

GROUND REALITIES OF WOMEN BEEDI WORKERS : A CASE STUDY AT JANGIPUR TOWN, WEST BENGAL.

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Abstract

This research article seeks to present an academic account of the working circumstances, lives of beedi workers and relevant Indian laws in the Jangipur Town region of West Bengal. The beedi manufacturing sector relies significantly on the labour-intensive process of beedi rolling, which is mostly performed by women and young girls. In contrast, males are typically engaged in duties such as sorting, inspecting, baking, labelling, packaging, and packing, which pay greater rates than beedi rolling. Despite the fact that beedi workers have been in the business for centuries, their occupational structure continues to remain unaltered, leaving the bulk of beedi rollers with a poor socioeconomic level and unpleasant living circumstances. Furthermore, tobacco use endangers the health of beedi workers, especially mothers and young girls. The purpose of this quantitative study is to throw light on the everyday life of beedi workers via in-depth interviews carried out in Murshidabad's Jangipur area with workers engaged in beedi rolling at their residences. The study demonstrates that a combination of factors including low levels of education, unemployment, inadequate earnings, limited mobility, and awful working conditions, as well as a lack of understanding of their rights, result in beedi workers being exploited and living in a state of perpetual poverty.

Key Words: Beedi, Female Labour, Workers, Government and etc.

Introduction

Beedi is a type of forest product that is also known as poor man's smoke or poor man's cigarette. It is a tiny South Asian cigarette composed of 0.2-0.3 g of tobacco flake rolled in a tendu (*Diospyrox melanoxylon*) leaf and held together with colourful thread at both ends. It is quite popular among the impoverished since it is an inexpensive way to consume tobacco, but because it contains more tar, nicotine, and carbon monoxide than regular cigarettes, it poses more health issues. A major portion of this sector is unregistered, home-based, and cantered around women, who are often involved in the rolling of raw Beedis. Beedi rolling is a key vocation for many women, who are the foundation of the business. A single woman rolls 1000 beedis every day on average, using approximately 500 g of tobacco flake, and while doing so, a beedi roller can breathe in tobacco dust along with other volatile substances. They are therefore exposed to unburned tobacco since they don't wear any protective gear (Cherianane, 2014).

Because the initial stage requires no knowledge or training, children of all ages, even the elderly, may

participate. All that has to be done is re-roll the thread from a tiny bundle onto an object, often an empty matchbox or a pulley-type object. Rewinding a bundle of thread takes around 30 minutes to an hour. The following process, cutting the beedi leaves, calls for some talent because the worker's skill level determines how many pieces, they can cut off the leaf. The key function in the procedure is to wrap tobacco into the beedi leaf and bind it with thread; the pinch of tobacco must be exact. Assistants can also do the last stage of folding the beedi head; the completed beedis are then wrapped and given to the employer/contractor (Pramanik & Murmu, 2018). There are no instruments used other than standard scissors, winnows, and wire nets. The two types of raw materials used for beedi making are beedi tobacco and tendu leaves. The only workers who are engaged in production are the women who roll out the beedis and augment their household income (S. Prethesa Mercy & C. Selva Smiley, 2020). The four main steps involved in the production of a beedi are-

- a) rewinding the thread
- b) cutting the beedi leaves
- c) Rolling the beedi, and (folding the beedi head).

Because the majority of manufacturing takes place in houses, it is geographically scattered, making it difficult to establish a distinct employer-employee connection. The tangle of contractors and subcontractors effectively creates a spiral chain of production, which amounts to many degrees of labour law evasion. In order to make beedis, the manufacturer must register with a variety of government offices and get license from numerous sources (Pramanik & Murmu, 2018).

Beedi-making is a flourishing cottage industry that operates in 17 states across India. The beedi business is one of the most important informal agro-industries, contributing significantly to the national economy. There are more than 72 million beedi smokers (Goodchild *et al.*, 2020). According to study, India produces somewhere between 750 billion and 1.2 trillion sticks each year. Bengal is one of the largest employers of beedi-workers, with 20 lakh individuals. Workers must endure poor salaries and greedy intermediaries in this predominantly unorganized industry, which is reported to be contributing at least Rs 48.2 billion (Chaudhuri, 2022). The laws which directly deal with the welfare of beedi workers are:

- 1) **The Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act 1966:** The Beedi and Cigar Workers Act is an Act that governs the welfare of workers in Beedi and cigar businesses as well as the working circumstances. It covers daily work hours, weekly rest, paid leave, maternity leave, benefits, and welfare facilities including drinking water, restroom facilities, and a canteen. The Act forbids an employer and contractor from rejecting in excess of 2.5 percent of the beedis as inferior beedis. Rejection of 5% would involve making entries in writing and noting the justifications for rejection ensuring the workers had a written record. However, the Act's scope is restricted in that it only prescribes approaches to enhance the working conditions of beedi and cigar workers at the industrial premises only.
- 2) **The Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act 1976:** The Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act established the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund (BWFF) to support the welfare of home-based, informal beedi

workers. The BWWF is funded by a cess levied as an excise charge on produced beedi, which is periodically updated by the national government.

- 3) **The Beedi Workers Welfare Cess Act, 1976:** The Act authorizes levying a cess on produced beedis as well as tobacco issued for the manufacturing of beedi to support the welfare fund established in compliance with the Beedi Workers Welfare Fund Act.

Objective of the Research

The main purposes of this study are -

- 1) To highlight the major factors which lead women to work in beedi industry.
- 2) To investigate and identify pressing issues about the welfare of Beedi workers, with an emphasis on health, social security, labour rights, and gender-based exploitation.
- 3) To study the effectiveness of laws applicable to beedi industry.

Literature available on Beedi industry

Mukharjee *et al.* (2014) carried out research to illustrate the health profile of beedi workers in West Bengal's Murshidabad area. The majority of beedi workers are economically disadvantaged and lack education, and many workers suffer from health-related problems such as tuberculosis and lung cancer as a result of their regular exposure to tobacco dust according to the study. Women beedi rollers had irregular menstruation and other pregnancy issues. Through the study, the authors have brought attention to the serious health issues that beedi rollers suffer.

Surendra (2001) provided a state-by-state distribution of working children in India based on census data from 1971, 1987, and 1991. The primary goal of the research was to emphasize the living and working circumstances of beedi workers in general, and child labor in particular.

Through the study, the author addressed the economic and social circumstances that push children to take jobs as beedi rollers at a young age. The author has also found that beedi rolling job is the sole source of income for child laborers' households. The author has furthermore attempted to furnish details regarding the living and working environments of juvenile beedi rollers. The author has come to the conclusion that the poor pay in the beedi rolling industry has put pressure on beedi rollers to roll more and more beedies, which they have satisfied by enlisting the aid of their kids to assist support the family business.

Padole (2014) has concentrated on the underage laborers in beedi rolling homes in Maharashtra's Gondia district. The study's author has brought attention to the issue of child beedi roller exploitation. The primary aim of the research is to investigate the working conditions of juvenile beedi rollers at their workplace. Additionally, the study aims to provide light on the types and extent of exploitation and moral abuse that these workers endure. The author has proposed that comparative evaluations of the capacities of various non-governmental organizations concerning their efforts to establish beedi rolling factories be conducted. The author has further proposed that additional research be done to evaluate government and non-governmental rehabilitation-related programs.

Nambiar (2015) research is primarily concerned with the origin and expansion of the beedi industry in

North Malabar, the commonly observed occupational health problems among beedi rollers, and the extent to which globalization policies impact this industry and aggravate beedi rollers' occupational safety and health. While beedi rolling originated in the industrial sector in the early twentieth century, over the last three decades, this system has gradually transitioned from factory to household employment. In this case, manufacturing is widely spread and carried out by a chain of contractors, with no employer-employee connection present.

Pramanik and Murmu (2018) argue that traditionally, women have dominated the informal beedi business, notably in tobacco handling and beedi rolling.

The majority of beedi workers are women who work from home and are separated from the bulk of the industrial labor, making them an easy target for painful exploitation. According to their study, women workers are more likely to experience a variety of occupational health concerns. T

hey continue to battle for survival despite poor earnings, constant exploitation by contractors, a lack of education and medical services, and government apathy. This research goes on to describe the causes as well as the corrective solutions, such as an awareness program, health education, and the effective execution of various programs to alleviate worker difficulties.

Dube and Mohandoss (2013) have underlined the key reasons that lead to youngsters working in beedi plants. The author believes that some of the main causes of children working in beedi factories include subcontracting, a challenging economic environment, children's vulnerability, and parents' ignorance.

The author suggests that a detailed survey be undertaken in various regions of Indian cities to map the socioeconomic specifics of children beedi rollers. The author believes that minimum salaries and social security benefits for beedi rollers should be strictly enforced, and that there should be frequent monitoring of abuse against female children working in beedi employment, including protection from sexual offenses.

Beedi business makes a considerable contribution to the government's tax income. Beedi commerce employs the second biggest number of people in India's unorganized economy. A sizable number of women from economically disadvantaged groups in semi-urban and rural areas are employed in this trade. Considering its economic significance, beedi workers' working conditions are still subpar. The purpose of this study is to look at the working circumstances that beedi workers in the West Bengal state.

Background:

India is the world's third-largest tobacco producer. In addition to providing the state with revenue, the tobacco sector creates a substantial amount of employment.

Among all the informal industries in the nation, this one is arguably the largest, employing a staggering number of men, women, and children (Bagchi, *et. al.* 1996). The beedi sector employs thousands of individuals, the majority of whom work under hazardous conditions.

It is noteworthy that women make up the majority of workers—up to 80% in some locations. This is

due to two factors: first, the labour is typically done at home, where women may do it concurrently with taking care of their children and other household responsibilities; and second, the work of rolling beedi is better suited to their nimble fingers (Pramanik & Murmu, 2018).

The home-based system is also highly advantageous for the employer since a factory system would need regularization of working conditions as well as payment of minimum salaries and other benefits as required by law; it would also require significant investment in work facilities.

Problems of Beedi Workers

- a) **Low Wages:** The beedi labourers make money in two ways. One set of labourers buys the basic ingredients from a middleman at a nearby marketplace called 'Munshi,' makes beedis, and sells them back to the Munshi. In exchange, the Munshi shares a portion of the profits with the beedi labourers. Another set of labourers buys the basic ingredients from the Munshi. They resell these basic ingredients to various other workers for greater rates. Beedi labourers believe they receive a disproportionately little share from the Munshi, which frequently leads to dispute with him. Due of the Munshi's poor salary rates, beedi workers frequently fail to purchase high-quality tobacco leaves and threads for rolling beedies. Conflict with the Munshi also frequently leads to the permanent closure of many beedi industries, and therefore the beedi workers are often forced to seek alternative means of subsistence, which contributes to the occurrence of livelihood transformation (Ankita Neogi & Suhel Sen, 2021).
- b) **Unjustified Rejection:** Among the main issues beedi rollers confront is a high percentage of rejected beedies owing to low-quality raw materials. Due to the high incidence of rejection, workers frequently do not get compensated for all the beedis they produce. The Munshi either takes the rejected beedis or sells them in the market for less money; no salaries are given for the rejected beedis. Furthermore, low-quality goods are frequently given, forcing the employees to pay for the missing components out of their own pockets. As a result, the net income is ultimately substantially less than the minimum wage (Ghatak & Gautam, 2017).
- c) **Health Concerns:** Occupational health risks are on the rise among a huge number of workers in unorganised or informal industries. In India, 1.83 million individuals currently suffer from occupational illnesses, accounting for 20% of the worldwide burden. Beedi is an important agro-industry in the Indian national economy, with a substantial share in economically deprived households due to the industry's long history of outsourcing. Beedi rolling is one of the most prevalent and popular jobs for meeting daily expenses, particularly among Indian women, despite the fact that it is a harmful a profession. Beedi job requires continual use of fingers and extended hours of sitting with a cramped posture in tiny quarters, which puts enormous strain on the spinal column. Employees experienced health issues such as calluses on their hands, back, neck, and joint discomfort, arm weariness, and finger numbness during group talks. Poor working conditions, work-related exposure, demographic variables, and an unhealthy lifestyle have a significant impact on the labour force of such an informal business through exposure to toxic substances (Basu *et al.*, 2018).

Large amounts of tobacco and tendu leaf waste are released during the beedi rolling process, and the workers' health is negatively impacted by the dusty workplace. The rollers are in direct contact with a dusty environment and do not use protective clothing, gloves, or masks. For women who worked at home in tiny huts with minimal ventilation, tobacco dust remained in the home where they ate, slept, and spent the majority of their time. As a result, breathing issues caused by the beedi dust in the air impact not only the beedi roller but also their whole family (Nambiar, 2015).

Several studies in India have found that beedi workers are more likely to develop respiratory, dermatological, eye disease, and podiatric disorders because hazardous tobacco compounds are released into the environment during beedi processing. The paradox is that women are unaware that this employment is affecting their health. Nicotine emitted by tobacco leaves can be absorbed by the skin, respiratory cells, and the soft tissues of the mouth. Beedi tobacco has much more nicotine than conventional filtered or unfiltered cigarettes (Kaup et al., 2017). The health of beedi workers suffers greatly from prolonged periods of stationary posture rolling beedis. In addition to respiratory issues, skin conditions, gastrointestinal illnesses, gynecological issues, and lumbosacral discomfort, beedi rollers can also cause fungal infections, peptic ulcers, hemorrhoids, and diarrhea. Beedi roller users have also complained of stomach symptoms, including cramps and gas, numb fingers, and dyspnea. Additionally, it was noted that typical symptoms among women beedi rollers were postural discomfort, eye issues, and burning sensations in the throat. Beedi rollers are reported to have fading fingerprints, and others experience loss of feeling in their fingertips. Only 11% of workers are registered, and the great majority of them go unidentified by government agencies. A fingerprint is a basic prerequisite for identification for any individual, but for someone who has had minimal access to schooling, this biometric is even more important. However, because most beedi workers have fading fingerprints from processing tobacco dust and rolling it into tendu leaves, the record remains unattainable (Rathore & Ugargol, 2018).

- d) **Access to Welfare Schemes and Entitlements:** Beedi workers and their families are eligible for a variety of health benefits, including free medications and reimbursement of up to Rs 30,000 for minor surgeries like as hernias, appendectomy, ulcers, gynaecological illnesses, and prostate problems. Workers are compensated for real costs of cancer treatment, medications, and diet expenditures incurred by themselves or their dependents. Transportation expenses are also paid. Workers receive a reimbursement of Rs 1,30,000 for heart disease treatment. A worker gets paid for expenses up to Rs 2 lakhs for a kidney transplant. Female workers receive a reward of Rs 1000 each delivery for the first two children. Workers are paid Rs 500 if they undergo sterilization. Interestingly, the award for delivery is only given to female workers, not their wives, which is one of the reasons why males are documented workers. Workers receive a cash support of Rs 300 for eyewear. Beedi workers are also eligible to several social welfare benefits in addition to health benefits. For example, single parents are given Rs 5000 for each daughter's marriage up to two daughters, and children of beedi workers receive financial assistance for their studies in school and college. There is more money available for school-aged girls than boys since it is assumed that parents require more 'incentives' to send or keep their daughters in school, and the state intends to motivate females to complete their education (Ghatak & Gautam, 2017). Workers receive cards issued by the beedi hospital / dispensary that allow them to access health care, education, and other

perks. However, workers are confused of the procedures for obtaining documents and receiving benefits. Many people are unaware that they must apply for benefits and believe that they would automatically receive them. Again, workers are unclear about what benefits they receive from the state government and what policies have been specifically intended for beedi workers (Ghatak & Gautam, 2017).

- e) A large percentage of beedi workers do not possess ID cards, although the government believes that around 85 percent do. For families who produce beedis, the normal procedure is to provide an ID card for just one member of the family, even if additional family members also roll beedis. The 'head of the family' reasoning appears to have been followed, with the majority of beedi cards and PF registrations being issued to men. Munshis play a crucial role in ensuring that employees are able to register for the Provident Fund. They are obligated to document the names of the employees they hire and provide them to the organizations. As a result, the firm identifies them as employees, and they are entitled for Provident Fund benefits. Each corporation has a code number, and its munshis have sub-codes. The Munshi is intended to ease worker registration for Provident Fund. Most workers are unaware that they are all eligible for Provident Fund and should register for it.

Munshis even convince people who sign up for PF to take their money out after five years. Because it is not permitted to withdraw money before the completion of five years, the munshis begin to convince workers to withdraw their PF as the five-year mark approaches. Such strategies allow corporations to avoid paying PF as well as retirement benefits to the workers (Ghatak & Gautam, 2017).

Research Methodology

The research study was done among the beedi workers in January 2023 at Mathpara, Ahiran and Master Para, Ahiran in Jangipur, Murshidabad district, West Bengal.

The Jangipur sub-division of Murshidabad is a prominent region for beedi making. According to locals, firms from all over the nation seek to establish themselves in Murshidabad, particularly in Jangipur, and then pass off all of their beedis as being created in Murshidabad.

There are no official data available, but it is believed that there are roughly 12 lakh individuals involved in the beedi sector in Murshidabad, with 7 lakhs in the Jangipur subdivision (Ghatak & Gautam, 2017), 90% work from home, with women accounting for 70% of the total.

Jangipur, West Bengal, was purposefully chosen for this study because of the town's significant potential and expanded opportunities for beedi manufacturers. The random sampling approach was used to pick the sample respondents, which included 21 female beedi makers from the research region.

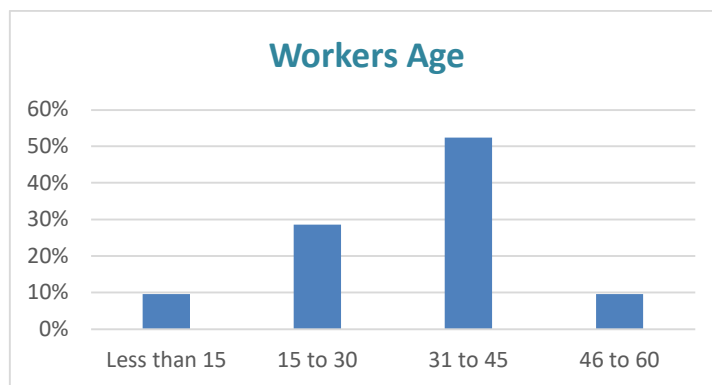
Data Analysis

It has been noted that the majority of women employed as beedi workers in the Jangipur block of the Murshidabad district of West Bengal are from lower castes such as scheduled tribes, with a larger proportion coming from Muslim communities and a very tiny proportion from the poorer segments of the general caste.

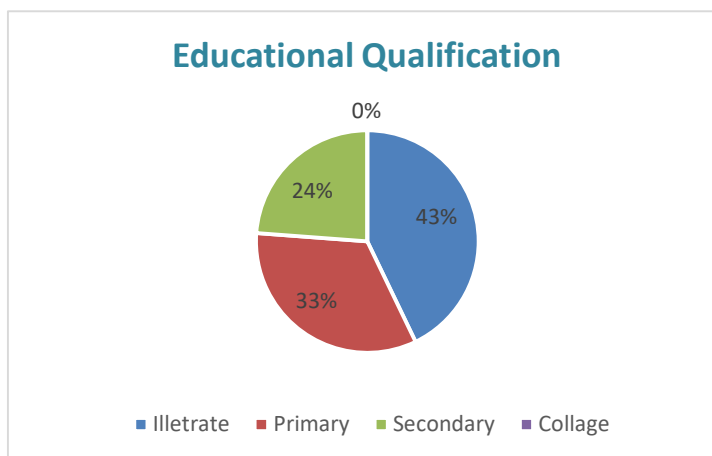
Women who work as beedi labourers in Jangipur, in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal, have a

lower socioeconomic position due to a variety of issues, including insufficient income, unauthorized deductions, and payment below agreed wages.

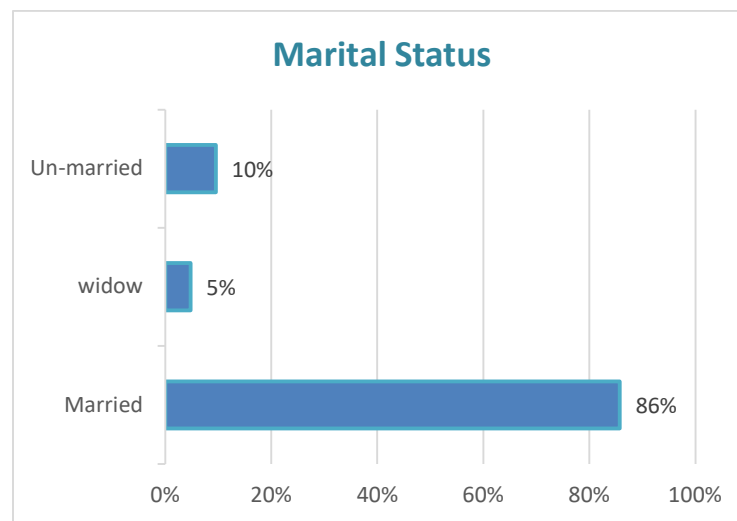
The researcher has collected data from two areas nearby the Murshidabad Centre of Aligarh Muslim University through questionnaire (with the help of translator) As the beedi rolling workers are female working from their homes, the data was collected by visiting residences of the workers. The analysis of data collected is presented below –



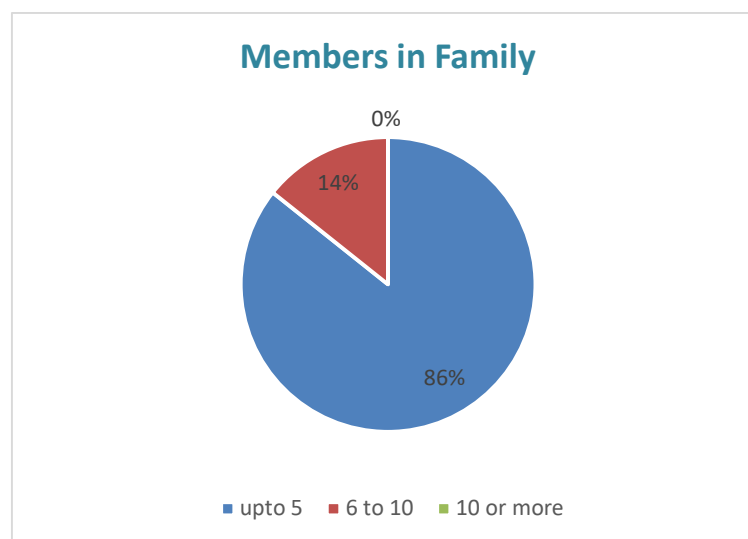
Nearly 80% of the workers surveyed (all were females) belong to the age group of 15 to 45



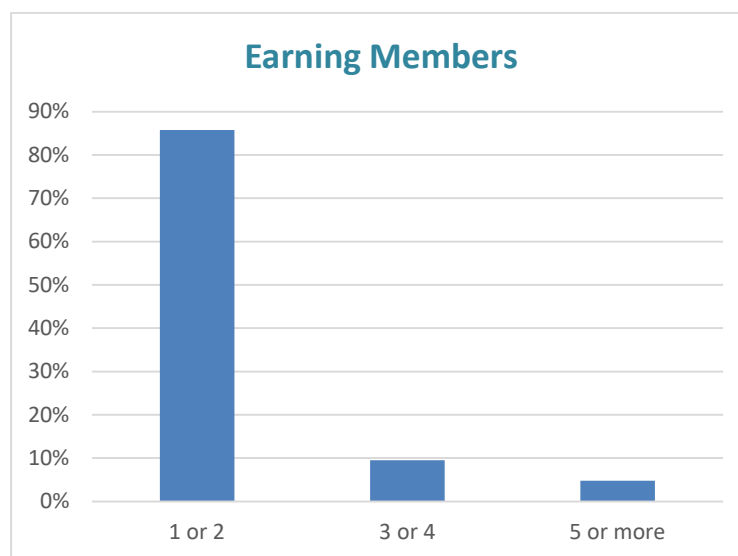
43% of the workers surveyed were illiterate, while 33% studied up to the fifth grade, 24% studied up to the tenth grade, and none of the workers attended any college.



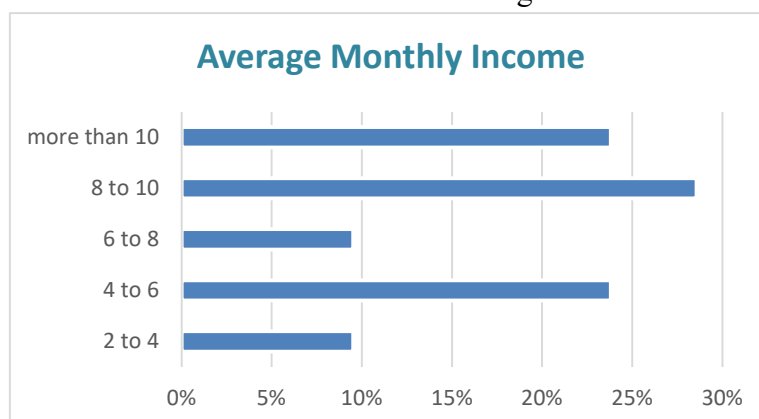
86% of the workers surveyed were married



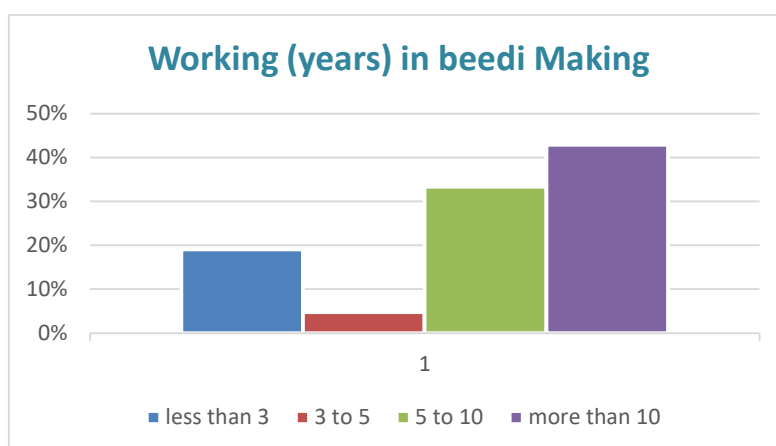
86% of the workers surveyed were where having a family of up-to 5 members, while 14% have a family of six or more members.



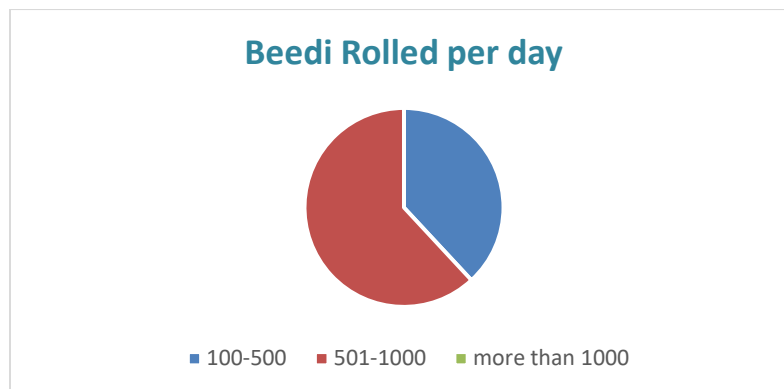
There were one or two earning members in 86% of the workers, while in 10% cases three or four members were earning.



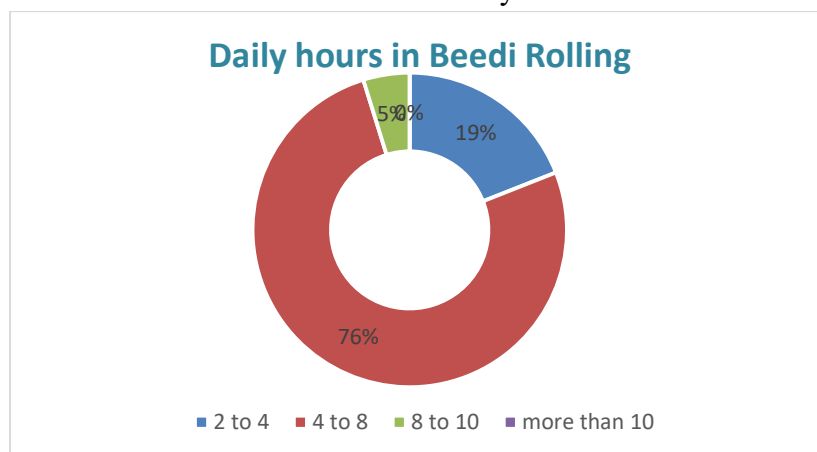
Average monthly household income of 29% of those surveyed was between eight to 10 thousand, while 24% have a family income of more than ten thousand with 44% earning less than eight thousand.



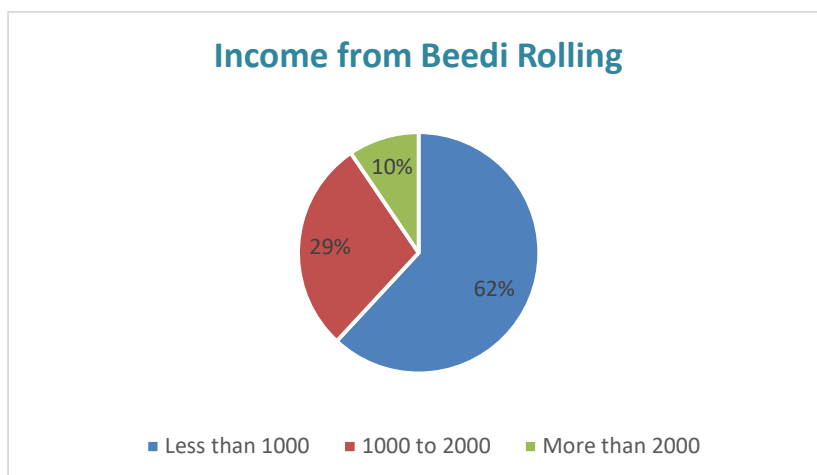
A staggering 43% of those surveyed have been working in beedi rolling for more than 10 years, while another 33% are in the profession for more than 5 years.



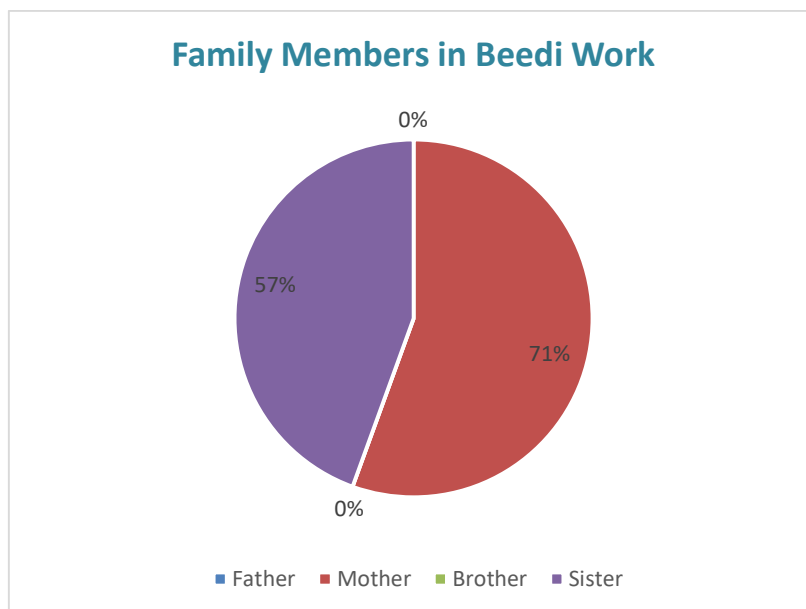
Most of the workers around 62% rolled 500 to 1000 beedi a day while rest 38% could roll less than 500 beedi a day.



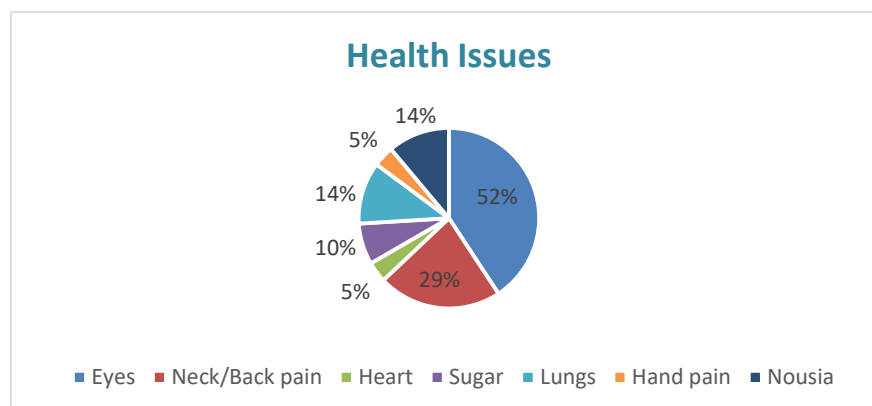
Most of the workers around 76% rolled beedis for 4 to 8 hours a day while, 19% put in less than 4 hours a day in rolling beedis.



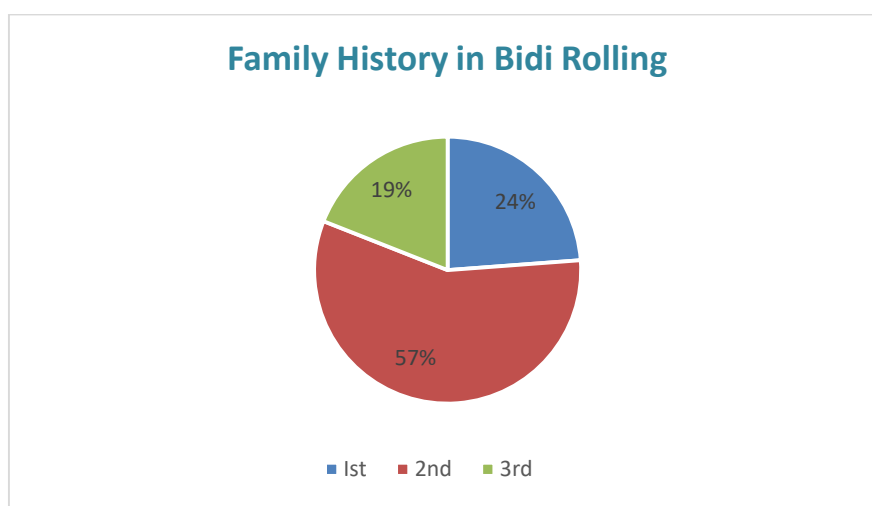
The monthly income from beedi rolling was less than One thousand Rupees for 62% workers while, 29% earned between one to two thousand Rupees.



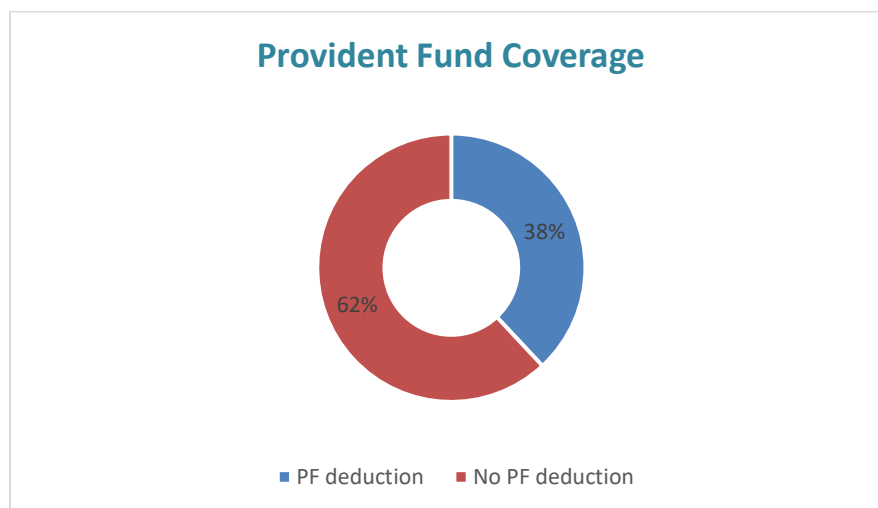
Mothers of 71% workers were also in the beedi rolling profession while, sisters of 57% also rolled beedis.



With regard to health issues 52% were experiencing problem in eyes, 29% workers were facing issues of neck or back pain and 14% were having breathing issues or chest pain.



57% workers have a family history of working in beedi rolling while 24% started by themselves.



There was no provident fund deduction for 62% workers, while in case of 38% PF was deducted from their wages.

It was also discovered that, despite the fact that practically all workers had a government-issued health card, they were unaware of any government assistance programs for them. They were not aware of minimum wages, and no contract was made between the workers and their employers. The majority of the women workers were satisfied with the amount (Rs 175/1000 beedis) they were receiving.

The families in which they lived were generally joint families, and beedi rolling was the secondary source of income for all of the married women because their husbands also worked. Importantly, the present female workers want their children to attend school and explore other vocations rather than working in the beedi sector.

Summation

- a) **Proper documentation of each worker is needed:** Workers are denied their Provident Fund as well as pension benefits due to a lack of appropriate documentation. Each adult worker should be registered individually and not as a member of a household. This will allow each employee to access their benefits.
- b) **Enforcement of right to education:** The right to education must be strictly enforced in order to provide quality education to boys and girls in the Beedi rolling settlements. It should be assured that no child from beedi workers' villages is denied an education. To do this, local elementary schools must be upgraded in terms of quality, and possibilities for intermediate and upper secondary education must be made available.
- c) **Create job opportunities:** The state should give individuals with other livelihood options to rolling beedis, which is now the only wage labour accessible. Other jobs will also improve women's mobility because they will be required to venture outside of their houses every day. The notion that

the beedi business is beneficial because it allows women to work safely in their homes must be addressed.

- d) **Government should reach out to workers:** Effective communication between governmental authorities and beedi labourers is crucial. They must ensure that the intended beneficiaries receive the services provided. Thus, it is necessary to disseminate information about services, policies, new initiatives, and other topics regularly and efficiently.
- e) **Regular Health Check-ups:** Because beedi workers are exposed to smoke for extended periods of time, it is important to regularly assess their health. These initiatives should be carried out by the local health care institution. Furthermore, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) might hold frequent health camps to monitor the health of beedi worker.

The current study clearly revealed that the majority of beedi workers were economically disadvantaged women, with many having little or limited education and have taken up beedi rolling job to supplement their family's income. Women labourers continue to work in the beedi sector because there are no alternative livelihoods available, despite the fact that they exploited. The low socioeconomic status, lack of education, and lack of training compel many women in these homes to spend their days continually in incorrect work postures. The beedi workers developed a variety of health problems as a result of their prolonged exposure to hazardous tobacco dust. Despite the introduction of social security regulations, the socioeconomic status of beedi workers in the informal sector has not improved significantly as various government initiatives and plans fail to reach these individuals owing to inadequate execution, as indicated by the workers' lack of knowledge about the schemes. Women workers are unaware of the benefits of the Provident Fund plan and the objective of PF withdrawal. These workers do not have access to basic health services since they are not registered as beedi workers. Workers are more worried about their children's education so that they can pursue alternative career opportunities. To raise the standing of beedi rolling workers, substantial improvements need to be made.

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