

Invisible Workforce: A Socio-Economic Study of Women Labourers in Brick Kilns of Thoubal District, Manipur

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Abstract

Despite being an essential component of the informal economy, women labourers in brick kiln industry are sometimes overlooked in discussions of policy and academia. They balance domestic duties and financial survival while performing demanding manual task in unsafe conditions. Women are frequently forced into labor intensive, low paying, physically demanding and socially unacknowledged jobs in areas with persistent poverty, low levels of education and limited opportunities for employment.

The purpose of this study was to understand the socio-economic conditions, reason of taking up this jobs, nature of work and health issues faced by women laborers, as these realities are rarely documented despite their significance for the local economy and family survival. The study is based on primary data collected through fieldwork from twenty women labourers working in brick kiln industry located in Thoubal District. In order to investigate their age, education, marital status, social category, income earn, mode of payment, nature of work, access of basic amenities and use of income, it takes descriptive approach.

The results of the study shows that the workforce is extremely vulnerable. Majority of the women labourers are married and comes under the middle age group, most of them are from OBC(Meitei) and they earn an income between Rs 300-600 per day, many of them are also reported of no fixed income i.e irregular income. Most of the, lived in kutchha house and they also reported of access to basic amenities. Their primary task includes loading, molding, stacking and cleaning which can lead to major health issues like back pain, shoulder and knee discomfort as well as respiratory difficulties. Most of these women didn't possess labour card because of these they did't get any government social security benefits. Majority of the women engaged in this job to help their husband since husband income is not enough to maintain their family.

The study concludes that women labourers work under the circumstances of economic insecurity, physical strain, and limited social protection. It draws attention to pressing need for equitable pay, health protections, robust welfare assistance and increased acknowledgement of the women's work in the unorganized sector.

Keywords: Informal sector, women labourer, brick kiln industry, social security, socio-economic condition

1. Introduction:

The informal sector constitutes the backbone of employment in Manipur, where limited industrialization and a fragile economic base have resulted in a heavy dependence on unorganized and small-scale enterprises. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018) defines the informal economy as comprising economic activities that are insufficiently covered or regulated by formal institutional arrangements. Globally, over 60% of the employed population earns their livelihood in the informal sector, with women disproportionately concentrated in precarious and low-paid forms of work. In India, informal employment accounts for nearly 90% of the total workforce (NCEUS, 2007) making it a central pillar of the country's labor market structure.

Within this informal sector, the brick kiln industry represents one of the most labor-intensive and unorganized segments. India is the world's second-largest brick producer, employing an estimated 10-15 million workers, many of whom are seasonal migrants and socially marginalized groups (ILO, 2015). Brick kiln work is typically characterized by piece-rate payment systems, hazardous working conditions, debt bondage practices, and lack of social security coverage. In Manipur, where industrial development is limited, brick kilns provide employment to economically vulnerable households, particularly women who engage in molding, carrying, stacking, and loading bricks under physically demanding conditions. The brick kiln industry is an important component of the informal industrial sector in Manipur and provides employment to a large number of women workers from economically and socially marginalized backgrounds. Though their significant contribution to brick production, women workers continue to experience poor socio-economic conditions characterized by low wages, job insecurity, inadequate living facilities, and limited access to social welfare schemes. Despite its significant contribution to the informal economy of Manipur and the broader Northeast Indian region, the brick kiln industry remains a largely under-researched domain. While it serves as a primary engine for infrastructure development and provides seasonal livelihoods to a vast demographic of unorganized laborers, the sector occupies a peripheral position in contemporary academic discourse.

The current study is, therefore, undertaken to address this empirical void, seeking to transition the industry from the margins of academic inquiry to a focal point of rigorous analysis. The present study seeks to examine the socio-economic conditions, work environment, and reason for entering into this job by women workers in the brick kiln industry in Manipur. The study aims to answer the following research questions: what are the socio-economic status of women brick kiln workers? What are the working and living conditions of women brick kiln workers in Manipur? What are the reasons for taking up these jobs by these women? By addressing these questions, the research intends to contribute to the discourse on gendered informal labor and inform policy interventions aimed at promoting decent work and social protection.

This study makes a substantial contribution to the conversation on gender inequality and labor rights by highlighting the pressing need for legislative changes and better labor practices to address the health hazards and exploitation experienced by female brick kiln industry workers. It highlights occupational risks, environmental dangers and positions the brick business as a crucial area of concern in modern civilization while advocating for better fair and compassionate working conditions for women working in brick kiln industry in Manipur.

1.2 Objectives of study:

1. To study the socio-economic status of women labourers in brick kiln industry.
2. To examine the nature and prevailing conditions of work within the kilns.
3. To identify the reasons that compel women to enter this sector.

2. Literature Review:

P. Kayal and I.R. Chowdhury (2024) in their paper sharply criticized of the brick kiln industry in South 24 Parganas which reveals how the so-called informal sector serves as a location for institutionalized exploitation. By examining at education, income, and health, it draws attention to a concerning paradox, although bricks sustain urban growth, their manufacture depends on women's physical deterioration and children's loss of childhood. The paper persuasively contends that informality functions as a regulatory void, allowing businesses in Falta and Budge II to bypass fundamental human rights.

Mondal, P. K. (2023) argued that the brick kiln industry is heavily depends on biological exploitation. In his paper he shows that not only poverty but also a collapse of state protection, including high rates of undernutrition, widespread child marriage, restricted access to healthcare and serious perinatal hazards. He also reveals a larger systematic problem like a production model that normalizes the exploitation of women's bodies as a cheap and disposable resource and emphasizes on how immigration status limits access to care.

According to Gogoi, B. (2024) in his study of migrant women workers in Brick kilns in Jorhat, Assam shows that there is a substantial ($p < 0.05$) correlation between increased brick production efficiency and access to essential social security benefits like healthcare, clean water and maternity benefits. It makes a convincing case for investing in working conditions by arguing that worker welfare serves as a predictor of productivity. The analysis, however highlights a deeper issues such as migrant women's dignity is reduced to their place in the production process since fundamental human rights are viewed less as moral or legal duties and more as instruments for financial gain.

Chakraborty, N., & Jyoti, R. (2026) in their cross-sectional study of 150 brick kiln workers in Agartala documents the severe physical toll of unregulated labour, with respiratory, musculoskeletal and mobility related disorders emerging as statistically significant outcomes ($P < 0.05$). They reveals that the exploitative realities behind the informal term by connecting employment roles and work duration to deteriorating health. However, blaming these conditions to lack of protective gear and poor posture risks individualizing responsibility, overlooking structural failures. The study also highlights a larger issue like utilitarian perspective of labor is reinforced by the prioritization of worker health due to its impact to production.

According to Nath, A. and et al.(2025) which uses the WBGT index to calculate the biological cost of rising temperatures on manual labourers in Eastern India demonstrating a direct correlation between cardiovascular strain and heat stress. The study shows that productivity drastically decrease upto 6.6% for every degree Celsius increase highlighting the human body's limitations in harsh environments. They also highlights gender difference with women suffering from higher incidence of heat related diseases and a greater loss of productivity.

Hariom Duggal and et al.(2026)in their descriptive study which uses secondary data highlight the socio-economic conditions of women brick kiln workers in Haryana which are characterized by low income, little education, unstable employment and little knowledge of social programs. The paper also highlights a discrepancy between actual social security access and policy provisions. Although it successfully advocates for increase outreach and enforcement, its dependence on secondary data restricts depth and highlights the necessity for primary research

Narejo, S., Mustafa, A., & Khatyan, A. (2025) in their quantitative study of 90 brick kilns in North Sindh highlights a significant gender discrepancies including as a male-dominated workforce, income gaps and substantial occupational segregation. It concludes that women’s labor is essential to production and that their absence lowers output. However, non random sample reduces generalizability and absence of qualitative insights inhibits a more comprehensive understanding even when the regression model reveals important labor determinants.

Kashyap, P.(2020) in his article analyses the brick manufacturing sector in Assam’s Demow area highlighting its role in supporting local economies and infrastructure while exposing serious environmental and social concerns. It identifies problem such as deforestation, topsoil depletion, air pollution, unfavorable working conditions and seasonal employment. So the study advocates for policy regulation, cleaner technologies like zigzag kilns and coordinated efforts to balance economic benefits with environmental sustainability.

3. Research Methodology:

The study is a descriptive in nature and data is purely a primary source. Data were collected from the Brick factory manger and women labourers working at such factory residing at Khongjom and Wangjing area of Thoubal District. For the study 5 major brick making factory’s (namely MSK Brick Firm, YMC Brick Farm, TMD Brick Field, G.D.S.& Sons Brick Field and Arbindro Brick Field) are selected and from each 5 Brick making Factory’s Four women labourers and their manager/ owner/ supervisor were taken as a part of participant of the study. The Brick Factory and the respondent were randomly selected for the study. Thus total numbers of labourers are 20. For collecting primary data, a well-structured interviewed schedule is used. The data were collected by personal interviewing with the women labourers and manager/ owner/ supervisor of the selected Brick factory. Apart from personal interview, observation methods has also been used in the study. The data analysis has been done by using the tools like SPSS and later thematic analysis is followed. The secondary data has been collected through various journal articles, newspapers and internet by the researcher.

3.1 Limitation of the study:

1. The study is confined to Thoubal District which may not be representative of the entire brick factory or women’s experiences in other region.
2. The study’s finding might be based on a limited sample of women labourers, which could impact the generalizability of the results.
3. The participants reluctance to share information or interviewer biases, affecting the accuracy of the findings.

3.2 Ethical Consideration:

The researcher took permission from the Brick factory manager or owner before the data collection taken place. I have taken consent from the participant before interaction taken place and she may leave if she had urgent work. Data collection has been done during their free time only in order to do their work without interruption.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation:

4.1 Socio-economic profile of the women Labourers in the brick kiln Industry

4.1.1 Demographic Indicators(The Personal Background):

Age	No. of participants	Percentage
20-30	1	5
31-40	5	25
41-50	9	45
51-60	4	20
61- above	1	5
Total	20	100

Table 1. Age of the labourers

The given table 1 shows that majority of the women labourers in brick kiln industry fall in the age category of 41-50 (45%), indicating that middle-aged workers form the most share of the workforce. The lowest 5% each belongs to age group of 20-30 and 61-above categories. Overall, the data indicates that the brick kiln industry is dominated mainly by middle-aged workers.

Education level	No. of participants	Percentage
Illiterate	15	75
Upto class 10 th	4	20
10 th to 12 th	1	5
Total	20	100

Table2: Educational status of participants

The table 2 shows the educational status of the labourers. A large majority of the participants 75% are illiterate, indicating a very low level of educational attainment among the workers, 20% of the labourers have studied upto class 10th, while only 5% has education between 10th to 12th standard. By and large, the data indicates that most women labourers in brick kiln industry have little or no formal education, which may influence their employment opportunities and keep them concentrated in unskilled labour work.

The table 3 reveals that most of the participants, 70% are married, indicating that most workers have family responsibilities. The data also highlights 15% labourers are widowed, while 10% labourers are divorced. Only 5% labourer is unmarried. In general, the data suggests that most of the workers in the brick kiln industry are married and likely engaged in labour work to support their households

Marital status	No. of labourers	Percentage
Married	14	70
Unmarried	1	5
Widowed	3	15
Divorced	2	10
Total	20	100

Table 3: Marital status of participants

Social category	No. of participants	percentage
General	1	5
OBC (MP)	4	20
OBC(Meitei)	15	75
SC	0	0
ST	0	0
Total	20	100

Table4: Social category of the participants

Table 4 highlights the social category distribution of the labourers. The majority of the participants 75% belongs to OBC(Meitei) category, indicating that this group forms the largest share of workers in the brick kiln industry. While the minimum 5% of the labourers belongs to General category. So, the data indicates that most of the labourers in the study area belong to OBC communities, particularly OBC(Meitei).

4.1.2 Economic Indicators(Financial Stability):

Table 5: Daily Wages of the labourers

Wage per day	No. of participants	Percentage
upto Rs.300	6	30
Rs.301-600	7	35
Rs.601-1000	2	10
Not fixed	5	25
Total	20	100

The table 5 shows that the largest group of participants, 35% earn Rs. 301-600 per day. 30% of the participants earn up to Rs. 300 per day, while 10% of the labourers received Rs. 601-1000 per day. Additionally, 5% participants reported that their wage are fixed, indicating irregular income. Overall, the data suggests that most labourers earn low and unstable daily wages in the brick kiln industry.

Table 6: Mode of payment

Mode of payment	No.of participants	percentage
Paid daily	4	20
Weekly basis	8	40
Half monthly basis	4	20
After completion of 100 trips of loading	4	20
Total	20	100

The table 6 clearly indicates that the largest proportion of participants, 40% receive their wages on weekly basis. 20% of the labourers are paid daily, while another 20% of the labourers receive payment on a half monthly basis. Additionally, 20% of the remaining labourers are paid after the completion of 100 trips of loading, indicating a task-based payment system. In general, the data shows that weekly payment is the most common mode, though different and irregular payment systems also exist in the sector.

Table 7: taking advance or loan

Taking advance or loan	No. of participants	percentage
Yes	18	90
No	2	10

The table 7 shows whether the labourers take advance or loans. A large majority of the participants , 90% reported that they take advance or loans, while the remaining 10% stated that they do not take any

advance or loan. The data indicates that most labourers depend on borrowed money or advance payments, possibly due to low and irregular income and financial insecurity.

Table 8: manage finance during off season

Manage finance during off season	No. of participants	percentage
No off season	9	45
Secondary source (eg, farming, weaving etc)	2	10
From earlier saving	5	25
Borrow from other (pay later)	4	20
Total	20	100

The table 8 clearly shows that majority, 45% of the labourers reported having no off-season, meaning they get work throughout the year, while the minimum 10% of the labourers depend on secondary sources of income such as farming or weaving. Overall, the data indicates that women labourers use different strategies such as continuous work, savings and borrowing to manage their finances.

4.1.3 Social & Living Indicators(Quality of Life)

Table 9: No. family members of the women labourers

No. of family members	No. of participants	percentage
1-3	9	45
4-5	6	30
6-8	5	25
Total	20	100

The table 9 shows that the majority of the women labourers, 45% have 1-3 family members. 30% of the participants have 4-5 family members, while 25% of the labourers belongs to families with 6-8 members. Overall, the data highlights that most labourers live in small to medium-sized families.

Table 10: types of house

Types of house	No. of participants	percentage
Kutcha	17	85
Pucca	3	15
Total	20	100

The above table 10 shows that majority of the women labourers, 85% live in kutcha houses, while the remaining 15% live in pucca houses which indicates that most of the labourers belongs to economically weaker sections with poor housing conditions.

Table 11: Access to basic Utilities at workplace

Availability of basic amenities(drinking water, sanitation/toilets, restroom)	No. of participants	percentage
yes	19	95
No	1	5
Total	20	100

The above table 11 shows that the availability of basic amenities such as drinking water, sanitation/toilets, and restrooms. The majority of the participants 95% reported that these basic amenities are available and remaining 5% of the participants stated that they do not have access to these facilities which indicates that most labourers have access to basic amenities.

4.1.4 Institutional & Welfare Indicators (Social Security)

Table 12: Possession of government scheme card

Govt. Scheme card	No. of participants	Percent
job card, Ration card	7	35.0
job card, Health card, ration card	10	50.0
BPL, Job card, Health card, ration card	3	15.0
Total	20	100.0

The above table 12 shows the possession of government scheme cards among the labourers. Half of the participants 50% possess job cards, and ration cards while the minimum 15% of the participants possess BPL cards along with job cards, health cards, and ration cards. This indicates that most labourers have access to multiple government welfare schemes.

The given figure 1 shows that 90% of the women labour in the brick kiln industry doesn't possess labour card and remaining 10% women labour have possessed labour card.

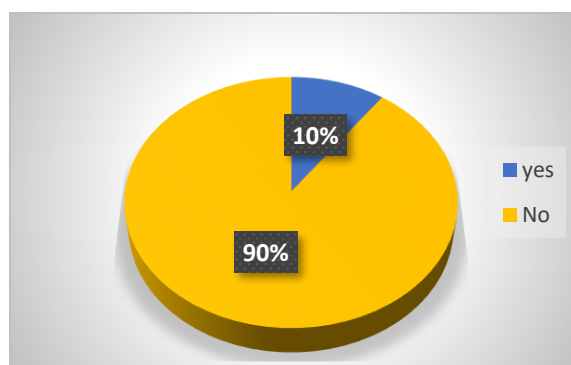


Fig.1: Labour Card

fig.2 clearly sees that majority of the women labour in brick kiln industry get benefitted from the government side such as housing scheme and other form but not as these women work as labour in this industry. And the remaining 45% women labour didn't get any benefitted from any government scheme.

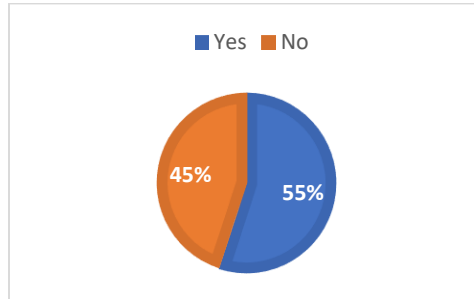


Fig.2: benefit of govt. scheme

The figure 3 shows that majority i.e 75% of the women labour in the brick kiln industry doesn't have the knowledge of minimum wage laws or maternity benefits and the remaining 25% have the knowledge of minimum wage laws or maternity benefits. Though they aware about these laws, they didn't get any such benefit from the factory or government side since they are working in informal contractual basis. Even they didn't demanded the minimum wages because of fer of losing their job.

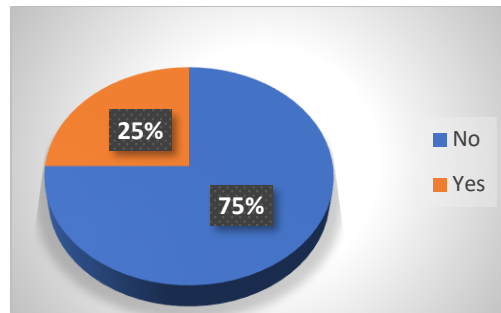


Fig.3: level of awareness

4.2 Nature and condition of Work:

Primary task	No. of participants	percentage
Loading and unloading	7	35
Loading, stacking, carrying bricks with hands	2	10
Moping, Cleaning	4	20
carrying brickswith pullers	1	5
Molding(chek saba), breakdown of packed of bricks(Kila heigtpa), stacking	6	30
Total	20	100

Table 13: primary task

The table13 shows that 35% of the respondents are engaged in loading and unloading, followed by 30% involved in molding, breaking packed bricks and stacking. 20% of the respondents performed mopping and cleaning, while 10% of the respondents were doing loading, stacking and carrying bricks by hands and remaining 5% of the respondents were engaged in carrying bricks using pullers. Overall, the data indicates that labourers are involved in different types of physically demanding tasks in brick-related works

Table 14: Duration of work

Duration of work	No. of participants	Percent
upto 8 hrs	14	70
8-10 hrs	1	5
not fixed time	5	25
Total	20	100

The table 14 shows that 70% of the respondents work up to 8 hours pr day, while 25% have no fixed working hours. Only 5% of the labourers work between 8-10 hours. Some respondents who works as loading and unloading of bricks that they used to return back home even late night when they used to go far place for delivery so for them there is no fixed time to work.

Table 15: health issues of the participants

Health issues	No. of participants	Percent
Back pain, soldier pain, breathing problem	9	45
back pain, stomach pain, arthritis, headache	3	15
Back pain, shouldier pain, knee pain	6	30
others	2	10
Total	20	100

The above table 15 shows the health issues faced by the labourers and it founds 45% of the respondents suffered from back pain, shoulder pain and breathing problem which is the most common health issue reported. 30% of the labourers experienced back pain, shoulder pain and knee pain, while 15% reported back pain, stomach pain, arthritis and headache. The remaining 10% of the labourers suffer from other health problems. Overall, the data indicates that musculoskeletal problems, especially back and shoulder pain, are common among the labourers due to the physically demanding nature of their work.

4.3 Reason for women enter into brick kiln industry

Reason	No. of participants	Percentage
help her husband since husband income not enough to run the family	9	45
for family maintenance, children education since their husband didn't earn income due to illness or other reason	3	15
after divorced or death of husband manage to run family herself	5	25
other reason	3	15
Total	20	100

Table 16: Reason for taking this work

The above table 16 shows reasons for women participating the labor work. The majority of the participants 45% work to support their husbands as the husband's income is not sufficient to run the family. 25% of the participants work to manage the family after divorce or the death of their husband. Another 15% of the participants work for family maintenance and children's education due to husband's illness or lack of income, while another 15% reported other reasons. Overall, the data indicates that the economic necessity and family responsibility are the main reasons for women engaging in labour work.

Table 17: Used of income earn from this job

Used of income earn from this job	No. of participants	Percentage
family maintenance, Children Education	8	40
Family maintenance, fooding, Marup(local chit fund)	5	25
family maintenance, health medical fees	2	10
Fooding, relatives events gift (Potyeng), Deva Karma(ritual)	5	25
Total	20	100

The above table 17 shows how the income earned from the job is utilized by the labourers. Majority of the participants 40% use their income for family maintenance and children's education. Again 25% each of the participants spend it on family maintenance, food and marup (local chit fund), and use it for food, relatives events, gifts(potyeng), and Deva Karma(rituals). Remaining 10% of the respondents spend their

income on family maintenance and medical expenses. Overall, the income is mainly used for household needs and social obligations.

4.4 Major Findings of the Study

The empirical evidence suggests that women engaged in brick kiln labour inhabit a space of profound socioeconomic disenfranchisement, characterized by an intersection of low educational attainment, systematic debt and physically grueling work environments.

1. Demographic profile and structural Barriers

The study reveals a predominantly middle-aged workforce, with 45% of participants falling within the 41-50 age group. This demographic trend suggests that younger women may be seeking alternative employment or that the industry relies on a matured workforce capable of enduring sustained physical labour.

A critical concern is the 75% illiteracy rate, which underscores a significant barrier to social mobility and formal employment. This lack of education effectively traps these workers in the informal sector, limiting their agency and bargaining power. Again, the workforce is socially homogenous with 75% belonging to the OBC (Meitei) category, indicating that certain social groups are disproportionately pushed into these precarious labour roles.

2. Economic Vulnerability and the Debt trap

The financial landscape for these labourers is defined by income instability, while 35% earn between Rs301-600 daily, a significant portion (25%) reported no fixed wage structure, reflecting the arbitrary nature of informal contract work.

The most important finding is that 90% of the labourers rely on advances or loans which indicates indebtedness suggests a cycle of debt bondage, where current wages are perpetually consumed by past obligations, leaving no room for wealth accumulation. This vulnerability is further exacerbated by housing conditions; 85% live in kutcha houses, despite their participation in the labor market.

3. Occupational Hazards and health Degradation

The labour perform is intensely manual, involving loading, unloading and brick molding. The physical toll is evident as 70% of the labourers works up to 8 hour per day, yet 25% endure irregular hours. 45% of the respondents suffer from chronic musculoskeletal issues specially back and shoulder pain.

These findings highlight a lack of occupational safety and a disregard for long term health in favour of immediate productivity. While 95% reported access to basic amenities like water and sanitation, these are fundamental survival needs rather than indications of quality of life.

4. Familial Survivalism and Gendered Burden

The motivation for entering this hazardous industry is almost exclusively economic necessity. 45% of the women reported that the work specifically to supplement insufficient household income and support their husbands.

The utilization of their earning further reinforces the survivalist nature of their work; 40% of income is prioritized for family maintenance and children's education. Remaining funds are distributed across food, medical needs and traditional social obligations(Marup)

5. Recommendation:

Education and Skill development: Adult literacy programs and skill development training should be implemented to improve the knowledge, skills, and employment prospects of the women labourers in brick kiln industry.

Fair and regular Wages: To reduce income instability and financial insecurity, the government, and relevant agencies should guarantee fair wages and a regular payment system for women labourers in brick kiln industry.

Access to social Security schemes: To enhance their social protection, workers should be better informed about and included in a variety of government welfare programs, including health insurance, pension plans and labor welfare initiatives.

Mandatory registration: The brick kiln industry also take awareness campaign to ensure that all kiln workers are fully registered on the e-shram portal providing them with formal identity and access to national social security benefits. The registration process should be easily accessible, enabling labourers to registered with minimum cost and effort.

Safety and Health measures: To lessen health hazards at work, the brick kiln sector should provide a regular medical medical check-up program, basic health facilities and other safety equipment at workplace.

Awareness programs: In collaboration with Manipur Building and Other Construction Worker's Welfare (MBOCWW) board and the brick kiln industry, awareness programs should be conducted to acknowledge labourers about the Labour Welfare Codes and other related labor welfare schemes designed for their benefit.

5.1 Conclusion:

The study's highlights the difficult socio-economic conditions faced by the women laborers involved in brick kiln industry. The majority of the women laborers are middle-aged and are largely illiterate, which restricts their opportunities for better employment and confines them to low paid manual labor. Most of the women engage in this profession out of financial need, especially to maintain their families when their income is inadequate or when they must handle household duties on their own.

The women labor are paid less and irregular wages for doing physically demanding task like loading, unloading, molding, stacking and carrying of bricks. They primarily use their income to pay for necessities like food, medical bills, family maintenance and children's education. Due to their financial vulnerability, a large number of women laborers also depend on loans or advances.

Additionally, the nature of their profession exposes them to a number of health issues, particularly respiratory issues, shoulder pain and back pain. Even while majority of women labourer have access to some basic utilities and government scheme cards, these actions frequently fall short of improving their overall quality of life.

In conclusion the study reflects the problems faced by a workforce that is constantly ignored and highlights the need for more effective social protection, equitable pay, better working conditions and enhanced policy attention for women labourers in brick kiln industry.

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