

Socioeconomic Condition and Challenges of Female Labor Working in Brick Kilns

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Abstract

The study explores the plight of women workers working in the brick kilns. It examines the women's engagement in brick kiln work, their issues, working conditions and proposes the solutions to their problem. For this study, data was collected by using a purposive sampling technique from seven old women (31-50 years) and five young women workers (13-30 years) living in District Vehari, Khanewal, and Machiwal town. A semi-structured interview was conducted for data collection, whereas data was analyzed by using Thematic Analysis. The results revealed that poor socio-economic background, vulnerable due to lack of education and opportunities, family experiences and debt bondage as the main reasons for working in brick kilns. The reported nature of the problems was the physical impact on their health, gender issues, work-related exploitation, and child labor. Regarding the perception of their future lives, hopelessness and unhappiness were reported by the majority, but at the same time, they wanted to change their lives. Respondents demanded financial and structural support as proposed solutions. The government, local civil society, and labor unions should take measures to ensure the implementation of labor laws.

Keywords: brick kiln, gender, bondage labor, peshgi (advance money).

Introduction

Pakistan is one of the populated countries of South Asia, where women represent more than half of the population, but a relatively small segment of the labor force. According to global reports, women are struggling in Pakistan to get their fundamental rights and contribute in country's development.¹ Statistics reveal that women's participation in the labor force is 22.18 % in 2020 compared with other 182 countries, which is

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¹ N.d. Weforum.Org. Accessed 1 December 2021a. http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf.

51.86%.² Some of the reported reasons for this low participation are; harassment at work place, wage gaps, and discrimination in the laboring process, lack of facilities and social security especially in the informal sector³ where unskilled or semi-skilled women are usually, require to do manual labor and part-time work at low wages.⁴ Only 25% of women with university degrees work in the formal sector. Additionally, in Pakistan, women's participation in informal activities isn't completely acknowledged and appreciated. So when almost half of the population represents low labor force participation in the productivity of the country.⁵

This condition is even worst in rural areas where economic development is affected by unemployment, socioeconomic and environmental issues. Here, many workers work in brick kilns, which is considered one of the oldest industries to support their families. Making bricks by hand is the unregistered industry where workers come from distant areas to work for part-time or as seasonal work.⁶ According to the Department of Labor, Government of Punjab, men, women, and children are directly and indirectly employed in this extensive brick kiln industry in Punjab. Still, there is no exact data available of brick kiln workers.⁷

In this regard, several researchers revealed the working conditions of brick kilns workers such as becoming the victim of bonded labor due to poverty and working mostly in a hostile working environment. To pay back their loan, they have to work extra hours. This situation comes as an unending cruel circle that overpowers the families

² Pakistan Female Labor Force Participation - Data, Chart.' n.d. Accessed 1st December 2021. https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Pakistan/Female_labor_force_participation/.

³ F. Gill, G.M. Phull and A.A. Chachar, 'Human Rights Violations of Labour and Women in Pakistan', *Grassroots*, 51:1 (2017).

⁴ 'Protection of Rights of Vulnerable Labour Groups', n.d. Ihsn.Org. Accessed 1st December 2021. <https://catalog.ihsn.org/citations/51219>.

⁵ R. Ray, 'Child Labor, Child Schooling, and Their Interaction with Adult Labor: Empirical Evidence for Peru and Pakistan', *The World Bank Economic Review* 14:2 (2000) 347-67.

⁶ Banibrata Das, 'Assessment of Respiratory Symptoms and Lung Function Values among the Brick Field Workers of West Bengal, India', *Archives of Environmental & Occupational Health*, 71:4 (2016), 222-30.

⁷ 'Brick Kiln Workers: The Endless Battle', 7 August 2015. <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/brick-kiln-workers-the-endless->.

physically and economically.^{8&9} Moreover, researchers¹⁰ explained the reasons for bonded labor which are cultural, societal, and political. Workers face problems because they don't register themselves, their existence and identity are unknown to the government. They also have to work at low wages.¹¹ To bear expenditures such as health and looking after their children, they usually agree to take the minimum amount of money as a loan in advance which they have to pay back in a short time. No opportunity for other works and poverty compel workers to accept this very less amount of money as a loan.¹² Additionally, mostly brick kilns are not registered, and organized. The present scenario of global warming, prolonged summer, and changing climate, is very challenging for brick kiln laborers. Furthermore, work in direct sunlight in the summer season affects and increases physical stress, especially for female labour in brick kiln.¹³ Various other studies discuss that exposure to pollution due to using coal or wood as fuel and toxic substances make brick kiln workers at the risk of having health threats such as breathing, lungs problem and biomechanical problems in their bodies.^{14&15} Other reported health problems are injuries while doing work and musculoskeletal problems.¹⁶ Brick Kilns of Pakistan engage

⁸ T. Sakthivel and G. Ravi, 'An Economic Analysis of Seasonal Migration Workers in Brick Kiln Industry, Tamilnadu', *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 22:9 (2017), 60-64.

⁹ M.J. Iqbal, 'Bonded Labor in the Brick Kiln Industry of Pakistan', *Lahore Journal of Economics*, 2006, 99-119.

¹⁰ F. Gill, G.M. Phull and A.A. Chachar, *op.cit*

¹¹ T. Sakthivel and G. Ravi, *op.cit*

¹² Javaid Gill and M. Rizwan, 'South Asia Labour Conference 2014: Lahore. Creating Better Working Conditions and Enhancing Labour Productivity and Competitiveness', 2014. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/ea443454965de4b9c9101d276311a990bd2a43e5>.

¹³ Moumita Sett and Subhashis Sahu, 'Effects of Occupational Heat Exposure on Female Brick Workers in West Bengal, India' *Global Health Action*, 7:1 (2014), 21923.

¹⁴ Banibrata Das, 'Prevalence of Work-Related Musculoskeletal Disorders among the Brick Field Workers of West Bengal, India', *Archives of Environmental & Occupational Health*, 69:4 (2014), 231-40.

¹⁵ Hoang Xuan Co, Nghiem Trung Dung, Hoang Anh Le, Dam Duy An, Kim Van Chinh and Nguyen Thi Kim Oanh, 'Integrated Management Strategies for Brick Kiln Emission Reduction in Vietnam: A Case Study', *The International Journal of Environmental Studies*, 66:1 (2009), 113-24

¹⁶ Shiraz Shaikh, Asaad Ahmed Nafees, Vikash Khetpal, Abid Ali Jamali, Abdul Manan Arain and Akram Yousuf, 'Respiratory Symptoms and

women in many tasks specifically in central Punjab and across all provinces. In Sindh it is observed that labor's families including females live at brick kilns and also work as labor. But in NWFP, seldom females work at kilns even if they live near sites.¹⁷ Thousands of women are involved in the brick-making process in Pakistan, however, their work is unrecognized and they also do not receive wages for it. Other highlighted problems are the wage gap for women and men working at brick kilns and prevalence of sexual harassment¹⁸ working under direct sunlight even during pregnancies¹⁹ and the dual burden due to their gender roles, also facing discrimination based on gender in terms of work allocations and wages.²⁰ Similarly, other reported a worse condition of women workers that are work place discrimination, as women are given such task which does not require skills such as carrying a load on heads and all skilled work that has value and economic return is restricted to male workers only like molding, packing, and stacking the bricks. This is the reason why women get low wages as compared to men. Even if women do the same work as men they are not paid the same wages. In the end women workers hardly get 60 percent as compared to what is earned by male workers.²¹

Another aspect of brick kilns in Pakistan is child labor.²² According to UNICEF (United Nations International Emergency Fund), there are at least 250,000 child labor working at brick kilns in Pakistan. The study also estimates the number of bonded child labor that is 2/3rd of total child labor. Educational facilities and schools aren't available, so they remain uneducated. Even if schools are near, they don't go to school

Illnesses among Brick Kiln Workers: A Cross Sectional Study from Rural Districts of Pakistan', *BMC Public Health*, 12:1 (2012), 999.

¹⁷ Pakistan Institute of Labour Education, and Research, 'Unfree Labour in Pakistan: Work, Debt and Bondage in Brick Kilns', 2004. https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/publications/WCMS_082028/lang-en/index.htm.

¹⁸ The Newspaper's Staff Reporter, '96pc of Brick Kiln Owners Do Not Pay Men, Women Workers Equally', *Dawn*, 7 April 2016. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1250448>.

¹⁹ M.J. Iqbal, *op.cit*

²⁰ T. Sakthivel and G. Ravi, *op.cit*

²¹ 'The Hard Hitting Facts about the Brick Kiln Women Workers: Can CSR Support?', 15 March 2017. <https://jnicstimes.com/?p=726>.

²² Mohammad Abbas Ali, Mohammad Vaqas Ali and Faiza Abbas, 'Hidden Hazardous Child Labor as a Complex Human Rights Phenomenon: A Case Study of Child Labor in Pakistan's Brick-Making Industry', *Cogent Social Sciences*, 3:1 (2017), 1369486.

because of rapid migration. Shelter issues and a load of debt on their families.^{23,24&25}

Other reported factors are the political influence of landowners, lack of implementation of laws, and no record of debts in documentations. For instance, the Bhatta Mazdoor Tehreek and Labor Qaumi Movement (local platforms for the protection of workers) protested for no payment of wages. The government has fixed 962 Rupees per 1000 bricks. Brick kiln workers face torture if they demand wages fixed by the government and the police refrain from taking action.²⁶ Therefore, direct action has been taken by legal authorities, such as Supreme Court in 1989 to close the brick kilns where underage workers were being exploited which is against human rights.²⁷ Even after commitment to international conventions (UDHR, CEDAW) and national legislation, including the constitution of Pakistan which ensure the protection of labor rights against bonded labor, debt bondage, and discrimination (11, 17, 18, 25 & 37e), it is unfortunate that the labor rights remain highly violated in brick kilns due to lack of implementation of labor policies and awareness. The conditions are same in all of the provinces of Pakistan.^{28&29}

Therefore, it is important to understand the status of the deprived and unrecognized group of women attached to this sector from their perspective to give them a platform to share their concerns. This study is an attempt to understand the situation of women workers working along with their families in the brick kilns in the selected districts of Southern Punjab. It is expected that the findings might serve as a useful source to take measures for uplifting the status of women in this informal sector of the economy.

Objectives of the study

- To understand the status of women by examining their reasons of working at brick kilns
- To identify the problems faced by women workers in brick kilns.

²³ F. Gill, G.M. Phull and A.A. Chachar. *op.cit*

²⁴ M.J. Iqbal, *op.cit*

²⁵ A. Ercelawn and M. Nauman, 'Unfree Labour in South Asia: Debt Bondage at Brick Kilns in Pakistan', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2004, 2235-42.

²⁶ 'State of Human Rights in 2016 Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.' N.d. Accessed 12 August 2022. <https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2017-State-of-human-rights-in-2016-EN.pdf>.

²⁷ F. Gill, G.M. Phull and A.A. Chachar. *op.cit*

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Brick Kiln Workers: The Endless Battle', *op.cit*

- To understand the perception of women workers about their status in the future

Literature review

Pakistan is biggest brick making industry in South Asia. Nearly, 18000 Brick Kilns, per year produced 45 billion bricks in Pakistan. In the Punjab province of Pakistan, there are 7,966 functional brick kilns. At brick kilns, heaps of men, women, and children are involved in making bricks as reported by the Labor and Human Resource Department of Punjab. No exact statistics are available of laborers, it is estimated that 4.5 million labor is involved in the brick-making process. Bonded labor and child labor isn't legal. A survey conducted in 2004 by the Federal Bureau of Statistics in Punjab on brick kilns, reported that 90% of labor at brick kiln is the bonded labor. According to PILER report in Pakistan, up to 1 million labor is bonded. The brick kiln industry is an informal industry, which is risky, unsafe, and harmful for the workers. Lack of implementation of laws and policies makes the workers' more helpless and vulnerable to many discriminatory practices like working in unfavorable conditions that severely affect them psychologically and physiologically, too.³⁰

Various studies reported the harmful effects of brick making in the traditional way of burning coal. It risks the health of workers.³¹ Because, the fuel used in brick kilns is wood and coal, which makes the atmosphere and workers vulnerable to the disposal of toxic waste.

Due to which there are greater chances of respiratory diseases in workers. The toxic substances, nature of work, smoke in the atmosphere, and age are the major factors causing these diseases workers.^{32&33}

Several other studies reported the worst socioeconomic conditions for women. That make them work up to 12 to 16 hours under very unfavorable environmental and physical conditions.³⁴

In this regard, gender favors for men in terms of division of work, working environment, and getting financial benefits. Another

³⁰ 'Pakistan Third Largest Brick- Producing Country in South Asia – Business Recorder' n.d. Accessed on 1st December 2021. <https://fp.brecorder.com/2017/05/20170504175631/>.

³¹ Kamal, Atif, Riffat Naseem Malik, Tania Martellini and Alessandra Cincinelli, 'Cancer Risk Evaluation of Brick Kiln Workers Exposed to Dust Bound Pahs in Punjab Province (Pakistan)', *The Science of the Total Environment* 493 (2014): 562-70.

³² Hoang Xuan Co et al, *op.cit*

³³ Shiraz Shaikh, *op.cit*

³⁴ T. Sakthivel and G. Ravi, *op.cit*

important factor highlighted by researchers in the field of brick kilns is debt bondage. In Pakistan's context, it is through the system of 'Peshgi' that labor is bounded especially in brick kilns. Usually, there are no records of advance loans because it's not in written documents. This is a very cruel system of bondage as a little amount is offered by the owner for advance that workers are supposed to return with the rate of interest on demand by owners which never ends. This system of debt bondage, bounds the entire family to pay back the money.³⁵ Women and children do unpaid work as their work is in replacement to pay the debt.³⁶ This situation sometimes involves the physical and sexual exploitation of bonded labor as well. The paying advance loan exists for the last hundreds of years, in Pakistan when people don't find any jobs they involves themselves into the prolonged agreement of debt bondage.^{37&38}

It is challenging to investigate the factors of bonded and forced labor because of social, political, and cultural issues. Prevailing situation of workers at brick kilns demands a comprehensive examination of issues from the perspective of women for purposing gender-sensitive measures to ensure the well-being of women workers.

Theoretical framework

The theorist Karl Marx paid major attention to low wages, labor, class economic conditions, due to capitalistic inequalities faced by labor class. Capitalistic economy gives rise to an unbalanced share of resources and favours the powerful class to control the poorest class of society. This system would never protect the labor class in the world. It seems Pakistan isn't excluded from the practices of labor abuse and slavery.³⁹

According to Karl Marx slavery is embedded in the system of feudalism, where a master subjugates the slaves as they own them.⁴⁰ It can be related to the bonded or forced labor of kilns as they are also exploited by the owners in trapping them by giving loans with strict conditions like to pay back the loans they have to work for long hours under unfavorable environmental conditions. According to Karl Marx, this situation makes the poor poorer and alien to society by accepting poverty as a natural phenomenon. Just like bonded labor feels helpless

³⁵ 'The Hard Hitting Facts about the Brick Kiln Women Workers, *op.cit*

³⁶ Javaid Gill and M. Rizwan, *op.cit*

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ N. Muhammad, M. Shah, I. Alam and A. Askar, 'Debt Bondage: A Sociological Study of Brick Kiln Workers in Badhabar, Peshawar, Pakistan', *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*, 8:1 (2010), 19-23.

³⁹ F. Gill, G.M. Phull and A.A. Chachar.*op.cit*

⁴⁰ Javaid Gill and M. Rizwan, *op.cit*

regarding the vicious circle of bondage. He further stresses, if workers unite themselves and take a stand against the owners (bourgeois), then the revolution will occur in the society.⁴¹ He also gave the concept of false consciousness. This condition is similar to the advance money offered by the owner to poor people. Poor people have false consciousness of debt that it will reduce the burden, but it reduces burden temporarily and they get trapped in bondage for the entire life even their next generation, is bound to pay the loan.⁴²

Another theory of Rowland(1997) highlights that power operates at four interconnected levels, i.e., ‘power over’, a negative and controlling power exercised in win-lose relationships; ‘power with’, a collective power based on mutual support, solidarity, and collaboration with benefits; ‘power to’, a generative or productive power with which creativity allows actors to exercise their agency for the realization of their aspiration; ‘power within’, the strength that nurtures self-esteem and respect for and acceptance of others as equal. The concept of different types of power is used here to understand the situation and conditions of working women by applying these theories.⁴³

Method

The research design used in this study is a descriptive exploratory design. Data and information from respondents about their experiences and their socioeconomic status while working in brick kilns is collected from the selected area. The population of this study is brick kiln women workers living in the houses provided by brick kiln owners near villages of Khanewal, Machiwaal, and Vehari. These are the districts of Multan city which is located in the south of Punjab Province. These rural areas are relatively less developed in terms of socioeconomic conditions, infrastructure, and services. The majority of the population is illiterate and have few work opportunities. A purposive sampling technique was used to choose the sample. Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with seven old women and five interviews were conducted with young girls living in the villages of Khanewal, Vehari, and Machiwala. A semi-structured, open-ended interview was used as a data collection tool. All

⁴¹ B. Johnson, ‘Karl Marx’s Theories’ *Class Differentiation and Revolution, Socialism & Capitalism*, n.d.

⁴² Faccarello, Gilbert, and Christian Gehrke. ‘Karl Heinrich Marx (1818–1883).’ In *Handbook on the History of Economic Analysis Volume I*. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016).

⁴³ J. Rowlands, *Questioning Empowerment: Working Women in Honduras* (Oxfam: Dublin, 1997).

twelve participants were interviewed face to face in the field after taking informed consent. Interviews were recorded after giving assurance of complete confidentiality.

Table 1
Demographics of Old Women

Variables	f	%
Age 31-50	7	100
Education level		
Illiterate	7	100
Marital Status		
Married	6	85
Divorced/separated	1	15

Table 2
Demographics of Young Women

Variables	f	%
Age 13-30	5	100
Education level		
Illiterate	5	100
Marital Status		
Married	1	20
Single	4	8

Findings and discussion

The first emerging theme was related to the reasons of working in brick kilns as shared by the respondents. This theme is socioeconomic factors comprising of poverty, vulnerability due to lack of opportunities, family experiences, and debt bondage. This work seems the only possible option to meet the respondents' family needs as earnings of one family member could not fulfill their family expenses. Therefore, women joined their male members for the work to share the burden of the family expenditure. As one of the women respondents said 'We work to feed our family three times because earnings of one person does not fulfill our needs' (*Hum 3 waqat ki roti khanay k liye ye kam kartay hain ek admi k kamany sy zrortain puri nhi hotien*). Another said 'We are working due to poverty' (*hum gurbaat ki wja sy kaam kr rhy hain*). Likewise, one of them said 'When one person is an earner and 10 people are dependent on him, survival is not possible' (*jab ek admi kamany wala ho or 10 log*

khanay waly hun tou guzara nhi hota). Many women said they work for their children to give them better future. As one woman said 'We work for our children' (*hum apny bchun k liye mehnat krtay hain*). This finding is supported by the previous study.⁴⁴ Similarly, having illiterate parents who did not get their kids enrolled in schools, migration from other areas, unavailability of schools, and limited opportunities lesser work opportunities made them vulnerable to become workers at brick kiln's and become victims of exploitation of the owners at brick kilns. As one of the respondents said 'Our parents were illiterate that's why we did not get any education.....we are also not educating our children' (*hmaray maa baap b un parah thay isi liye hmny b ni prha, hm b apny bchu ko nhi prha rhy*). Young women in this context shared their views that absence of male members, family circumstances, compell them to work with their male members to assist their family's earning. Whereas, some of them joined this as their family profession, while others joined because male members were not earning. Another respondent stated that 'We opt this work because our parents used to do this work' (*hum ye kam is liye krty hain kiun k hmaray maa baap b yehi kam krty thy*).

Another said 'My uncle does this, so I started doing this work' (*myra mamu ye kam krta hai is liye maine ye kam krna shuro kr dia*). Likewise one of them said 'I do this work to support my husband, it is difficult to do it alone' (*main apny Shohar ki madaad k liye ye kaam krti hun akelay kam krna mushkil hai*). It is supported by the literature.⁴⁵ Another respondent said 'Earlier, my mother used to do this work, but now she is sick, so I do it, (*pehly meri maa ye kam krti thi lekin ab wo bemar hai tu main krti hun*). One respondent said 'My brother is youngest and there is no one to earn, so I am doing this work' (*mera bhai chotta hai koi kamanay wala nhi hai is liye ye kam kr rhi hun*). Some workers were migrants so they were helpless and compelled to do this work. As one of the respondents said 'We came here from Kabeerwala, (*district of Punjab*, we don't have any house here, what else we can do' (*hum yahan kabeerwala sy aye hain hmaray pass ghr nhi hai rehany k liye, or kiya kar*). One of the young respondents said that 'We accept whatever money they give, we work here because it is located nearby our house' (*jitney paise dyte hain hum ly lyte hain ye bhhatta ghr k pass hai is liye yahan jatay hain*).

Another important revealed reason was debt bondage. Before work due to prolonged poverty a large number of workers, including men and women took loans from the owners of brick kilns which made

⁴⁴ F. Gill, G.M. Phull and A.A. Chachar, *op.cit*

⁴⁵ Banibrata Das, *op.cit*

them the victim of bonded labor. As one of the respondents said 'We have taken a loan of 100,000 rupees so the contractor says, first pay back the loan, then you can go and work elsewhere' (*hmny 1 lakh Qarza lia hai, is liye kahie or kaam nhi kr sktay Thekaydaar kehata hai pehly paise wapis kro phir dosri jga ja kr kaam kr sktay ho*).

Another women said 'We don't take a loan once, we took loans when we get married, die, at the time of child delivery, for medicine and when guests come' (*hum ek bar Qarza nhi lyta hum shadi py, kisi k marny py, bcha paida hona ho, dawai lyne k liye or jb mehman aien tu b Qarza lyte hain*). One women said 'My child was about to be born, I had taken a loan for the operation, now I am working to pay back that loan' (*Mera bcha paida hony wala tha operation k liye Qarza lia tha ab wo qarza dyne k liye kam kr rhi hun*). A similar situation is found in the context of young girls. One respondent said 'My father has taken a loan for the treatment of my brother, that's why we are doing this work' (*myre abu ny bhai k ilaja k liye Qarza lia hai is liye hm ye kam kr rhy hain*). An important piece of information reported by the majority of the respondents of both groups is that they directly don't take advance money. Usually, male members or elders of the family take advance money or wages and women are supposed to work for a week. Sometimes even without wages. So this situation indicates their vulnerability of being used as labor for 'others' to make sure their survival as a good wife, or daughter in the family and in the society as well.

This situation of debt forces all family members, including children to work from dawn to dusk to pay back the loans without any limitation of working hours. As one of respondent said 'In summer, we go to work before the Fajr call to prayer, because when the sun comes out it gets hot' (*Garmi mein hum Fajar ki azan sy pehlay kam py jatay hain kiun k phr soraj nikal ata hai garmi ho jati hai*). Labor gets wages after week on Thursday, according to the number of bricks they have made, and those who have to return the loan, receive half wages which makes their survival difficult. Workers are not allowed to do work anywhere else until and unless they pay back the loan. Even children of this family have to join them. They were getting 600 to 700 rupees for making 1000 bricks. This finding is consistent with the literature.⁴⁶

Additionally, they have to pay the loan with interest, which is not possible to return by working longer hours. Illiteracy of labor is another reason for their exploitation. As all the record-keeping is done by the staff of brick kilns' owners. One respondent said that 'The contractor

⁴⁶ F. Gill, G.M. Phull and A.A. Chachar, *op.cit*

has record of our loan calculation, we are uneducated, we cannot do calculation, he keeps increasing it as he wants' (*Thekaydaar k pass Qarzay ka hisaab hota hai, hum un parh hain hmains hasaab kataab nhi ata wo apni mrzi sy barhatya rehtay hain*). This finding verified the exploitation reported by a previous study,⁴⁷ who found absence of written record of money causes problems for labor. This finding is also consistent with one of the studies conducted earlier,⁴⁸ which revealed, when people don't find any jobs they entered themselves into the prolonged agreement of bandage which leads to the vulnerability and sometimes causes, owner to become violent. This also relates to Karl Marx's theory of class, that when the working class get trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty, they are exploited by the rich with their wealth and resources. Similarly, the brick kiln owner has enough resources, they provide advance money to bind the poor people with the bondage by taking the advantage of their vulnerability instead of taking care of their workers.

If women workers demand to increase the wages the owner says 'Pay back the loan... go find another job' (*Qarza tou do.... koi or kaam dhondu ja kr*). Another respondent said 'we starve to death, that's why we work (*hum bhokay martay ye kam krtay hain*). Another said 'We do not get the full reward of our hard work (*hmains hmari mehnat ki mazdoori puri nhi milti*). They were unable to afford their own home, therefore live in the shelter provided by the kilns' owner. If they raise any voice, Owner says 'Pick up your belongings and vacate the house' (*apna saman uthao or ghr khali kro*).

The unavailability of basic services also adds to their vulnerability to accept exploitation. As they revealed, they could not access and afford medical services and medicines. Respondents said that medicines of government hospitals aren't effective and hospitals are not located nearby. Only available option is private medical facility, which they cannot afford. One women said 'In case of sickness whatever it is, we take Panadol and get injection' (*hmains kuch b hota hai tu Panadol kha lyte hain or tikka lgwa lyte hain*). Such circumstances made them vulnerable to stick to their condition. This finding also relates to the theory of Karl Marx,⁴⁹ who said masters subjugate the slaves, as they own them in the oppressive structure of slavery.

The second theme was about the impact of work on their lives, which comprised of; negative effect on health, work-related problems,

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ A. Ercelawn and M. Nauman, *op.cit*

burden of gender, child labor, and lack of availability and accessibility to basic life facilities. Due to dust in the atmosphere and many chemical particles, labor has asthma and breathing problems. One woman said ‘My father-in-law has breathing problem, whenever he does this work, his health deteriorates’ (*Myre Susar ko sans ka msla hai wo jb b kam krta hai uski tabiat bht kharab ho jati hai*). Another woman said ‘I have infection in my eyes due to smoke and dust’ (*Meri ankh mein dhoaien or matti ki wajs sy infection hua hai*). Various studies supported this finding that working environment at brick kiln badly affects the health of workers.^{50,51&52}

Using wood and coal as fuel makes the environment and workers vulnerable to it. Many respondents complained about body aches. One respondent said ‘It is very difficult to sit and work continuously, when there is pain, we take rest for a while and then start working again’ (*Bht mushkil hai musalsal baith kr kaam krna, jb dard hota hai thori dair aram krny k baad phr kam krna shuro kr detay hain*) They work in direct sunlight without any shelter, in extreme temperature. This finding is consistent with a previous study, which also reported that work of extended hours in uncomfortable posture affects the health of brick kiln workers.⁵³

Many respondents reported that their hands and feet are torn in winters and starts bleeding. Working in mud makes their skin hard and rough. Women have different problems than males. One of the respondents as average age women said ‘In summer, when my menstruation starts, the blood would not have stopped, I use two handkerchiefs or a piece of cloth, I go to work by wearing two trousers’ (*Garmio mein jb Mahwari ati hai khon bnd ni hota main koi romal ya kapra istmaal nhi krti 2 shalwarain pehan kr kaam py jati hun*). They continue their work in menstruation and pregnancy because they cannot afford to lose the wage even for one day. Another woman told ‘We work till the last month of our pregnancies’ (*jb bcha paida hony wala hota hai to akhri mahenay mein b kam krty hain*). Another respondent said ‘My sister-in-law went to labor and her child born while she was in the middle of her work’ (*meri bhabhi kam kr rhi thi or kam kartay hoey bcha paida ho geya*). In these cases, no medical emergency services are given to them by the owner, which consequently affects the health of children, as one respondent said ‘When the mother feeds the

⁵⁰ Banibrata Das, *op.cit*.

⁵¹ Moumita Sett and Subhashis Sahu, *op.cit*

⁵² Banibrata Das, *op.cit*

⁵³ Javaid Gill and M. Rizwan, *op.cit*

child after working in the hot weather, the child gets diarrhea' (*garmi mein kam krny k baad jb maa bchay ko dhod pilati hai tu bchu ko motion lag jatay hain*).

Similarly, as discussed by young workers in extreme weather, high blood pressure, body aches, skin problems, bleeding from hands, itching, burning and swelling in body. One respondent said 'It is very difficult to sit and work in the sunlight during summers and as our hands and feet bleed in winters' (*bht mushkil hai garmio mein dhoop mein kam krna or sardio mein hathu paon sy khoon ata hai*)

Women suffers more because of their domestic work. They are supposed to work in brick kilns and then do household chores along with looking after elders, kids, and animals, as well.

As one respondent said 'We go to work first, then we bring fodder for the animals, then collect firewood for cooking' (*hum pehly kam py jati hain phr janwaru k liye ghaas lati hain phr lakrian ekhti krti hain khana pakany k liye*). A group of young respondents also experienced the dual responsibility. This finding is supported by previous literature. Another respondent said 'We do not have national identity cards, only our men have ID cards' (*Hmaray pass shanakhti card nhi hain sirf hmaray mardu k pas hain*) which also highlights the pattern of male dominance.

Workplace-related problems reported by respondents includes unsafe working conditions. Wages are very low as they get only 700 or 600 for making 1000 bricks. This finding is consistent with the previous report.⁵⁴ Long working hours with no fixed time is another common reported problem. One respondent said 'We go to work at 1 o'clock in the night and come back at dawn Fajar Prayer' (*hum raat ko 1 bji uth kr kam py jatay hain or Fajar k waqt wapis atay hain*). Another said 'We even work without electric supply after dark' (*hum andhera honay kay baad light ky begair kaam karty hain*). They work till midnight. Another respondent said 'We are three sisters and we go to work with our father late at night' (*hum 3 behnay hain or raat ko uth kr kam py jatay hain apny abu k sath*) Additionally, it was also found that no precautions are taken to protect labor health at the kiln. There are many toxic gases, dark smoke, and dust particles in atmosphere. No masks were given to workers that is why many workers suffered from asthma and other respiratory problems. This finding is supported by a study revealing that women working in the informal sector are fighting for health and social security issues.⁵⁵ It also co-relates with the study which insists that

⁵⁴ Shiraz Shaikh, et al, *op.cit*.

⁵⁵ F. Gill, G.M. Phull and A.A. Chachar, *op.cit*

informal sectors are not registered by the government that is why no labor laws are followed.⁵⁶

Basic health facilities and basic education are the fundamental rights of every citizen of Pakistan, which are not provided to the laborers and their families. So respondents from both groups reported about the lack of availability and accessibility to fundamental facilities. Hospitals were in a distant place and the conditions of schools were not satisfactory. Many respondents complained about the unsatisfactory medical services for women. Clean water was available at distant places. One respondent said ‘We have to go far to fetch clean water, we don't have any money or a ride to come and go’ (*saaf pani lanay k liye dor jana parta hai hmaray pas Qaraye k paise nhi hoty na hi koi sawari hai jo hum ja k rly aien*). Another women said ‘There is only one water tap here where we all fill our water (*sirf ek pani ka nalka hai yahan jahan sy hum sub pani bhartay hain*). Another said ‘My daughter has allergies all over her body, she has not been bathed for a week because there is no clean water here (*meri betti ko saray jism py allergy hui hai usy 1 hafta sy nehlaya nhi kiun k saaf pani nhi hai*) In the brick-making process, water is required to make mud.

They also shared that not a single mosque is available in their area to acquire religious education. Moreover, the school is 6, 7 kilometers away from kilns with no teacher. Their poverty and debt burden compel them to engage their children in this work. So child labor is also found as one of their major problems. One of the respondents said ‘If the children go to school, the work will not be completed and we will not get enough money’ (*agr bchay school jaien tu kaam puraa nhi hota or hmain paisee puray nhi miltay*). Another women said ‘The police have come a couple of times to check whether the children go to school or not. The contractor agree to send the children to school, but if the work is not completed, we do not get money’ (*ek du dar police ayi hai check krny k bchy school jatay hain ya nhi, thekaydaar kehta hai bchu ko school bhajj du lekin kaam pura na ho tu paise nhi miltay*). Another women said ‘We have no clothes to wear, how can we send our children to school, we cannot buy uniforms’ (*Hmaray pas pehan`ny ko kapray nhi hain hm bchu ko school kaise bhajain, hum uniform nhi kahareed sktay*). However, few of them wanted to send their daughters to school but were reluctant due to security risks and distance. As one woman said ‘I used to send my daughter to school but now she doesn't go because the school is too far and she has grown up now (*main apni beti ko school bhajiti thi lekin ab wo nhi jati kiun k school bht door hai or wo bri ho gai*

⁵⁶ ‘Brick Kiln Workers: The Endless Battle’, *op.cit*

hai). Likewise, young women also revealed that children do the same work with their siblings. They don't have enough money to bear the expenses of education as their small wages are not enough to fulfill basic needs like providing food, clothes, and shelter. Additionally, long-distance, their parents' illness, and financial crisis reduce their chances and time to go to school. One of the young girls said 'I go to the work in the morning and come back in the evening. I don't get enough time to think about education' (*Subah kam k liye jati hun sham ko wapis ati hun itna time ni milta k parhaie k baray mein sochun*). The literature also verified this finding.⁵⁷

A third major theme was women perception regarding their future, which indicates mixed feelings of hopelessness, unhappiness, and aspiration for change. The senior respondents think they don't have any future, because of the vicious circle of bondage they are helpless. They have no hope for peaceful life.

One of the respondents said 'We do not have any savings for the future' (*hmaray pass koi jama ponji nhi hai anay waly wqt k liye*). It seems to them that this situation continues from generation to generation and will remain the same as one woman said 'We do this work and our children will do the same' (*hum ye kam krtay hain hmaray bchay bhi kam krain gye*). Another respondent said 'The debt keeps increasing and never decreases' (*Qarza barhta rehta hai kbi km nhi hota*). They think their poverty does not allow them to think otherwise. One women said 'When there is no bread in the stomach for a time, who thinks about the future' (*jb pait mein ek wqt ki b roti nhi hoti tu kn sochta hai mustaqbil k baray mein*).

Similarly, younger women also revealed the feeling of hopelessness about their future because they don't have savings and other skills to work with. A respondent said 'If we have money then we will do something, there is nothing to eat, what the future will be like' (*paise hung gye tu kuch krain gye na khany ko kuch hai ni mustaqbil kia hoga*). They have no savings because they get a very less amount in return. Another girl said 'We get 600 Pakistani rupees of making 1000 bricks, whereas Govt has decided rate of 800 rupees' (*hmmain 600 militay hain 1000 entain bnany ka or government ny 800 fix kia hua hai*). They can't protest against the owner because workers are helpless of their financial condition and vulnerabilities. They don't get enough time to think and plan about the future.

This finding relates to the concept of alienation given by Karl Marx. According to Karl Marx if capitalism is continuous the poor

⁵⁷ F. Gill, G.M. Phull and A.A. Chachar. *op.cit*

becomes the poorer and alien to society. Just like bonded labor feels helpless who can never get rid of the vicious circle of bondage.⁵⁸ They believe this bondage will transfer from generation to generation without having the hope of getting help.

Although many respondent revealed hopelessness and unhappiness with their current working status, few of the young respondents reported their desire for change, especially when it comes to their family well-being. They hope if their children get education their future will be secured and they will not do the same work, but it is only possible when their child get rid of bondage. They want their own home to live and freedom from the dependence of brick kilns' owners. Furthermore, they expressed their desires of having different opportunities. A girl wishes 'We want to do some work which we can do within four walls of house' (*hum aisa kam krna chahtay hain jo chaardawari mein ghr baith kr kr skain*). They were ambitions to do some other work after returning their loan. One respondent said 'We could not do anything until the debt is paid off' (*jb tk Qarza nhi utray ga hum kuch nhi kr sktay*). Another respondent said 'We get half of our labor as loan repayment' (*hmmain adhi mazdori milti hai Qarzay ki wja sy*). Another said 'I want my daughter to study and become a teacher' (*main chahti hun meri beti prhy or wo prh kr teacher bn'na chahti hai*). Likewise, a young respondent said 'I want my younger siblings to study, when I go to work, they go together and play there' (*main chahti hun myre chotay behan bhai prh jaien jb main kam py jati hun wo b sath jatay hain wo wahan matti k sath khailtay rehtay hain*). Another respondent said 'I am working so that my brother can somehow get admission in the school' (*main is liye kam kr rhi hun k myre bhai ka school mein kisi trh dakhla ho jaye*). Some women wanted to do agriculture-related work like crop picking, whereas other were interested in sewing and stitching, as learning and earning by using these skills can make their life easier. This finding relates to the concept of 'power to' given by Rowland,⁵⁹ which refers to every individual has potential and capabilities to shape their life. Similarly, if brick kiln workers get freedom from debt bondage and have the option to experience new work they can live an independent life. Especially if women workers have vocational training they can improve their life.

While responding to the question asked about the solution of their problems, respondents hoped for the government's help to take

⁵⁸ A. Ercelawn and M. Nauman, *op.cit*

⁵⁹ 'State of Human Rights in 2016 Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, *op.cit*

action to improve their living standards by providing basic facilities. A respondent said ‘We do not get any support from govt such as Benazir Income Support Program’ (*hmain hakumat ki trf sy koi madad nhi milti jaise Benazir income support program*). Moreover, other proposed solutions include freedom from bondage, education for children, financial and structural support assistance from the government in terms of schools and hospitals.

It was observed that they don’t have awareness of labor unions and their role to solve problems. Although they have desires to have different lives but for this, they do not know how to gather on any platform to raise their voices for their rights. This situation indicates towards the concept of ‘power with’⁶⁰ that indicates, when people have the same interest they understand the direction and purpose in life. Similarly, in the present study brick kiln workers can form their unions to protect their collective interests and rights.

Conclusion, suggestions and limitations

Women’s increased participation in income generating activities not only develop any country’s economy, but can also uplift women’s financial and living status.⁶¹ The results revealed that both young and senior women workers work in circumstances and environment which is physically dangerous for them and their families. It is found that belonging to poor socioeconomic background and debt burden made them vulnerable to join brick kilns and face exploitation of their labor rights along with negative impacts of this work on their health. The majority of respondents were desperate and discontented about their present working status and conditions, however young girls have the positive hope for the future as compared with old women. They want education and basic facilities for their children and seem ambitious for independence and change. They want government to provide them support and vocational training so that they can get rid of their debt, earn better and work in safe and healthy environment.

This study indicates the need of making workplaces safe by ensuring the application of labor laws in the informal sector of the economy, so that workers can get their basic rights and live their life with dignity without exploitation. In this regard, local government can form some monitoring setup for implementation and inspection and to

⁶⁰ S.A. Batool, A. Tabassum and S. Saghir, ‘Dynamics of Female Labor Force Participation in Pakistan’, *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences* (PJSS). 39:3 (2019), 751-62.

⁶¹ J. Rowlands, *op.cit*

take strict action against the debt bondage system. Moreover, local government or community-based organizations can play their role in the registration of workers and their social security along with, awareness sessions for women workers about the importance of formulation of unions and their role for the protection of their rights. Gender sensitization and labor laws training of brick kilns owners need to be arranged to promote a gender-sensitive, safe, and healthy working environment. Government should ensure the availability and accessibility of basic facilities related to fundamental rights such as schools and hospitals for, child labour, women workers and their families to ensure their social and economic well-being.