

Modern Slavery in the Shadows: Addressing Child Labour in the Brick Kiln Sector

Rupak Verma^{1*}, Sarvind Chaudhary²

ABSTRACT

Child labour continues to be a widespread issue worldwide especially within the brick kiln industry which is predominantly found in developing nations. This paper explores the socio-economic and structural factors that sustain child labour in brick kilns, emphasizing the dangerous working conditions that children endure and the negative effects on their health and education. The research identifies poverty, insufficient education and weak social protection systems as fundamental causes that compel families to engage their children in labour. It highlights the necessity for comprehensive and coordinated strategies that integrate the enforcement of child labour laws, community empowerment, and the provision of educational and livelihood alternatives. By examining policy deficiencies and the real-life experiences of affected families, this study advocates for holistic solutions that prioritize the welfare and future of vulnerable children in the brick kiln industry. The findings stress the critical need for collaboration among governments, NGOs and other stakeholders to foster sustainable change and safeguard children's rights.

Keywords: *Brick Kiln Industry, Child Labour, Education, Policy Interventions, Socio-economic Factors*

Child labour remains one of the most pervasive and challenging social issues globally, with significant implications for human rights and sustainable development. Among the various sectors that employ children, the brick kiln industry stands out as a particularly concerning example. Concentrated in developing countries, this industry thrives on informal work arrangements and an abundant supply of cheap labour, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exploitation. The prevalence of child labour in brick kilns represents not only a violation of fundamental rights but also a barrier to achieving equitable societal progress. Brick kilns, characterized by their labor-intensive production processes, rely heavily on manual labour, often involving entire families. Children are frequently engaged in arduous tasks such as clay preparation, brick molding, and transportation of raw materials. These tasks expose them to hazardous conditions, including prolonged physical strain, extreme temperatures, and exposure to toxic substances. Such working environments significantly threaten their physical health, psychological well-being, and developmental potential. Furthermore, the involvement of children in these activities disrupts their education, depriving them of opportunities to break free from the cycle of poverty. The root causes of

¹Research Scholar, Sociology Department, Central University of Haryana

²Research Scholar, Sociology Department, Central University of Haryana

*Corresponding Author

Received: December 12, 2024; Revision Received: December 14, 2024; Accepted: December 17, 2024

child labour in brick kilns are deeply embedded in socio-economic and structural inequalities. Families engaged in this work often belong to marginalized communities, including low-income households, migrant workers, and socially disadvantaged groups. Poverty remains a central driver, compelling families to involve their children in labour to supplement household income. In many cases, these families lack access to quality education, healthcare, and alternative employment opportunities, further entrenching their dependence on exploitative work arrangements. Cultural norms and intergenerational practices also contribute, as children are often socialized into accepting their roles within this labor system from an early age. Legislation aimed at addressing child labour, such as international conventions and national child protection laws, exists in many countries. However, enforcement remains a critical challenge. The informal and often hidden nature of brick kiln operations complicates monitoring efforts, allowing exploitative practices to persist unchecked. Corruption, weak institutional frameworks, and insufficient political will exacerbate these enforcement gaps. As a result, despite legal prohibitions, child labour continues to be a systemic issue in this industry. This research project seeks to examine the dynamics of child labour in brick kilns, focusing on its socio-economic drivers, the lived experiences of child workers, and the broader implications for social justice and development. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach, the study aims to provide a detailed understanding of this issue, drawing on insights from sociology, economics, and human rights perspectives. The analysis will also investigate existing policy frameworks and interventions, pinpointing gaps and opportunities for more effective responses. In doing so, this study contributes to the broader discourse on child labour by emphasizing the specific vulnerabilities associated with the brick kiln sector. It underscores the need for integrated strategies that address the root causes of child labour, promote social inclusion, and prioritize the rights and well-being of children. Ultimately, eradicating child labour in brick kilns requires a collaborative effort involving governments, civil society organizations, and international stakeholders to ensure that all children have the opportunity to realize their full potential in safe and supportive environments.

Women workers in Brick Kilns

The article examines the challenging circumstances faced by women working in brick kilns, particularly in the Khejuri CD Blocks of Purba Medinipur, West Bengal. It highlights that a significant percentage of these women engage in brick-making due to poverty, lack of alternative employment, and the need to support their families. The study reveals that women constitute a substantial part of the workforce in the brick industry, which is crucial for the Indian economy, yet they often endure poor working conditions, low wages, and limited access to welfare facilities. The research, based on both primary and secondary data collected over four years, emphasizes the necessity for improved socio-economic conditions and welfare measures for these workers. It also calls for further research to explore various aspects of the brick industry, including labor welfare and environmental impacts, to enhance the living and working conditions of female workers in this sector (Rabin, 2013).

The article outlines the severe conditions faced by laborers in the brick kilns of Andhra Pradesh, where numerous families, often from the state of Orissa, migrate to work under harsh circumstances. Workers, including women and children, endure long hours—up to 18 a day—under unsafe conditions, with insufficient pay and poor living standards. Despite laws against bonded labor and child labor, these violations persist, with reports of physical harm and exploitation. The introduction of new international guidelines aims to hold multinational companies accountable for human rights violations in their supply chains, but the reality on the ground remains bleak, as many workers live in squalor and face health

issues due to their environment. Activists argue that the situation is akin to modern slavery, with little urgency from authorities to address these systemic issues (Hawksley, 2014).

Child Labour in Brick kilns

The article examines the role of child labour in the brick kiln industry of Tamil Nadu, India, arguing that child labour is not merely a substitute for adult labour but rather a complementary force that enhances household productivity and bargaining power. Families in this industry often rely on a piece rate system for wages, where children contribute to the household's income, allowing parents to negotiate higher advances from brokers. This dynamic helps families avoid falling into debt bondage, a common risk due to the exploitative nature of the advance system used by brokers. The study highlights that child labour serves as a form of insurance for families, enabling them to manage their debts and improve their living standards. The authors suggest that understanding these complexities is crucial for NGOs aiming to address child labour issues effectively in the developing world (Bhukuth & Ballet, 2006).

The article by Augendra Bhukuth examines the prevalence of child labour and debt bondage in the brick kiln industry in Tamil Nadu, India. Through both qualitative and quantitative surveys, the study reveals that many families resort to using child labour as a means to enhance their household income and bargaining power in a competitive market. The findings indicate that workers often find themselves in a cycle of debt, where a significant portion of their wages goes towards repaying advances received from employers, leaving them with little to no surplus at the end of the season. This financial dependency is exacerbated by the lack of financial literacy among workers, who often rely on brokers and managers to keep track of their debts. The article highlights the structural issues within the industry, including the exploitation of workers and the systemic nature of child labour, suggesting that without addressing the advance payment system, the industry will continue to perpetuate these practices. Overall, the study underscores the urgent need for regulatory measures to protect vulnerable workers and combat child labour in this sector (Bhukuth, 2005).

Policy interventions and Rights Based Approaches

The article explores the urgent issue of child labour in rural India, particularly its widespread presence in agriculture, mining, and brick kilns. It underscores the detrimental effects of child labour on children's physical health, emotional well-being, and educational opportunities, ultimately threatening their future. Advocating for a rights-based approach to development, the report stresses the significance of empowering children through education and active community participation. It also highlights the crucial roles of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in combating child labour by implementing innovative initiatives that uphold children's rights and provide alternative pathways. In summary, the article calls for a coordinated effort to address the root causes of child labour and to foster an environment that nurtures the comprehensive growth and development of all children (Satyajit, 2013).

The article discusses the urgent issue of child labor in brick kilns around Bhubaneswar and Cuttack, where children as young as six are often seen working alongside their parents. In response to this exploitation, local police are implementing a new code of conduct that mandates brick kiln owners to ensure that no children are engaged in labor, in compliance with the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act of 2016. Brick kiln operators are required to provide a list of children living with migrant workers to the police, establish crèches for younger children, and facilitate school admissions for those aged six and above. The initiative aims to hold kiln owners accountable for the welfare of these

marginalized communities and to reclaim the lost childhoods of children who are currently deprived of education and a normal childhood due to labor demands (Barik, 2023).

Migrant Labour and Seasonal Dynamics

The article explores the challenging lives of women working in brick kilns in Haryana (India) based on a study conducted from March 1999 to December 2001. It reveals that a significant majority of these workers are young, with over 87% under 45 years of age, predominantly from Scheduled Castes, and a staggering 91.22% are illiterate. Many of these women migrate from neighboring states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, with around 25,000 women employed across 547 kilns in the Hisar division. The study highlights the dual burden these women face, as they juggle demanding work at the kilns with extensive household responsibilities, dedicating three to four hours daily to chores. Despite their hard work, they often lack independent income and rely on male family members for financial support. The article also touches on issues of sexual exploitation, noting that while some women reported harassment, many did not discuss it, reflecting a complex social dynamic. During the off-season, most women return home, with many not engaging in any work, while some take up informal jobs or agricultural work to support their families. Ultimately, the lives of these women are marked by exhaustion and limited leisure time, compounded by ignorance and illiteracy, underscoring their crucial yet vulnerable role in family survival and the need for greater recognition and support for their contributions in the unorganized sector (Singh, 2005).

The article examines the challenges faced by children who migrate with their families to work in brick kilns, a common practice among impoverished families in Nepal. The authors highlight that while educational support is crucial for reducing child labour, access to education for these children is often sporadic and inadequate due to their seasonal migration. The review discusses various educational interventions aimed at improving access to schooling and non-formal education, as well as the importance of livelihood support and child safeguarding. It emphasizes the need for a coordinated local strategy that includes the perspectives of both parents and children. The article also explores the roles of government, non-governmental organizations, and employers in addressing child labour and promoting educational opportunities. Ultimately, the authors call for more comprehensive research on the educational experiences of these children and the necessity of multi-agency collaboration to effectively combat child labour in the brick kiln industry in Nepal (Angela et al, 2020).

Health and Education Impacts

The article discusses the critical issue of child labour in rural India, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, mining, and brick kilns. It highlights the alarming prevalence of child labour, with many children engaged in hazardous work conditions that compromise their health and education. The report emphasizes that while child labour is legally prohibited in certain sectors, enforcement remains weak, leading to continued exploitation. It also notes the increasing trend of child migration for work, often driven by family debts and economic necessity. The findings suggest that children's well-being is more closely linked to their parents' spending priorities than to their income levels. The article calls for stronger implementation of existing laws, community mobilization, and a rights-based approach to ensure that all children, especially those from migrant families, have equal access to education and opportunities. It advocates for a comprehensive strategy involving local governance and NGOs to address the root causes of child labour and promote the rights of affected children (Burra, 2009).

The article examines the pervasive issue of child labour within the brick kiln industry in Moradabad, India, highlighting it as a significant global concern, particularly in developing countries. It identifies poverty, indebtedness, and large family sizes as primary drivers for children's entry into the labour market, which deprives them of educational opportunities and a chance for a better future. The study reveals that children are engaged in various hazardous tasks within the kilns, exposing them to health risks and poor working conditions, including long hours and inadequate amenities. The author emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to address child labour, advocating for improved educational infrastructure and social attitudes towards child labour. The findings underscore the vulnerability of child labourers, who often come from marginalized communities, and call for urgent interventions to enhance their socio-economic conditions and overall well-being (Jafar, 2008).

The article examines the pervasive issue of child labor in the brick kiln industry in Odisha, India. It highlights that approximately 20% of the workforce in these industries comprises children, primarily driven by poverty and low parental income, which forces families to send their children to work instead of school. The authors discuss the detrimental effects of this labor on children's health and education, as well as the environmental consequences of brick production, including water pollution and ecological imbalance. The article also reviews existing laws and regulations aimed at combating child labor and emphasizes the need for effective implementation of these measures. Furthermore, it offers recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders to enhance legal actions, conduct rescues, and provide rehabilitation for affected children, ultimately advocating for a comprehensive approach to eradicate child labor in the brick kiln sector (Ranjan & Sushree, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The issue of child labour in brick kilns is a multifaceted problem deeply rooted in socio-economic inequalities, systemic exploitation, and weak institutional frameworks. The introduction underscores the hazardous and exploitative conditions under which children work, highlighting how these circumstances rob them of their health, education, and potential. The literature review further emphasizes the pervasive nature of the problem, detailing its intersection with poverty, debt bondage and migration, and exposing the vulnerabilities of children and their families in this sector. Studies reveal that child labour in brick kilns is not merely an outcome of economic necessity but also a structural issue perpetuated by exploitative labor practices, inadequate legal enforcement and socio-cultural norms. Children's involvement in this labor-intensive industry is often a coping mechanism for families grappling with poverty and financial instability. Furthermore, the gendered and intergenerational dimensions of labor, as seen in the contributions of women and children, reinforce the need for targeted interventions that address the unique challenges faced by these groups. Existing legal and policy frameworks, while well-intentioned, often fail due to weak enforcement and systemic corruption as discussed in various studies. The hidden and informal nature of brick kiln operations compounds this issue, enabling the persistence of exploitative practices. Despite some promising local initiatives and international guidelines, the need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach remains critical. To effectively combat child labour in brick kilns, it is essential to adopt strategies that address root causes such as poverty, lack of education, and inadequate social protection systems. Integrated interventions that combine enforcement of child labour laws, community empowerment, and the provision of education and livelihood alternatives for families are imperative. Furthermore, collaboration among governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders is necessary to create sustainable change and ensure the protection of children's rights. This research

aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse by providing a nuanced understanding of the socio-economic and structural dynamics of child labour in brick kilns. By analyzing policy gaps, exploring lived experiences, and proposing actionable recommendations, the study seeks to advocate for holistic solutions that prioritize the well-being and future of vulnerable children in these industries. Only through sustained and collective efforts can the cycle of exploitation in the brick kiln sector be broken, paving the way for a more just and equitable society.

REFERENCES

Barik, S. (2023, March 12). Reclaiming lost childhoods: Odisha Police to hold brick kiln owners accountable. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/reclaiming-lost-childhoods-odisha-police-to-hold-brick-kiln-owners-accountable/article66604150.ece>

Bhukuth, A. (2005). Child Labour and Debt Bondage: A Case Study of Brick Kiln Workers in Southeast India. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 40(4), 287–302. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909605055776>

Bhukuth, A., & Ballet, J. (2006). Is child labour a substitute for adult labour? *International Journal of Social Economics*, 33(8), 594–600. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03068290610678734>

Burra, N. (2009). Child labour in rural areas with a special focus on migration, agriculture, mining and brick kilns.

Daly, A., Hillis, A., Shrestha, S. M., & Shrestha, B. K. (2020). Children's migration to brick kilns in Nepal: a review of educational interventions and stakeholder responses to child labour. *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, 16(3), 221–231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450128.2020.1867334>

Das, R. (2013). Socio-economic conditions of female workers in brick kilns: An exploitation to healthy social structure: A case study on Khejuri CD blocks in Purba Medinipur, West Bengal. *International Journal of Science and Research*, 4(1), 95-102.

Hawksley, H. (2014, January 2). Why India's brick kiln workers "live like slaves." BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-25556965>

Jafar, M. (2018). Child Labour in Brick Kiln Industry: A Case Study of Moradabad. *International Journal of Research Culture Society*, ISSN, 2456-6683.

Mohanty, R. K., & Suman, S. S. (2020). Children in brick kiln: Scenario in Odisha. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(2), 97-102.

Roy, S. (2011). The Challenge of Child Labour in India in Rural Areas: With a Special Focus on Migration, Agriculture, and Mining and Brick Kilns. *Agriculture, and Mining and Brick Kilns* (February 7, 2011).

Singh, N. D. (2005). Women Workers in the Brick Kiln Industry in Haryana, India. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 12(1), 83–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152150401200104>

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

Modern Slavery in the Shadows: Addressing Child Labour in the Brick Kiln Sector

How to cite this article: Verma, R. & Chaudhary, S. (2024). Modern Slavery in the Shadows: Addressing Child Labour in the Brick Kiln Sector. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 9(4), 109-115. DIP: 18.02.011/20240904, DOI: 10.25215/2455/0904011