struck, they were still expected to clean, cook, and be responsible for their children, no matter how physically drained they were from their work. This remained true during the pandemic. Most were forced to fill their time serving family or labouring in the house despite the fear, anxiety, or fatigue they might face. There is yet another layer of marginalisation that comes with being an immigrant, for weavers from Myanmar. Without a proper support system for immigrants or refugees in the country, most Burmese residents have no formal support or even kin-based connections to lean on during times of distress. Without sufficient state or local support, many ended up returning to their

homes in Myanmar, and those who stayed had to mitigate the risks of living in a foreign country without any income, all on their own. The military coup in Myanmar further added to their adversity as they lost connection to any semblance of home, and were cut off from their families, unsure if they even survived the violence in their hometowns.

These are large, structural issues that do not offer immediate solutions, and indeed it is not my ambition to find the answers. However, bringing these stories, and thereby bringing the larger structural injustices that handloom weavers face, to a broader audience is just as important in understanding their lives and what our collective responsibility may be towards them. Our challenge lies in figuring out what these responsibilities are in the first place. In the context of Mizoram, one thing that we can attempt to do is buy locally handcrafted textiles—not just puan, but also things such as bags and shawls, to support weavers especially in the post-pandemic world. But this is a temporary fix and not a structural change. The larger issue lies in the lack of representation of people from the handloom sector—weavers, intermediaries, and puan sellers, all women, who have very few spaces to voice their problems and concerns. Even though the handloom and textile chain is run almost entirely by women, the Mizoram Handloom and Handicraft Society is run by a man as president, one chosen despite his lack of direct involvement in the sector, and in place of many women who have far more knowledge and experience to understand the struggles of the women working in it. This is also a symptom of the greater affliction that Mizoram suffers from, of the lack of political opportunities for women in the state. Despite priding itself in being an equal society that empowers and celebrates women, Mizoram rarely features women in prominent seats of power, especially in state politics. This translates to a dearth of representation in policies that pertain to women, who make up half of the population. Although the stories I tell in this anthology do not bring up these concerns, they are points I hope to keep in mind as I continue to listen to more stories from women who have struggled so much, and who we have asked to keep being resilient in the face

of structural, daily violence committed against them. The stories that follow are much more personal and reveal each person's losses and strengths in different ways. Just as I hope the system one day gives them the justice they deserve, I hope my writing also does their stories justice and gives them a platform to be heard, and listened to.

‘I thought things would be better here’

When I first met Niang, she told me she had little to say, that she wasn't a good speaker. But when she began to speak, I rushed to keep up as she spun and wove the captivating fabric of her life. To tell Niang's experiences of the pandemic, we have to first know who she is and what brought her to where she is today. Niang was twenty-two when she first stepped across the border separating Myanmar and Mizoram. Young and recently married, she believed her new life would bring her the bounty she could not grasp at home. Despite leaving behind all of her family—her parents, siblings and extended family—she was hopeful, and why shouldn't she have been? She believed she would find a job as a weaver and that her husband would provide for her too. She believed that life would be better across the river that separated two cities, two nations, two circumstances.

When they arrived in Aizawl, Niang found an empty handloom to start her work while her husband worked odd jobs, sometimes leaving for days in the jungle to work as a logger. Niang woke up to a cold bed and went to sleep yearning for a warm hand to reach for, but her loneliness was the least of her concerns. At that time, Burmese immigrants were forbidden from selling the puan they wove, as they did not have the documentation required to do so, issued by the handloom association. So, she sold in secret and lived from sale to sale, sometimes only affording rice while her husband drank away his earnings. Two children and a few years later, Niang was exhausted. After four hours of sleep every night, she would rise before the sun could peek through the nearby hills. She only had a couple of hours to prepare the day's meals before her children sought her attention and the workday began. By 8:00 AM, she would have to start her rhythmic

jaunt on the handloom, filling their one-room home with the click-clack noises of wood against wood. Despite her small frame, Niang was a diligent weaver, tirelessly kicking her legs all day with only a few breaks to eat, in between. When her family needed more money, she sometimes worked till 10:00 PM, only to repeat the routine the next morning. Each day, each week, each month was the same. Many nights, she shed tears that no one else would see, that no one could comfort her over. Yet she always found the strength to wipe them herself, and wake up and start the next day all over again.

Things were not made easier by her husband's absence. He spent most days working in the jungles in the suburbs of Aizawl, but his presence at home on the weekends meant little for the lonely Niang. He drank, and took out his frustrations on his wife. She absorbed the verbal and physical jaunts and pretended everything was okay for her children, only allowing the occasional tear to fall when she was alone at night. Niang recalled her past unashamedly, even as her husband—obviously drunk even then—sat nearby, listening attentively to our conversation. As Niang spoke about him, she didn't look afraid or angry, but a resigned and tired look eclipsed her face and made clear how difficult it had been for her. At his insistence, Niang said that although her husband still drank, he wasn't as bad as before he had finally learned a different craft and begun to fix and assemble handloom parts around Aizawl.

Although her husband was around and contributed more to the family, all household duties still fell on Niang, who was only afforded one day away from her loom. On Sundays, she gathered the week's pile of dirty clothes and spent the day hand-washing, drying, and folding them—all the while having to run after her children. Now numbering in four, her children were simultaneously a constant source of joy, regret, pride, and worry for her. When the conversation turned to their children, both Niang and her husband immediately said, 'Our eldest daughter ranked first in her class!' But no matter how many teachers advised them to move their children to better schools, no matter what promise their children showed, Niang was struck with the reality that

they would never be able to afford the education that the children needed, and deserved, to excel even more. This was, and continues to be, Niang's biggest regret.

Despite painstaking hours on the handloom provided by her employer, Niang's effort did not translate into an adequate amount for her family. She could usually weave around three to four puan in a week and earn around 1,500 rupees. Niang admitted that the money was barely enough to afford the week's meals for their family of six. Each week, they needed at least fifteen kilograms of rice, not to mention the dal, potatoes, and vegetables. 'We don't eat nice meals like other families. I should be eating good things, nutritious things for my frail body. But we simply cannot afford it.' The treacherous battle between Niang's small frame and the wooden machine caused her sores and backaches, and she is not sure how much longer she can continue to work as a weaver. Yet there is nothing else she can do to earn a living, so she continues to weave. The lack of money for food also proved a nuisance for her children, who couldn't enjoy the delights of the deep-fried chips or chocolates that their peers ate. More than the lack of variety on their dinner table, Niang hated that she couldn't even occasionally give her children what they wanted—even if what they wanted was not the healthiest, or necessary.

Although things were getting slightly easier with her husband's contributions to the household, the lockdown following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 caused a new set of challenges for Niang's family. With complete lockdown in Aizawl, her husband was no longer able to leave the house to fix machines around town, and the sale of puan came to a sudden halt. Without warning, Niang's family had no way of earning. When the lockdown began, Niang's employers warned that they would not be able to take any puan, even if they were completed. To add to the burden, yarn became even more expensive as the pandemic rolled on, and the employers could no longer provide the yarn to continue their weaving. Niang often went a week or two without work and only earned when the employers found the occasional source to sell her products. As the pandemic and all its

threats of illness and job loss knocked on their doors, many Burmese immigrants in her community packed up to go back home across the border, where they at least had a family to rely on. Out of the twenty families that lived in their local community of immigrants, only four remained—including Niang's. Added stress came from the imminent loss of her house. As people moved away and took their labour with them, the owners of the house the family lived in could no longer afford to keep their land and had sold it for use as grounds to the local university. 'We don't know where we will go next or how we will afford rent,' said Niang. 'How will we even afford to move in the first place?'

With an uncertain future and a precarious present, the days and nights Niang spent on the loom were replaced with more immediate concerns of how they would eat their next meal. With more time on her hands, she had planted a small garden in the patch of soil behind her house. They made it through the first and second lockdown with the meagre rice they could afford, and the insignificant harvest from this garden. Although she worried that her four growing children were not getting what they needed, there was little she could do when no meal was guaranteed. The children were no longer going to school in person, and had to all take classes from the one shared smartphone in their house. With three of four children attending classes, Niang had to negotiate with teachers so that each child could take classes at a different time of day. As she pled her family's case to each teacher, they all understood their situation and changed their class timings, or offered separate tuition for her children.

Unlike Mizo families living in Aizawl, Niang had no family to reach out to when they needed money or food. Although her employers sometimes lent them money, they were also struggling. Beyond her immediate family of six, everyone else was in Tahan, in the Chin state of Myanmar. On top of the distress brought by the pandemic, another momentous event in 2021 further affected them. The military coup of February 1, 2021, in Myanmar gravely affected the place they called home. When we spoke, Niang had not spoken to her family in more than half a year as all the phone lines in their hometown had been cut.

'I don't even know if they are still alive,' she plainly said, though it was a grave statement of loss and anxiety. In the months that followed the coup, Niang lost touch with everyone she knew back home. The phone numbers which she was familiar with only replied with obnoxious beeps that sounded the loss of everyone she left behind. Niang did not want to dwell on the details, but rather accepted what she could not change. I couldn't help but wonder how she did it, to speak of a loss so profound with a demeanour so calm. Perhaps it came from her acceptance of the losses that life had presented to her so far.

Despite all the worries and losses brought on by the pandemic, Niang clung to her family's good health. 'It's been difficult, but at least we are healthy.' As the virus jumped around Mizoram, infecting more than a lakh of people and claiming 623 lives, Niang's family managed to avoid falling victim to it. Even as the virus continued to spread in the city, she was hopeful that they could avoid it by taking every precaution—avoiding crowded public spaces, washing up if anyone goes out, and staying home as much as possible. For her family, the risk of catching the virus goes beyond the health implications. Being sick would mean diverting their limited food funds to medicine, and potentially to hospital bills. So, she takes more care than anyone to be wary of the pandemic, always keeping in mind the threat of what could be. Putting aside everyday anxieties, Niang finds time to be grateful. While anyone else in her shoes might find reasons to complain, or express their anxieties, she spoke more of everything she had than what she lacked. Speaking to her and witnessing her resilience, I learned that loss and grief do not have to be separated from hope and gratitude. During the pandemic, Niang realised that she received more love and care from God and the community around her than she ever had before. All of her sentences started with 'by God's grace' and she spoke of how their health was a testament to the fact that they were always protected by God. Through her difficult losses, Niang was uplifted by her faith and gained strength from her unstinting belief in the promise of her God. She also fondly recalled how members of the local church's youth group distributed money and food rations to her

family and to the community members around her. To her, such acts of kindness and solidarity were blessings revealed by the pandemic, and they allowed her to remain hopeful and get through the otherwise difficult times. With my preconceptions of her life as one of loss and grief, I had undermined the avenues of comfort that made every day worth getting through. She suffered loss, but it did not define her. She had her regrets and her fears, but her strength amidst her losses spoke far louder.

YEARNING FOR HOME

When the pandemic struck Aizawl, Zaii felt immobilised by the fear that came along with it. As the city went into lockdown, she immediately wished to go back home, back to her village where safety called. But knowing her family relied on her earnings, Zaii decided to swallow her fears and continue weaving, slinking into her corner with her handloom and refusing to step out. No matter how hard she tried, her fear showed through. Her friends recalled how she spent most of her time jittery and unfocused, as if the virus had taken a physical form and come to haunt her. Her reaction seemed overdramatic and unnecessary in hindsight, but at the time she felt the world was closing in around her. She feared the virus, especially as she scrolled through messages on WhatsApp groupchats at night reporting the accounts of new infections and deaths, the number rising every day. She also foresaw the loss of her job on the horizon, the virus not only taking people's health but also their sources of income. She wanted nothing but to go home, but she waited and worked till she no longer could.

Her younger sister and parents longed for her to be with them as well. With the virus making rounds in the city, their village was a much safer place to be, but Zaii pushed on with her work. On the front end of the lockdown in 2020, her employer was still able to pay the weavers for their puan, their finished cloth wraps, despite the lack of

sales. However, as the lockdown droned on longer than expected, the employer had no money left either and slowly stopped paying them in full. Lockdown meant that public church services and all other formal events were cancelled, the market for puan shutting with them. It eventually came to the point where her employer no longer had the money for yarn to don their looms. Zaii realised that inevitably, the time to go home had come. For a few weeks, she had to stay in the small shack that doubled as both her bedroom and her workplace, with no work and slowly running out of rice and gas. With lockdown strictly in place, there was no way for her to travel to her village. Her anxiety grew worse; all she wanted to do was go home, where at least family awaited.

A few months into lockdown, the chance to travel home finally arrived. She was elated, but also feared that she might never come back, and would lose the job that had made her independent and allowed her to support her family for the first time in her life. But worries about the future were nothing compared to the distress of the present. With a lightened heart, she climbed on the crowded, rugged Tata Sumo filled with strangers, all heading for a semblance of peace and safety that the city could no longer promise.

Home was as warm and safe as she expected. Her parents, especially her father, had missed her and felt better when she was with them. But outside her front doors, people reacted a little differently. 'Why are you home?' 'Are you never going back to weave again?' Nosy neighbours and strangers did not think of the pandemic, but thought she had failed in her duty to work in the city for her family. Although she explained her situation to many, she soon grew tired and resorted to silence around prying questions. Instead she worked in the fields with her parents, her body wired to work hard for long hours. She remarked that roaming around all day under the scorching sun in the fields was easier than sitting in one location from dawn till nighttime. The fields didn't make her bottom or her back ache in the way her wooden loom did. Being at home, away from her handloom, was initially a relief for Zaii. The small, cramped structure she called home in the city was cold

and bleary compared to the home she grew up in. It didn't matter that they were about equal in space.

With no sign of the lockdown being lifted in the city, Zaii began to worry again. What if the nosy neighbours were right? What if she never got to return to weaving and earning for her family again? Upon reflection, Zaii realised that despite all the joy that she had grown up around, she had sacrificed a lot because of their family's limited means of livelihood. While she had lost her job and her family could not live as well without her pay, the pandemic made her realise that the real loss she faced was deeper-rooted in her social condition. Why had she decided to become a handloom weaver in the first place? For her, the pandemic revealed a loss that was not tangible or only monetary, but rather opened her eyes to losses of the past—of education, comfort, and family.

Zaii had left her village to travel to Aizawl in 2018, hoping the city would allow her to be more useful to her parents. She had dropped out of school after finishing the ninth grade. She had believed that studying further would not have amounted to anything and had begun working in her family's fields right after dropping out, but did not feel she contributed enough. When she first reached Aizawl, she was simply excited to learn. Zaii had never woven cloth before, had never even seen a handloom in her life. Yet she was expected to learn the ropes in just three days, earning little to nothing for the next three months that she spent making unsatisfactory puan. But she never complained and kept pushing through until she was able to produce at least five puan in a week. Before the pandemic, Zaii was able to earn around 6,000 rupees a month, spending around 2,000 rupees on food and sending the rest of it home in cash or through other materials. Even as she saw the fruits of her labour, and saw how her earnings made life more comfortable for her family back home, she felt lonely in the city and longed to go home. Even though her family sometimes considered bringing her home for good, no one wanted to pass up the great opportunity that she had built up with her weaving in Aizawl. Besides, being at home meant she would spend her days in the fields just like her parents, and she wanted

to make sure her sister got better opportunities than she had received. Keeping this in mind, she convinced herself that she could keep her anxieties at bay and thrive through her job. This constant yearning and separation from home took its greatest toll just as the pandemic began to hit Mizoram, and made her realise how her family's social condition had made her lose so much. Yet by then, she also had something else to lose, her source of pride and independence—her job.

Zaii spent the lockdown toiling the fields and wondering if she would ever return to the life she once had; a life of loneliness, but simultaneously one that provided for her family's and her own needs. During this time, her family's condition had slipped back to what it had been before. Although they grew what they needed to eat, it wasn't the life that they had gotten used to. Not only had Zaii lost her source of income, but her family also had nowhere to sell their produce. She then swore to herself that since she wanted her family to live in comfort, she would work as hard as she could, even if it meant being in a faraway city without loved ones around. As the pandemic slowed its course and lockdowns lifted, Zaii returned to the city and worked twice as hard on her weaving, determined to gain back what she had lost. She was not alone. Working for years in the same place, Zaii was delighted to return to a place full of familiar faces, with people she realised she could call friends. The pandemic had made her stronger, and see all that she had gained. Her work was not necessarily easier, and she still called her father whenever she could, but she was also happy to be working again. She revelled in the pride that she could provide for a family she loved, a family that had raised her with care.

Listening to Zaii reminded me that resilience in itself cannot be celebrated without recognising the difficulties that make it a necessity in the first place. Although her story sounds like one of hope, strength, and resilience, it is also a reflection on the lived realities for many weavers, especially those who have to move far away from home to provide for their families. While the pandemic may have caused suffering and loss, it also unearthed the precarious lives that many of them lived even before it. Although Zaii found her way to manage the

life of loneliness, and can still continue a physically demanding job every day, it is difficult not to question the structures that have made such difficulty a necessity in the first place.

A MOTHER BEFORE A WEAVER

The streets of central Thenzawl, once brimming with colourful puan of all kinds, had been replaced with closed tin doors. Once filled with the constant buzz of shop owners and customers alike, the wind whistled and softly travelled the empty streets. Just about a kilometre to the west, Mami clicked her heels against her handloom in the small basement house she lived in with her husband and five-year-old daughter. Walking into their house, the large wooden structure looms over the small space, forming a makeshift partition wall between the kitchen and the living room. Outside, her daughter and neighbourhood friends shrieked gleefully as they collected dust and memories on the cobblestone path. I had known Mami for years but never tried to understand her beyond the short interactions we had whenever I visited my father's village.

Mami was one of the thousands of weavers who participated in making Thenzawl the puan capital of Mizoram. Much like other young women of the village, she started weaving before finishing school, marrying young and learning to weave as a means to contribute to her new family. Raising a young daughter and living on her husband's family's property, Mami felt pressured to learn a skill and earn whatever she could. The best option she saw for herself was to start weaving, so she trained for months despite having to take care of her months-old baby and doing household chores all the same. Eventually, she received a loom through a government scheme, and could work from the comfort of her house. She paid for everything else herself, including the services needed to set up each new design, and the yarn needed for the loom. However, she was part of an association that

controlled what designs its members wove and also collected their puan without fail whenever they finished weaving one, always paying her on time. Even as the pandemic rolled in, they still bought as much puan as they could, finding new markets in Myanmar to replace the loss of markets in Aizawl.

Thanks to the fact that she could continue to weave and that her husband's work at the petrol pump continued through the lockdown, Mami's family did not suffer greatly because of the COVID-19 pandemic during the first wave. Being far from the city, the epicentre of the virus, she wasn't all too worried about the COVID-19 virus either. But as the pandemic dragged on and the second wave hit the villages outside Aizawl much harder than during the first, it became more difficult to continue her weaving. Puan sales had completely gone down, and collectors no longer made their weekly rounds taking, and paying her for her work. Once collectors stopped buying her products, Mami slowly started running out of yarn, and as the prices of yarn skyrocketed, she was unable to buy what she needed to prepare a stock of puan that would be ready to sell once things settled down. Just like others in the town who relied on the regular, even if minimal, earnings that they received from the collectors, she lost her source of income and had to rely solely on her husband's earnings. She had to start budgeting more tightly, making sure to cut down on the purchases she had once considered lavish, such as their weekly Sunday meat or the data plan to play streaming videos for her daughter.

With strict lockdowns in place even in the village, Mami realised how much of her independence and her value to her family came from her work. Without her monthly contributions, she had to rely on her husband's salary and was no longer afforded the financial freedom, though limited, she had when she was making her own money. Her in-laws also seemed to treat her differently. Without the occasional sales of her puan, she was no longer a productive member of the family and in their eyes, she had much more free time to cater to their needs. She became responsible for two families, including her in-laws that lived upstairs. She was expected to clean and cook for them, and take care

of her husband's grandmother, even though free time was not a luxury she was afforded, as she had to also take care of her own household and family during the pandemic.

With her husband constantly between work and sleep, most of the household and childcare responsibilities fell to her. As she struggled to keep up with these responsibilities, she reflected on how she used to have even less free time when she spent her days weaving, only resting to cook and eat in between. She told me she usually woke up at 6 AM to prepare breakfast for her husband and daughter, starting her day at 8 AM and ending around 9 PM, only resting for a lunch and dinner break. On weekends, she spent her time cleaning the house and keeping her energetic daughter out of trouble. Despite those long days working on her loom, she gained a sense of accomplishment and independence from her work. She could work without being told what to do, and in her own house, she could work on her own schedule.

Mami's daughter was her biggest source of joy and concern, taking up most of her waking thoughts. When her daughter went out to play with her neighbourhood friends, Mami constantly worried that she would get injured, or would say something unkind, as she was often accused of doing. At the same time, she was also happy to know her daughter was having fun outside, and was also guiltily pleased that she had some silence at home as she worked and weaved during the day. She had given up on school in the twelfth grade, when she found out she was going to have a child. Back then, she was anxious and regretted having a child so young, unsure how she or her unemployed husband would afford to raise her. She knew her family was also unhappy that she would have to leave school in her last year, but it was a sacrifice she had to begrudgingly make. At first, it was all too difficult for an inexperienced mother. She didn't even believe the title suited her. Changing diapers, never sleeping enough, all while adapting to a new life as a wife, exhausted Mami. Her responsibility of learning how to weave only added to the pressure. As years passed and Mami learned to balance taking care of her child and her household responsibilities, she realised that having a daughter was what got her through the more

difficult times. Even though her daughter was boisterous and often played too hard to the point of coming home bawling, she was a joy to her all the same. Mami was proud to have raised her and came to accept that she was indeed a mother, one that tried her best even when difficulties abounded. Unlike others in her life, Mami's daughter had no expectations from her, except to simply love her and let her play outside when she wanted to.

During the third wave, Mami's daughter tested positive for COVID, and she felt like she had failed as a mother. It wasn't her fault, and she knew it, but she felt deeply that she should have prevented it from happening in the first place—maybe been stricter, so her daughter wouldn't have played with the neighbour's children and contracted the virus. More than the loss of her source of earnings in an earlier wave of the pandemic, she was frightened by her daughter's sickness. Although the child only suffered a small cough and healed quite soon, she worried about what could have been. The fear of losing her daughter, however far-fetched it may have been, threw Mami into an inconsolable panic. She told me she had realised, then, that all her identities, especially being a weaver, came second to her role as a mother. The loss of sale, comfort, and even the independence she faced in her work as a weaver paled in comparison to the worry of this potential loss that the pandemic brought. Although she had to pretend not to be worried for her daughter's sake, the possibility that the same foreign virus that she had heard was taking lives all around the world had taken a hold of her daughter often led to sleepless nights. Her losses were not simply financial or social; they were psychological. Her daughter was all better and COVID-free the last we spoke, but the experience also had slightly traumatised Mami, who was keeping a much closer eye on her daughter.

Mami's story was different from other accounts of loss, resilience, and the pandemic that I had heard from other weavers. Although she told stories of how the pandemic had affected her work as a weaver, she wanted to make sure I knew that such losses were temporary, but the

anxiety and the loss of peace of mind were far worse. She emphasised that before a weaver, she was always a mother first.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the fragile existence of informal workers in Mizoram, particularly handloom weavers, whose livelihoods are deeply intertwined with Mizoram's cultural heritage. The stories of Niang, Zaii, and Mami reveal multifaceted challenges, from economic instability to societal expectations. Their struggles are compounded by their roles as women, navigating domestic duties alongside their weaving.

The craft of handloom weaving commands immense respect due to its cultural and artistic significance. Each puan is a testament to the weaver's skill, creativity, and dedication, and contributes to the rich cultural tapestry of Mizoram. However, respect for their craft must be accompanied by concrete support measures to ensure that the weavers' livelihoods are sustainable, and that their cultural contributions are recognised and preserved.

The resilience of Niang, Zaii, and Mami in the face of adversity is not only written here to inspire or to garner pity. Rather, their stories underscore the urgent need for systemic support to protect and empower informal workers. By recognising these workers' labour not only as economic activity but also as cultural preservation, the art of weaving must continue to thrive in Mizoram. Through a combination of financial support, market access, skill development, social security, and cultural recognition, the government can build a more resilient and equitable future for Mizoram's handloom community. A comprehensive approach that addresses both economic and cultural dimensions will help uphold the dignity and independence of these skilled artisans, ensuring that their contributions are valued and sustained for generations to come.

For now, their stories stand as reminders that they exist, that they do not only serve as statistics or symbols of resilience. They are individuals with unique challenges, dreams, and contributions. It is imperative that we see and support them as such, recognising and honoring their indispensable role in weaving the fabric of Mizoram's cultural and economic landscape.

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