Living Conditions of Women Workers in Brick Kilns: Reflecting the Agenda for Social Work Intervention

D.P. SINGH MOR

The present article looks into some of the aspects relating to housing, health, safety, education and welfare facilities of women workers of the brick kilns industry. In spite of the pivotal role of this industry in the activities relating to the infrastructural development in the country, the living conditions of the workers in this industry are far from satisfactory. These women are unprotected and suffer from economic exploitation due to ignorance and illiteracy. They do arduous work for long hours, generally in unhygienic conditions effecting their health. Protective legislation in the critical areas of wages, maternity benefit, childcare and social security have not benefited a great majority of them. The present article is based on a study done by the author on 54 brick kilns selected randomly out of a total of 547 units located in the five districts of the Hissar division of Haryana.

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INTRODUCTION

The status of women has often been argued as an indicator of the level of development of particular societies. The workforce participation rates of women, on the other hand, are also related to women's status. But today these assumptions are seriously under threat and the actual condition of women, and particularly in developing countries like that of ours, does not tally with these descriptions.

More than one billion people in the world today, the great majority of who are women, live in unacceptable conditions. Good health and well-being elude the majority of women in the world. Women worldwide are increasingly affected by HTV/AIDS. Women have different and unequal access to and use of basic health resources, including primary health care services for prevention and treatment of childhood diseases, malnutrition, anaemia, diarrhoeal diseases and tuberculosis, among
others. Health policies and programmes often perpetuate gender stereotypes and fail to consider socioeconomic disparities and other differences among women. Violence against women has reached alarming proportions in almost all countries of the world. It is a manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to the domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of women's empowerment.

In India, the situation of women is even worse than most of the developing countries of the world today. Even after 50 years of its freedom from colonial rule, more than one-third of the total population, still continues to live in abject poverty; of this, 70 per cent are women. Women's poverty in India is directly related to the absence of economic opportunities and autonomy, lack of access to economic resources, including credit, land ownership, and inheritance, lack of access to education and support services, and their minimal participation in the decision-making process.

However, in spite of the situation of women in India as outlined above, women have been working both in the home and outside, though not in strict sense of earning wages. According to the 1991 Census (India, 2001), women constitute a significant part of the workforce. Of the total women workforce of 89.77 million in 1991, their share in the organised sector was only 4.2 per cent, while the remaining 95.8 per cent were in the unorganised sector. The women in the unorganised sector have no legislative safeguards even to claim either minimum or equal wages along with their male counterparts, leave alone the benefits that women in the organised sector enjoy.

In India, the brick industry is a significant one in the unorganised sector, confined mainly to rural and semi-urban areas. Nearly half of the workers in this industry are women. While the Indian brick industry is the second largest producer in the world, next only to China, and has more than 1,00,000 operating units, producing about 100 billion bricks annually, its workers are characterised by extremely low wages, total lack of job security and social security benefits, long working hours, unsatisfactory working and living conditions, and no protection by any government labour legislation.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:
• investigate and observe the types of living arrangement and the facilities available;
• observe and explore the facilities and legal provisions available for the health, safety, welfare, and education of the female workers in this industry;
• know the effect of work on the health of female workers; and
• highlight the scope for intervention of social workers/activists.

Sampling

For the purpose of the present study, a sample of 410 women workers was drawn using the multi-stage random sampling technique. Table 1 presents the different stages for drawing of this sample.

**TABLE 1: Stages of Selecting Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Total Number of Kilns</th>
<th>No of Selected Kilns (10 per cent)</th>
<th>Total number of Women Workers in the Selected Kilns</th>
<th>No. of Women Selected for the Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jind</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhiwani</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hissar</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>679</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sirsa</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatehabad</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>547</strong></td>
<td><strong>54</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,465</strong></td>
<td><strong>410</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tools for Data Collection**

Data was been collected from the selected respondents, with the help of a structured interview schedule, especially designed for the purpose. Besides employers, some significant persons were also consulted to gather further pertinent information concerning the problem. Accordingly, on the spot observations and discussions were also used for verifying the information collected from the women respondents in the field.

**FINDINGS**

**Living Conditions at the Kiln Site**

The living conditions of the workers in brick kilns were observed to be quite unsatisfactory. Besides the poor quality of their living
structures, there are no proper facilities of drinking water, sanitation, health care and education.

The living quarters for these workers at the brick kilns sites can be classified into four types.

1. *Pakka* Houses: The *pakka* quarters, are made of bricks and the roof is generally made of tin sheets.

2. *Kachcha* Houses: The *kachcha* quarters are made up of unbaked bricks and the roof is covered with twigs of cotton plants or a special grass called *dhaab*, smeared with mud paste. In some cases, the roofs of these quarters were covered by tin sheets.

3. Huts: The huts are similar to the *kachcha* quarters, but their roofs are conical in shape and covered with a sheet made of twigs of some plants other than cotton or *dhaab*. This sheet in local language of the workers is called as *saraki*. The roof of a hut is conical because the sheet type structure has to be supported by a wooden log across its middle and the entire length of the hut. One end of this wooden log is placed on the rear wall of the hut, while another end is placed on yet another log erected in the middle of the front side of the hut.

4. Own house in nearby village.

These quarters varies in size from 15 x 10 to 20 x 12 feet floor area. The height is normally around seven feet. The inner space of these quarters is used for all purposes like kitchen, store and bedroom. In many cases the female workers even bathe inside these quarters due to the lack of closed bathing places in the brick kilns.

Regrettably, the quarters in the brick kilns do not have waterproof roofs, necessary doors, windows and ventilators, as well as suitable cooking and bathing facilities. On the whole, the quarters are not suited to the climate in the area or water proof. In summers, the tin sheets used on the roofs get so hot, that it becomes virtually impossible to stay inside them. Therefore, the workers spend their afternoons under trees. In the rainy seasons, these quarters start leaking and make living extremely difficult. The workers are exposed to health hazards like dampness, mosquitoes or even snakes sometimes. It was observed that during the rainy season, it becomes too difficult to house in the *kachcha* quarters as in many of the quarters, the unbaked bricks 'melt'. In few kilns, the quarters even get submerged in water, specially during heavy rains. None of these kilns had any proper arrangements for draining out such flood waters.
Table 2 reveals that nearly one-fourth of the workers (24.63 per cent) live in *kachcha* quarters, whereas six out of ten (61.71 per cent) lived in *pakka* quarters. While more than one-tenth (11.71 per cent) of the workers lived in huts, there were just about two per cent workers who used to go to their villages in the evenings.

**TABLE 2: Distribution of Workers According to the Type of House**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Living Arrangement</th>
<th>Dist. wise Distribution of Women Workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bhiwani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kachcha Quarters</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakka Quarters</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(7.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huts</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own House</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(16.58)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Figures in parentheses denotes the percentage.*

During the survey, it was also noticed that the workers in brick kilns preferred to live with their fellow workers from their own states only. Surprisingly, workers from the state of Bihar preferred to make their huts away from all other dwellings and lived next to the places where they moulded bricks.

**Basic Services or Facilities at the Dwellings**

Table 3 presents data of availability of basic facilities like light, water, kitchen arrangements, toilets and washing facilities, and so on. It is evident from the analysis that the availability of these facilities is far from satisfactory.

Although water was made available to all respondents for washing, drinking and bathing, the respondents had to go to distant places for fetching water. There was no provision for public supply of water in any of the kilns. However, some of the owners have dug wells in the premises of the kiln. The respondents have used plastic cases for carting of as well as storage of water, which is hazardous. On investigation, it was found that the respondents preferred plastic because they do not break and are not expensive.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilities</th>
<th>Light</th>
<th>Water</th>
<th>Kitchen</th>
<th>Bathroom</th>
<th>Latrines Facilities</th>
<th>Washing</th>
<th>First Aid</th>
<th>Free Transport</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Respondents</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.9)</td>
<td>(96.10)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
<td>(100)</td>
<td>(2.19)</td>
<td>(97.8)</td>
<td>(4.88)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Living Conditions of Women Workers in Brick...
None of the houses in any kiln in Hissar division had a legal electricity connection. However, 3.9 per cent respondents replied in the affirmative with regard to the availability of power supply to them. This supply was taken from the office premises of the concerned kiln with the help of a wire with no proper fittings.

The houses of all the respondents did not have a proper cooking area. Never the less, many of them had erected a wall and made a chullah near it for cooking purposes. Only a few respondents used gas stoves. None of the households had bathrooms. Male members and children would bathe in the open, either at tube-wells or wells. Since the women could not bathe in the open they would either bathe by the wells in the dark or bathe inside their quarters.

Only in the case of 2.19 per cent of the households were there sanitary type latrines. On investigation, it was known that the owners were compelled to make these latrines because the land owners of the nearby fields had stopped the workers from entering their fields for this purpose. Some of the employers blamed the workers themselves for not cleaning and maintaining these latrines properly. Consequently, these toilets got choked and sometimes had to be dismantled. Some of the employers reported that the latrines made by them were not used by the workers at all as the workers preferred going out in the open. These employers were of the view that it was really difficult to make this facility successful unless the workers cooperated and developed a culture of their proper use.

About 4.88 per cent respondents were provided with cemented platforms for washing clothes or bathing near the tube-wells or the wells. The remaining 95.12 per cent respondents had to make some sort of washing or bathing arrangements on their own. Many of these workers used wooden planks or stone slabs for this purpose, while still others arranged bricks near the wells/tube-wells and covered them with plastic fertiliser bags to make a smooth surface for washing purposes.

About 5.85 per cent respondents reported that while there were no proper first aid boxes provided to these workers, the munshi (accountant) of the kiln kept some medicines, bandages, and so on, for emergencies.

Surprisingly, two-fifths (60 per cent) of the women respondents expressed their happiness over the facility of free transport made available to go to the cities for purchases. Further investigations revealed that vehicles like tractors and trucks usually had to go to
cities for transporting bricks to the customers and the owners in such cases instructed their drivers to take along with them any worker if he or she so desired. However, there was no vehicle specially assigned for meeting emergencies like serious illnesses, accidents, and so on.

In short, the facilities provided to the workers in the sampled kilns are not good enough both qualitatively as well as quantitatively. These facilities also do not conform to the specifications laid down by the government from time to time. There was no respondent who said to have been satisfied with these living arrangements.

**Health Facilities**

Although, there are no scientific and direct evidences to support that women workers in brick kilns contract occupational diseases, there can always be a probability of contracting a disease due to their continuous exposure to dust, heat and unhygienic housing conditions in the brick kilns. It was noticed that some of the women, who worked either as the carriers or unloaders suffered from some problems, which they said were due to the brick kiln work.

Respondents who worked as moulders complained of pain in the back, shoulders, waist and joints. The carriers had roughening and blistering of hands and fingers and the unloaders complained about coughing, chest pain and difficult breathing. Where the respondents had to squat for more than 10-12 hours, they suffered from gynecological problems, like miscarriage. Exhaustion due to extreme heat or cold was yet another problems reported by the respondents.

At times, there were episodic occurrences of cholera and typhoid, especially in children and women in these kilns. Respondents complained of malnutrition in their children and it was observed that many of the children of the brick kiln workers were underweight and suffered from digestive problems and nutritional deficiencies. The analysis in Table 4 reflects that a majority of the respondents stated that they suffered from one or the other health problems. The diseases stated by the respondents can be divided under seven broad heads.

The data revealed that 62.68 per cent of the respondents suffered from bronchial and respiratory diseases like cough, cold, allergies and tuberculosis. The reason could, perhaps, be due to their continuous exposure to dust. An overwhelming majority of nearly 80 per cent complained of having aches relating to back, shoulders, hands and
joints. The reason of the aches can be related to the bodily postures and manual work which these women had to do in the kilns. Nearly three-fifths (63.66 percent) of the females reported that they suffered from eye problems, skin diseases, blisters of the hands, and episodic cholera and diarrhoea. This category of diseases may be mainly because of the fact that the women workers in the brick kiln had to work during extremes temperatures in summer, especially in the months of May, June and July.

TABLE 4: Distribution of Workers according to the Pattern of Diseases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Disease</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bronchial Diseases</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>62.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Aches</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>79.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heat Exhaustion</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>63.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injuries</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>26.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaria</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>30.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Specific Diseases</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>20.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snake Bites</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Multi-response table.

A little more than one-fourth (26.83 per cent) of the respondents had injuries. There were 30 per cent of the respondents who complained that they got malaria because they had to sleep in the open and are subjected to mosquito bites.

Another one-fifth (20.49 per cent) of the women suffered from gynaecological problems, premature delivery, or miscarriages. The reason given by them was the excess manual work and little or no rest during pregnancy. It is worth mentioning here that since the mode of wage payment was on a piece-rate basis, the workers tended to work more to earn more per day and as a result, got affected.

About 3.41 per cent respondents reported to have been bitten by snakes. Since many workers work and sleep in open, they are more prone to insect and snake bites.

The most common problems of the women workers appear to be directly related to environmental and living factors. If the employers look into providing them with good and clean houses with proper facilities of kitchen, water, and toilets along with provisions for safely at work; most of the health problems can be prevented. The owners can also make arrangements for periodic medical check ups by taking the help of some social welfare and government agencies working in the area to improve the health standards of these workers.
Medical Facilities

It was observed that there was not even a employer had made arrangements for periodical visit of some qualified doctor for attending to the health problems of the women workers in his kiln. The women workers had to go to the community health centres or quacks in the nearby villages, in case of illness. Employers gave them the money for their medical check-ups, but later on deducted it from their earnings. During the period of illness, they were not paid any wage because the mode of wage payment was on a piece-rate basis, and thus, loss of work due to illness was entirely that of the worker and not of the employer. In the sampled brick kilns, it was found that there was no concession for pregnant women, nor there were any arrangements for trained dais or auxiliary midwives.

Educational Facilities

Women workers of the sampled brick kilns were particularly disadvantaged with regard to educational facilities. A majority of these workers were illiterate and so were their children. Besides economic, environmental and cultural constraints, the major constraint was the seasonal character of this industry. Since the workers migrated from their native places roughly in the months of October-November and remained in the kiln till May-June, they had to remain away from their houses for nearly nine months. Therefore, it was practically impossible for them to send their children to school because if they left them at their native places, there might be no one to look after them and if they took them along, they could not attend school. As far as the education of adults, both male and females is concerned, there were no such provisions at any kiln site available from the governments or from the employers' side.

Safety Provisions

The information collected from the women workers of the sampled brick kilns revealed there were no proper and essential devices provided to them for their safety. For instance, women who carried the dried bricks to the trench needed to be provided with hand gloves for protecting their hands and fingers from bruises and injuries. Similarly, women who worked as unloaders of the trench required gas masks and protective eye glasses as they worked in extreme dust all the time. In unloading operations, there is always a possibility of some
brick falling on the head of the workers while sorting and stacking the baked bricks and such workers require safety helmets.

Data revealed that no kiln had provided its workers with these safety devices. Therefore, the workers in this industry are exposed to the risks of accidents and health hazards.

**Welfare Provisions**

According to Factories Act, 1948, factories which have more than 500 workers, should have an ambulance room with nursing staff. For more than 250 workers, there must be a canteen and where there are 150 or more workers, there must be shelters, rest rooms and lunchrooms. Creches are required in every factory having 30 or more women workers. However, none of these provisions were noticed being implemented in any of the brick kilns in the study area.

Women workers kept their infants and the young children along with them while they worked. The infants were usually placed in a bed sheet whose both ends are tied to the branches of a tree or some other structure to act as a cradle. Many respondents maintained that since they could keep their children with them, there was no need for a creche. The kilns did not have canteens; what it had were private roadside food stalls (*dhabas*) or tea-stalls near some of these kilns. These *dhabas* usually provided sub-standard food at exorbitant prices.

In some of the brick kiln clusters, besides the *dhabas*, some liquor contractors had also opened outlets for selling liquor to the workers of the brick kilns. While the women workers were not ignorant of these facts, they were helpless and could not do anything to stop the illegal supply of liquor to their male counterparts.

Besides poor facilities relating to health, welfare, education and housing, most of the women workers (96.34 per cent) in the kilns were unaware of any trade union(s) operating in their area. They were of the view that participation in trade union activities was a job for their male counterparts.

In spite of a number of laws purporting to provide basic social security benefits relating to old age, marriage, sickness, injury and death to the workers in the unorganised sector, the gains have been only marginal, particular in the case of women workers in the brick kiln industry. The existing social security schemes have not be able to provide security to the workers of brick kilns due to the non-implementation of these schemes by the owners of the kilns.
Women workers in brick kilns of the division under study are ignorant of the labour legislations like the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961; the ESI Act, 1948; the Inter State Migrants Workers Act, 1979; the Factories Act, 1948, and so on.

SUMMARY

The socioeconomic profile of women workers in brick kilns suggest that, on the whole, these workers come from the poorer sections of the society. Most of these workers are either from the scheduled castes or backward castes earning a meagre amount, which is not always, enough to support their families. They are deprived of good living as well as working conditions.

It is evident from the study that facilities at the dwellings of the women workers are very poor, both in terms of quality as well as quantity. The size in the dwellings is also extremely inadequate as the existing space is used for all purposes like storage, sleeping, cooking and sometimes even bathing. These dwellings have no ventilation, drainage, sanitation and lighting facilities. There are also no facilities relating to a canteen or a creche.

Continuous exposure to heat, dust and unhygienic living conditions increases the possibility of contracting diseases of the eyes, skin, joints and bronchial and respiratory problems like asthma and cough.

The system of recruitment in this industry is through intermediaries. This system not only leads to economic exploitation of these women, but also sexual exploitation. None of the intermediaries in this industry had the 'Certificate of Registration' as is required under the Inter-State Migrant Workers Act, 1976, and the Contract Labour Act, 1970.

There are no fixed working hours and unauthorised deductions and untimely payments are a common feature. Almost all the women workers were indebted either to their intermediary or their employers. Although advance in cash or kind is rendered illegal under the Bonded Labour System (Abolition), 1976, majority of the workers were found to have taken huge amounts of money as advance. This is one of the reasons that give rise to many unfair labour practices, both on the part of the employers as well as trade union activists.

In spite of the number of laws purporting to provide basic social security benefits relating to old age, marriage, maternity, sickness, injury and death; the gains to these women have been only marginal. It is because most of the provisions of the labour laws are either not
complied with by the owners or they are not practically applicable to
the workers of this industry.

Thus, we see that the life of women workers in brick kilns is
tough, as they have to perform a dual role. While bearing and
rearing children remain their primary responsibility, they are in­
volved in economic activities also. They are unprotected and suffer
from economic exploitation. Their ignorance, illiteracy and pov­
erty have added to their woes all the more. A great majority of them
have not benefited from the protective legislation in the critical ar­
eas of wages, maternity benefits, childcare and social security.

Therefore, there is no doubt that there is a great scope for interven­
tion by non-governmental organisations and social activists towards
improving the socioeconomic status of this marginalised lot. The is­
sues which require immediate attention are poverty, illiteracy, exploi­
tation, deprivation, and indebtedness.

There is an urgent need of advocacy roles so that the government
and policy makers take some concrete steps for ameliorating the so­
cioeconomic conditions of these workers. The government must
make an exhaustive and comprehensive legislation, which could
streamline the employment procedures, the practice of advance
money, working conditions, wages and other welfare facilities. Apart
from that, the legislation should also address to check their physical,
sexual and economic exploitation, besides enhancing their health,
safety, medical and educational facilities.

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