



Bidi Industry in India

Workers and Livelihoods: Women and Children

Bidi rolling is an entirely manual process. Laborers must painstakingly place tobacco inside a small tendu leaf, tightly roll the leaf and secure the product with a thread. This process is largely home-based and is dominated by women and children. An average roller can achieve a daily output of about 1000 bidis per day.¹ An already vulnerable sector of society, women and children engaged in bidi rolling face abuse, financial enslavement, and a number of health problems.

Women, Families, and the Bidi Industry

- Women make the largest proportion of labor in the bidi industry. Published literature estimate women make up 76% of total bidi employment.² The All India Bidi, Cigar, and Tobacco Workers Federation estimates women comprise 90 – 95% of total employment in bidi manufacture.³
- Women are primarily bidi rollers. Workers typically operate from their homes. Other members of the family actively assist in the bidi rolling, especially children. In many cases, several women from the same household will all engage in bidi rolling to fulfill quotas.⁴
- The industry is male dominated, and often contributes to the economic exploitation of women.⁵
- Middlemen are known to supply female laborers with low quality tendu leaves. They also reject bidis deemed poor quality, but eventually take them without paying.⁶

A Dangerous Occupation

- Entire households relying heavily on bidi production for survival are often forced to go into debt to bidi contractors when raw materials to complete the production process are scarce. Contractors then gain financial control over them.⁷
- Minimum wages are fixed by the state governments and revised from time to time. However, International Labor Organization findings indicate that such provisions had scarcely any impact on home-based workers.⁸ Fixed wages for rolling 1000 bidis varies from Rs. 29.0 in Tripura to Rs. 64.8 in Gujarat.⁹

Exploiting our Children

- Government estimates find 15-25% of children are employed by the industry. NGO estimates indicate that this is a gross underestimation of the size of the child workforce.¹⁰



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- Under the Child Labor Protection Act, 1986, permitting children under 14 to work in hazardous industries is illegal.
 - Section three of the Child Labor Protection Act, 1986, allows for the employment of children under age 14 in home-based work. Bidi production units regularly exploit the loophole by giving work to families and enabling them to employ children. Children as young as 3-5 years are known to assist in the family's work.¹¹
 - It is estimated that roughly 10% of all female bidi workers and 5% of all male bidi workers are children under 14.¹²
 - Children are made to work up to a fourteen hour day, seven days per week, with very short breaks.¹³
 - Children working in factories are commonly subjected to punishment for working late, making a mistake, working slowly, or even talking to another child. They are reprimanded by being hit with a stick on the open hand or even beatings.¹⁴

For women and children engaged in rolling bidis a myriad of occupational hazards exist:

- The process releases large amounts of coarse particles and dust into the work environment (typically the home).¹⁵
- Rollers do not wear protective clothing, gloves or masks, and are exposed to tobacco dust through their skin and by inhaling the harmful particles.¹⁶
- The Factory Advisory Services and Labor Institute in Bombay, a unit of the Labor Ministry of India, found the incidence of bronchial asthma and tuberculosis to be higher among bidi workers than any other group in the general population.¹⁷
- Further health effects include pain and cramping in the shoulders, neck, back, lower abdomen, anemia and eye problems.¹⁸

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