

ABSTRACT

A STUDY ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF WOMEN BEEDI WORKERS IN TUFANGANJ SUBDIVISION OF KOCH BIHAR DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL

Introduction

Beedi industry is predominantly an unorganised sector in India. A large number of people belonging to poor socio-economic backgrounds have chosen beedi rolling as their occupation to support their families. In our country women make up nearly 90 percent of total employment in beedi industry. Thus the beedi industry has helped them to escape from the vicious cycle of poverty. But the contractual nature of employment, low wage rate and involvement of middlemen has made the industry more vulnerable. Women and children engaged in beedi industry face abuse, financial discrimination and health hazards. Workers involved in beedi rolling activity are at a high risk of tuberculosis, asthma and others. However, at the time of job uncertainty, many people don't consider these health hazards when making decisions about their livelihood. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the socio-economic factors which are responsible for the backwardness of such workers engaged in beedi industry.

This thesis intends to focus on the livelihood status of women beedi workers in Tufanganj Subdivision of Koch Bihar district. Koch Bihar is a socio-economically backward district in West Bengal and predominantly an agricultural district. This study mainly concentrates on the social, economic and health condition of the women beedi workers in Tufanganj Subdivision as Tufanganj Subdivision is a special economic zone (SEZ) of beedi industry in Koch Bihar district.

Objectives

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To assess the socio-economic conditions of women beedi workers in Tufanganj Subdivision.
2. To assess the impact of beedi rolling on health condition of women beedi workers in the study area.
3. To evaluate the implementation status of legal provisions and schemes for the welfare of women beedi workers.

4. To find out their problems and suggest remedial measures for the upliftment of socio-economic status of women beedi workers.

Hypothesis

To fulfill the objectives following hypothesis have been taken:

1. Educational level of female beedi worker plays a key role in determining her number of child birth.
2. Level of income of women beedi worker has significant impact on family decision-making.
3. The health condition of women beedi workers is associated with hours of beedi rolling.

Methodology

This study is based on both primary and secondary data which are further analysed with the help of appropriate statistical tools and techniques. Tufanganj Subdivision has been selected as the study area and particularly women beedi workers were selected for the study as they are the best representative of the entire beedi worker community. A total number of 560 respondents were selected from various parts of Tufanganj Subdivision. Both rural and urban beedi workers were selected for the study to show the degree of deprivation of basic socio-economic opportunities among them.

Findings

Study has revealed that the socio-economic status of women beedi workers in both rural and urban areas is very low. Women engage themselves in beedi rolling at an early age. Workers below 20 years age and more than 60 years of age both have been found higher in rural areas than urban areas. It indicates that the rural young women are more vulnerable to engage in beedi rolling activity than urban women. Further, the literacy rate is very less among the women beedi workers in the study area and it has been discovered that in rural areas higher educated women have also opted beedi rolling as their occupation due to absence of alternate job opportunities. The quality of the dwelling places shows their poor economic condition. Only 5.71 percent households monthly income exceeds >15000 as most of the households do not have any fixed income. Even to insure their everyday expenses, the majority of households are in debt. Therefore, it is revealed that the beedi workers' poor financial situation has a negative impact on their standard of living in the study area. The piece rate

system compels them to roll beedi for the entire day. Study shows that 43.57 percent workers are engaged in beedi rolling for 8 to 10 hours, in a single day. Workers are also deprived of getting wage rates as per government prescribed rate and only 20.54 percent have reported a wage rate of more than 150/-. The contractual nature of employment has made their monthly income more vulnerable as it is totally controlled by the middleman. Study has also revealed that both rural and urban beedi worker households have moderate income inequality and rural households have a little bit higher income inequality than urban households. The main reason behind this may be the intensity and incidence of poverty among beedi workers in rural areas is higher than in urban areas. Livelihood security index also shows that beedi workers from both the rural (0.3864) and urban areas (0.4686) are less secure in terms of livelihood conditions and rural beedi workers are facing an extremely insecure livelihood status. Particularly, economic security is highly vulnerable situation in rural areas. Study has also revealed that beedi workers suffer from various health issues due to direct inhalation of tobacco and sitting in the same posture for long hours. Study has found that various types of respiratory and musculoskeletal problems are very much common among the respondents and severity of health hazards is higher in case of higher age, heavy workload and long years of beedi rolling. Various welfare programmes for beedi workers have been introduced by the state and central government but the utilization of these schemes is very minimal. Majority of the home based beedi workers are deprived of government welfare schemes because the employers consider them as self-employed as they work from their home. It indicates the existence of a wide gap between the policies for their development and their implementation. The level of awareness among beedi workers about various schemes is poor in the study area. 52.50 percent women workers were moderately aware of only the provisions of health under Beedi Worker Welfare Scheme. Study found that the workers with higher level of literacy and media exposure are comparatively more aware of various government welfare programs allotted for them. Exploitation by middlemen, inadequate supply of raw material, unhealthy working conditions, irregularities of wage payment, problems to access identity cards and heavy workload have been identified as major problems faced by women beedi workers in the study area.

So, it can be said that mere development plans and policies are not sufficient for the development of such vulnerable people; rather emphasis should be given on their proper implementation.