Research Notes

Perpetually Toiling for Others: Women in Brick Factory Works

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Economic compulsions coerce the vast majority of poor women workers to perform strenuous manual labour for survival. This is a report on the conditions that are debasing and discriminatory of women workers in brick production.

Introduction

Today more and more women are taking up gainful employment and their economic contribution to the family and economy has received increasing recognition. At the same time, it is equally evident that most women workers are still congregated in low paid, marginal and casual work. Out of a total of 494 million women only 127 million women are workers in India (Census 2001). The overwhelming proportion of women workers in the rural sector are mainly employed in agriculture and the informal sector.[1] While official estimates, shrouded in 'statistical purdah', reveal rising rates of women's work participation,[2] they cannot conceal many other disconcerting dimensions of women's work.

Agriculture is the single largest source of employment for women (Krishnaraj and Shah 2004), accounting for 58 per cent of women's employment. In rural areas 76 per cent of women work

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in agriculture. Men may still surpass women in the category of 'cultivator' but women outnumber men in the category of 'agricultural labourer' (43.4 per cent women against 27.5 per cent men). The status of women workers is extensively iniquitous compared to male workers. Women abound in marginal work. In fact their increasing work participation is due to the two-fold surge in marginal work participation both in rural and urban areas: while men's share in marginal work in rural areas is declining, women's share in such work is ascending—from 6.3 per cent in 1991 to 11 per cent in 2001 (all figures are from Census 2001).

Gender inequalities at work are pervasive.[3] Women workers in a generic sense have a disadvantaged position in the labour market (Omvedt 1992; Shramashakti 1988) and sexual division of labour is fairly well entrenched (ILO 2003). Embedded in such practices are a few age old notions: that women are temporary and supplementary workers, their foremost obligation is to the home and they are less committed and efficient than men. Their occupational role seems to be only an extension of their familial role and subjugated status. Household responsibilities restrict women's scope for skill attainment and new avenues of work. Further, occupational segregation by sex limits women's work opportunities (Mazumdar 1990). Women are treated as cheap labour with natural rather than professional skills (Roy 2001). Almost everywhere, the sexual division of labour is writ large, which confines women to specific lower–rung occupations that basically involve minimum training and lower wages. Such differentiation devalues women's work and fosters sex inequality. Such devaluation is embedded in cultures and religions and is key in accounting for wage gaps. Thus, it is not surprising that there are at least seven times as many male dominated than women–dominated occupations. There is segregation even within occupations in emerging areas of work like information technology.

Women are mainly part time workers, engaged in piecework and subcontracted at exploitative rates. They hardly have the autonomy to use or expend their wage other than for family purposes. Generally, wages are not to eke out their own livelihood

but to safeguard family 'fortune'. There is a close correlation between the economic condition of the family and women's employment. For the poor family, women's wages are incomparably essential. When the family can survive without a woman's wages, outside employment for her is considered undesirable, often a taboo. Women enter the job market particularly when men's earnings are inconsistent, inadequate or absent and are withdrawn as and when men have steady and satisfactory work as breadwinners. Thus women's work participation is flexible and for the benefit of the family.

The majority of women workers belong to the lower classes and castes,[4] have seasonal employment, work in unskilled, strenuous tasks with longer working hours,[5] earn definitely less than their male counterparts (Unni and Rani 2003), face ill treatment and lack basic amenities at work. The long and arduous working hours adversely affect their health and fertility, and poor housing conditions and absence of childcare facilities perilously compound women's afflictions (Mazumdar 1990). Lack of bargaining power as well as scarcity of employment avenues further aggravates the situation.[6] Even when both men and women do the same type of work, women in general get about 30 per cent less wages. The secondary or supplementary nature of their wage is often invoked as a reason to justify a lower wage rate for women. With the advent of globalisation, feminisation of the labour force is getting entrenched. (Unni and Rani 2003). Trade liberalisation has the potential to intensify gender-based wage discrimination. This is likely to expand women's share of employment in labour intensive manufacturing activities. With higher exports, women's relative share in employment may increase, as they tend to accept lower wages, which in turn drives down the cost price of export.

This study examines the work lives of 46 women workers in brick factories with a specific focus on wages and welfare provisions. The analysis is based on an investigation of two brick factories out of 22 located in the district of Cooch Behar in the state of West Bengal, Tufanganj Subdivision. Extensive interviews and informed discussions with 50 per cent of the total number of women workers in each factory were held.

Brick Factory Work and the Worker

Brick making is purely a seasonal activity, without any fixed time schedule. As bricks are prepared in open, uncovered fields, any hint of rain or water would ruin everything. Usually the work starts in September–October and ends in April–May, depending upon the vagaries of the monsoon. Brick factories are normally located on the outskirts of urban or semi urban settlements, as bricks are principally sold in urban centres; only recently has the demand increased in rural areas. Brick factories are mainly found in a specific geographical location where there is easy availability of a particular type of clay, the basic ingredient. Concentration of factories in one location helps in hiring workers and is also convenient for sales. Brick factories differ substantially from other factories in terms of area, output and labour absorptive capacity.

Brick factory workers are mainly of two types: supervisor and general worker. The supervisory category comprises the Manager, *Munshi* and *Sardar*. The Manager, appointed at a fixed monthly salary, undertakes all managerial functions and his position is next to that of the owner. *Munshis*, who are to count the quantum of bricks produced and supervise the work, are appointed in accordance with the recommendation of the ruling party in the concerned *panchayat*. In the category of *Sardar* or labour contractor two distinct types are perceptible. One type supplies migrant workers, mainly skilled, from distant places or states nearby like Bihar, and remains responsible for their transit passage, accommodation, etc. Another category supplies groups of workers (mostly from their own clan and locality), resides with the group, supervises the work and remains accountable for meeting the needs of the workers. In any case, *Sardars* do not undertake manual work and receive commission in proportion to the workers they supply, the rate mutually agreed upon by owners and *Sardars*.

A substantial number of workers are exclusively engaged in making raw or primary bricks—they are locally known as moulders or *patheras*. They are mainly migrant workers coming from distant places along with wives and children. About one-half of

moulders are thus women. Each family works as a unit or sub-unit. Minor children, if any, also extend a supporting hand by supplying the spade or water, laying bricks on the floor or piling them in stacks. The work of the moulder is somewhat skilled in the sense that no other category of workers undertakes this work. Elsewhere potters may be engaged in this work but not in this district. The task of the *pathera* begins at least a month before the actual start of work in the factory. Only after they have prepared a sufficient quantity of primary bricks can the burning of bricks or dock work commence. The migrant workers are provided temporary bamboo shelters near their place of work known as *pit*.

When the owner–manager decides that the stock of raw bricks is sufficient or that the dock should be fired, the order is given to carry the raw bricks to the chambers of the dock from the area where the *pathera* have made the stacks. Carriers of raw bricks who account for the second largest category of workers are locally known as *rejin*. Most brick carriers are women who hail from local areas; no migrant worker does this work.

Next come the dock workers of four distinct categories. Some, usually four in number, stack the raw bricks, one by one, within each chamber of the dock, systematically and row-wise. They are known as *bojjai* workers, both migrant and local workers venturing into this type of work. Another group consists of coalmen carry coal, spread it within the gaps deliberately made between rows of bricks in the dock chamber. Then the firemen light up the fire in the chamber and control the fire from above. When primary bricks so stacked in the chambers are thought to have baked adequately then the fire is extinguished. After some days when the chambers have cooled, another group draws out the burnt bricks and stacks them in the open field according to the quality of the finish.

The role of the firemen is critical because upon their expertise depends the extent of vitrifiction of bricks, which determines their market price. Until recently, all dock work was the monopoly of migrant workers, mainly from Bihar. Since the advent of the more sophisticated method whereby electric fans are used to spread the fire within the chambers of the dock, the tasks of coalmen and

firemen are being taken over by local workers. The traditional fire management expertise, it seems, is becoming obsolete; also, migrant workers lag behind in acquiring the new skill. Conspicuous is the absence of women workers in any type of dock work.

The wage for factory work is piece rated where the output is amenable to easy counting. Where the work is continuous the time rate is preferred. For the manager, *munshi*, night guard and dock workers like *bojjai*, coalman and fireman the monthly consolidated pay is established. For all other workers the weekly wage is paid according to the contract rate annually determined after the bipartite meeting between owners and trade unions of brick factories. Though the agreed rates are supposed to be applicable to all factories in the district, they vary across factories, albeit marginally.

However, the wage rate is not uniform for any category of contract workers within and across factories. The wage differs according to the nature of the task, the distance covered in the performance of the task and the ability of the owners to dominate. For the moulder two styles of work are discernible. One or a few families following the traditional mode can work as one unit without recourse to modern implements. Under the latest production system known as the mill system, mechanical devices like the power tiller grind the clay. Between 15 and 25 workers here act as one unit where each has a specialised task such as grinding clay, operating the power tiller, carrying the raw material and preparing bricks. Each sub-category has a separate contract rate. In short, under the traditional system a moulder gets Rs 110 per 1,000 bricks and under the mill system the rate is Rs 140.

For the carriers the contract rates vary. In factories spread out on large tracts of land, since carriers have to traverse longer distances to move bricks, their work output is lower compared to carriers in diminutive factories, yet their contract rate for carrying 1,000 bricks is higher than in smaller factories.

It is difficult to determine the wage per worker per week. The wage rates vary not only across factories but they are also different for categories and sub-categories of workers within the same factory, making the estimation of income tricky. The amount of wage depends heavily on the output that the contracted worker has

actually produced or carried in a week. Obviously, the output cannot be the same for everyone every week—one may remain absent for a day or an hour, may remain ill, may feel fatigue, may slow down production for any personal reason or for shortage of raw material or anything else. Moreover, every worker draws an advance from the owner (owners advance money to secure workers' service in the next year, known as *dadan*, and workers also borrow in case of distress), which is deducted from each worker's weekly payment.[7] If a worker has drawn an enormous advance, the deduction will be more than for those who have taken comparatively lesser amounts.

Gender Divides in Brick Factory Work

In the brick factory gender divisions in work and wages are not overtly visible but implicitly or intermittently operative. Brick factory jobs can conveniently be classified into brick making, brick carrying and brick burning, even though there are sub-divisions within each category and other variances. The women were mostly wives of the male workers. While the husbands were not necessarily and exclusively confined to unskilled work, the women really were. The confinement of women to inferior, unskilled tasks obviously constricts their wage earning potential. Relegation of women to lesser wage earning tasks has the immediate impact of making them impecunious as well as docile. The women had not taken up work to achieve personal solvency or independence but to supplement scanty family income.

When the nature of women's work is examined, it transpires that they are almost exclusively engaged in two specific types of works—brick making and carrying or loading. Forty six per cent of respondents were carriers or loaders and 35 per cent were engaged in brick making, while another 20 per cent were in yet more inferior activities like cleaning garbage and mud plastering of dock walls (Table 1). Compared to male workers in a specific broader category, it was found that women are shunted into minor tasks. In the moulder category women cut clay, maintained the workpit, rotated the instruments that kneaded the earth while males

Table 1
Social and Occupational Features of Women Brick Factory Worker

Age Group (years)	< 18	18–28	28–38	38+	Total		
	1	13	24	8	46		
Marital Status	Married	Widow	Unmarried				
	41	4	1	–	46		
Caste	SC	ST	OBC	Muslim	Total		
	18	0	5	23	46		
Occupation before Brick Factory Work	Labour	Agri.Labour	Maid	Others	No work	Work in BF	Total
	7	7	1	6	1	24	46
Why BF Work	Agricultural work not available regularly	More earnings	Other work unavailable	BF work continuously available	Poverty	Other reasons	Total
	2	4	2	1	36	1	46
Current Nature of Brick Factory work	Brick Making	Brick Carrying	Others	Total			
	16	21	9	46			
Work during closer of BF	Labour	Agricultural Labour	Maid	Any work	No work	Total	
	23	10	1	1	11	46	

Source: Based on data collected by author in field research.

cut clay, kneaded and prepared bricks. Women prepared bricks only occasionally, after completing their other basic tasks.

Even when both men and women were engaged in similar work, brick carrying for instance, the work was not comparable. Women carriers could carry head loads of at best 10 bricks at a time. But the men usually carried not less than 20 bricks on the *bak* (the bent pole borne on the shoulder with scales on which the bricks are placed). Thus men's work output, and consequently their wages, were more than twice women's wages. If men and women carry the same weight, wage discrimination could be avoided.

It is only as daily labourers, *hazira ka*, that women are overtly discriminated against. For this work, women workers received Rs 3 less per day than males. The important point is that such discrimination has prevailed for years and its black and white authenticity can be traced to the printed wage rate indicating that women's productivity is always suspect to some extent. Except in this particular way, the wage structure of the brick factory does not overtly exploit women workers. Women are paid less as they do less or are given unskilled tasks that are paid poorly.

Assessment of comparative work efficiency was found problematic. Many women were not working independently but worked only in a family unit where the wage was received and used by the male family head. Some women were concentrated in jobs which were exclusively female. Even when engaged in the same task men and women did not do similar work. Wage differentials may be a viable yardstick, but in brick work computation of the wage is difficult.

Fettering of women in two principal categories with further stratification within tasks has the clear consequence of a lower weekly wage for women. In gross average estimates, the male brick maker earned Rs 490 weekly and women earned Rs 350. The male carrier earned Rs 400 and women earned Rs 325. The women worker on average earned Rs 327 per week while the corresponding figure for men was Rs 430—thus, a substantial difference of Rs 103 manifests itself with all its nagging implications.

However, one redeeming feature is that women workers in brick factories were not abused in the work place, either by owners or others. Women workers in general are susceptible to humiliation

or harassment because of their vulnerable position or may be even subjected to outright sexual coercion; indeed they have been victimised elsewhere in many other sectors (Saran and Sandhawar 1990). But women respondents here did not face any such nuisance or distress worth mentioning, caused by owners or supervisors or fellow workers. Neither were women scolded by owners or supervisors, nor did fellow male workers flirt with them. In the workplace they encountered no invidious or embarrassing incident.

Another related point is that as the women's wage was mainly piece-rate, it is possible that intentional or inadvertent mistakes could be made in calculating their dues. However, no woman complained that the quantum of her output had ever been underestimated or manipulated. In other words, for every woman worker the output had been estimated fairly accurately, the wage paid accordingly and mostly weekly.

Before joining the brick factory half of the total number of women studied had worked as agricultural labourers while the other half had started their working career in the brick factory. They had to work for subsistence, whatever the work option available. The respondents said that their husbands forced them to work in the brick factory. In other words, husbands thought it perfectly justified that their wives should extend all possible help to add to family income.

Social Security a Sham

The state is expected to regulate the working conditions of workers so as to ensure human dignity, to save them from unforeseen eventualities or contingencies beyond their control, and these are generically known as social security provisions. However, in the informal sector most of the social security measures are hardly applicable and more substantially, when applicable they are rarely observed. Because of nebulous employer–employee relationships in home-based, casual, seasonal work, it is difficult to enforce such provisions. Due to the ignorance of scattered workers, cumbersome legal procedures and the deliberate design of the employer, social security provisions remain a dream for most of the workers. Moreover, the thrusts of protective legislation hardly conform to the

nature of the work in question and hardly consider the plight of workers in the informal sector. The basic focus of welfare schemes seems not to be on income support but on income maintenance, which is more relevant for the organised sector. Where workers have no permanent employment or steady source of income, the focus on income maintenance is questionable. Informal sector workers with irregular or seasonal employment cannot claim protection in the conventional sense.

For women workers in the informal sector in general, protective provisions are surely indispensable. All through, women have been hired only when they come relatively cheap. When because of statutory compulsion employers have to incur additional cost (as on a crèche) or loss (on account of maternity leave) women may be discarded. When the economic advantage of the women workers tends to dissipate, they are more likely to be abandoned particularly in the private sector. In the same vein, because of economic contingencies and scarce wage earning opportunities in the rural set-up, women seldom have the leeway to demand or fancy employment where gender-specific protection is available.

Scores of enactments seek to redress the specific problems of women workers. The Factories Act (1948) provides for separate lavatories, washing facilities, reserved space in dining areas, regulation of working hours and crèches where at least 30 women are working. The Equal Remuneration Act (1976) prohibits gender discrimination in recruitment, service conditions and remuneration. The Minimum Wages Act (1948) stipulates an adequate wage rate for fulfilling the minimum requirement of the family and the obligation to pay wages irrespective of the capacity of the employer. The Maternity Benefit Act (1961) regulates women's work that interferes with the development of the unborn child and provides for pre and post-natal care. The basic issue is whether the majority of women do enjoy these benefits or, as a case in point, whether women brick factory workers are getting even an iota of these.

Women workers are generally deprived of all statutory benefits and amenities. The gap between what ought to be and what actually is available is very large. A few provisions like minimum wages, drinking water, rest shed, toilet, etc. are absolutely indispensable.

When these, the barest minimum facilities, are consistently denied, the extent of sub-human and exploitative working conditions that women workers confront daily can be easily understood. Admittedly, the seasonal and contractual nature of factory work helps owners to ignore and evade all mandatory provisions; hence, there is no immediate likelihood of these being implemented!

Regarding the hours of work in the brick factory, there is no legal discrimination between male and female workers. Statutorily, women are not to be engaged in night shifts. But the night shift is not in vogue in this type of factory. In brick factories no hard and fast working hours are observed. For loaders or carriers the work commences at about 8 am and continues as long as the requirement of the dock is met or as long as workers can work. In between chores, workers can avail of breaks but it is not according to any rule or norm. When workers feel exhausted or are extremely hungry they can rest or eat. In our rough estimate, every woman worked not less than 9 hours daily—for the migrant woman it is at least 11 hours if the two hours spent in preparing lunch/dinner are taken into consideration.

As per the Factories Act (1948) no woman will be asked to lift, carry or move by hand any material, article or tool exceeding 30 kg in weight. Women loaders are continuously lifting 10 bricks weighing not less than 50 kg on their heads. Women engaged in moulding handle hand-bending weight all day long. The total weight they carry or handle is difficult to determine. Compliance to legal obligations regarding the maximum weight women may carry is nil.

Employers have to make arrangements for latrines and urinals of the prescribed type separately for male and female workers. State governments have consequently framed rules regarding the standard of construction and size of facilities. But these are only for the statute book and not for the brick factory. Though the number of women workers is quite large in every factory, not a single washroom, latrine, or urinal can be found on the premises.

Disregarding statutory provisions, no brick factory has arranged for any kind of rest shed, lunch room or even drinking water. As the work is done in the open field, these amenities are all the more

necessary. When the sun becomes unbearable, workers retreat to the shadow of the trees, drink water from the hand pump used for watering bricks, no matter how unhygienic the water is. Local women take their lunch in the shadow of a tree or the administrative building or barrack and migrant workers go back to their *dera* (housing cluster).

Married women have children of tender age to look after. Yet the crèche facility is absent in brick factories. The expectation of brick factory owners is that women should make their own arrangement for childcare and not bring infants or children to the factory premises. How then can the women cope with lack of childcare? Absence of maternity benefits and crèches inhibits women considerably. During advanced pregnancy and until the infant is amenable to be looked after by other members of the family, women usually stay away from factory work. During such absence they forfeit the miserable wages they contribute to the family coffer. Lack of the requisite facilities robs the wage earning woman of an income before and after childbirth.

Migrant women in particular cannot place their infants or minor children in the safe keeping of anyone in the *dera* and have to take them along to the worksite. Laying children on the floor of the brick making pit and taking care of them when required, feeding them from time to time, women continue their tasks. Some local women too do not always find it possible to deposit their infants anywhere. Thus one often sees under-nourished children crawling around in the dust or playing near heaps of mud. It can also be seen that children trail behind their working mothers. A few infants are also placed on a piece of cloth under the sun or tree and they often cry for attention.

If and when a worker is injured in an accident arising out of or in the course of work, the employer is liable to pay compensation. In fact many types of injury occur in the brick factory. These are either directly related to factory work—injury to hand or leg can occur while doing spadework, organ damage could happen when carrying or loading bricks—or are after-effects of factory work (pain in the shoulder or backbone for the moulder, respiratory troubles like bronchitis for the dock-worker). For minor ailments

tablets may be given. If anyone is bedridden no compensation is made. When the condition of a worker gets worse or when a hand or leg is lost the worker is thrown out.

Brick factory workers do not and are nor likely to get the benefit of the Provident Fund (PF) scheme. All workers are seasonal and temporary. Factory owners do not maintain any Muster Roll or Register for the employees; thus in a technical sense no list of permanent workers exists in any brick factory. Moreover, workers do not work regularly in any one factory. Thus, without any 'permanent employment' or employer, a PF account is difficult to open and maintain. Further, the wage earned is so meagre that after meeting living expenses, there is very little left to save.

Concluding Remarks

Women workers, comprising about one-half of the total brick factory workforce are engaged in highly arduous and extremely uncertain work as they can be thrown out at the whim of the factory owner. This non-permanent work is available for 6–7 months in a year and the wage in exchange for strenuous work without any sort of protective provisions is extremely meagre, to say the least. Like other women in the informal sector, they are involved in socially productive and reproductive labour, which is unequivocally critical for the subsistence of the family. Thus, they make a double contribution to family survival. They help in reproducing the labour power of their husband, children and themselves. They also participate in wage labour producing exchange value. Therefore, the amount of use value and exchange value they continuously create far exceeds that of the male members of their families.

The eternal struggle for survival and the laws of economics converge in the brick factory. Employment per se is preferred despite exploitation and sub-human working conditions. For women workers agricultural labour is the only other viable option but this sector is already saturated, purely seasonal and no less exploitative. Where poverty and the compulsion to earn meagre wages converge in sectors where terms and conditions are dictated by employers, women workers find themselves in the eternal trap of toil without reward.

Notes

1. Over 95 per cent of total Indian women workers sweat in these sectors, which are bedevilled by seasonality, uncertainty and absence of welfare or protective regulation. As the National Commission on Labour (2002) noted, because of insecure, irregular and unprotected work, workers in the informal sector are obviously the most vulnerable.
2. Women's work participation rate is steadily increasing. It was 14.2 in 1971, 19.7 in 1981, 22.3 in 1991 and 25.7 in 2001.
3. Religion and geography are a few other factors that affect women's work. In predominantly Muslim areas, women are debarred from using machinery in garment production units around Calcutta, while among Hindu women such a stricture is absent (see Custers 1997).
4. The occupational break-up of workers as per the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) 2001, (55th Round) reveals that the work participation rate is highest among Scheduled Tribes (STs), followed by the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs). The rate is lowest among high caste Hindus and Muslims.
5. One dimension of all this is that women are substantially engaged in domestic service. Poor women find paid employment by working for better-off women who are enabled to be economically active (Abramo and Valenzuela 2005).
6. In recent years employment generation both in rural and urban areas has seen a slump. This is due to macro-economic forces like reduction in public investment and expenditure, import competition, lesser bank credit. In rural India, employment generation had been less than 0.6 per cent, per year during the period 1993–2000, which is about one-third the rate of growth of population. Non-agricultural employment has not been able to absorb or counteract the decline in agricultural employment.
7. Elsewhere it is found that factory owners compel workers to depend on them 'for life' by paying wages insufficient for maintaining their family as well as by preventing them from working in other agricultural works (Dharmalingam, 1995: 3017).

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