

**NATIONAL FORUM FOR BEEDI WORKERS [NFBW]**

# **National Consultation**

## ***Concerns of Beedi Workers And the Way Forward***

***Vishwa Yuvak Kendra, New Delhi***

**1<sup>st</sup> August 2017**

**Organized By**

**National Forum for Beedi Workers  
(NFBW)**

**National Alliance for Maternal Health & Human  
Rights (NAMHHR)**

**CENTRE FOR HEALTH & SOCIAL JUSTICE (CHSJ)**

## Introduction

National Consultation on **"Concerns of Beedi Workers and the Way Forward"** was organized by National Forum for Beedi Workers (NFBW) in collaboration with National Alliance for Maternal Health & Human Rights (NAMHHR) at Vishwa Yuvak Kendra on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2017. Consultation was participated by 47 participants from Bihar, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Delhi. Participants include representatives from trade unions, civil society organizations and social activist.

The beedi manufacturing and processing industry presents a very complex picture. The chain of beedi production ranges from tendu leaf collection, transportation, home based rolling of beedis and centralized packaging and labeling. beedi industry is a labour intensive cottage industry which rests on informal employment within unorganized and organized sector.

Beedi manufacturing used to be a factory-based production in the early 1900s, but has eventually shifted to being home-based and this is one of the reasons why its employees tend to be women and children especially drawn from vulnerable and marginalized communities of society. Currently, beedi rolling is mainly happening in the home setting and it is estimated that today merely 10% of the industry operates from factories. The sheer number of people involved itself is a catchment for politicians who also have strong stake in the industry. There are large variations in minimum wages offered to beedi workers in different states. In reality, therefore, beedi workers tend to be disempowered, unorganized and vulnerable to all kinds of exploitations.

In this context, Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) carried out exploratory study for the mapping of beedi workers and documentation of their concerns in selected districts in three states i.e. Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal.

To work towards a bottom-up agenda for beedi workers' rights, a need was felt to build consensus on advocacy strategies with those working at the grassroots with beedi workers. State consultations were organized to identified state specific issues of Beedi Workers. National consultation aimed at synthesize the key learning drawn from different state and to discuss the

way forward to strengthen the advocacy actions for the rights of beedi workers in unorganized sector.

## **Objectives of the Consultation**

**The consultation workshop aimed at:**

- To relook at the advocacy issues which have emerged in State Consultations, consider new issues and gain consensus on the agenda for national level advocacy
- To build a strategy for advocacy around the identified issues related to rights of Beedi workers
- To build alliance with interested key stakeholders for working on the evolved advocacy agenda to take it forward

## **Welcome & Introduction**

The consultation workshop "**Concerns of Beedi Workers and the Way Forward**" started with a formal welcome and introduction of the participants including representatives from partnering CSOs, academicians, social activist and trade union leaders. Ms. Sandhya Gautam, CHSJ gave a warm welcome to all the participants and shared the context for organizing national consultation to develop advocacy strategies for raising collective voices for the rights of the Beedi Workers.

She stated that the Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) is a civil society organization working on issues related to health and social justice since long. However, working with Beedi Workers is comparatively new issue for CHSJ although not new issues for states like Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Tamil Naidu. So to understand the situation and challenges of Beedi Workers and about the implementation status of various schemes and welfare measures meant for them, separate studies were conducted in these 3 largest beedi producing states.

She oriented the participants that National Forum for Beedi Workers (NFBW) is a common platform for CSOs, academician, researchers working on the

issues of beedi workers evolved during the study process. About NAMHHR she told that it stands for the National Alliance on Maternal Health and Human Rights and was founded in 2010 by a group of civil societies and activists. As it is clear in its name, NAMHHR works on human rights issues in maternal health. Currently it has members (organizations/ networks/ individuals) in 19 States. Presently CHSJ is coordinating its work as Secretariat.

Dr. Abhijit Das, Executive Director, CHSJ & the Co-convener NAMHHR conceptualized the importance of national consultation with the words that Beedi industries is a very pervasive and vast sector but having huge invisibility of the health concerns of the beedi workers. The plight of home based women beedi worker increases manifold as they are not at all considered as wage earner. They don't have access to health care facilities even during pregnancy.

The vulnerability of beedi workers put them to further risk in the absence of industrial relationship between employer and employees as they are not even aware about their principal employers.

Dr. Das further observed that working for beedi workers since last one year has been a great learning experience for CHSJ and NAMHHR. Multiple stakeholders strategy ranging the stakeholders from trade unions, unorganized workers, contractors, government counterpart etc helps to untangle the vicious stakeholders' relationship in beedi industries.

He added that we need to synthesize the common issues of beedi workers in different states to develop common strategy for negotiating with the system for the rights of the beedi workers.

## Session 1: Sharing about Study Process

Ms. Rudrakshina Banerjee from CHSJ shared the brief of the process involved in the study conducted by CHSJ in three states for the identification of key concerns of beedi workers with focus on labour, livelihood, health, social security and other related issues.

While sharing the goal and objectives of the study she pinpointed that the larger purpose of the project was to develop a strategic plan for advocating for

the welfare, dignity and justice for the communities involved in the informal sector of Beedi rolling, especially women and children. It involved the process of analysis of policy framework, field research & mapping, relationship building with different stakeholders, consultations at state and national level and development of strategy document.

## **Session 1: Regulations, Beedi Workers' Rights & Industrial Accountability**

The session moderated by Mr. Shakti H. From Centre for Workers' Management (CWM) was aimed at discussing the key concerns and situation of beedi workers in different states and advocacy strategies regarding the regulations, rights of beedi workers and industrial accountability. The key speakers to the session were Ms. Sana Contractor (CHSJ), Ms. Meena Gopal (TISS Mumbai), Ms.B.Dharmakkany (Nav Jeevan Trust, Tamil Nadu) and Mr. Kedar (Gram Sudhar Samiti, M.P.).

### **Key Findings of the Study - Ms. Sana Contractor**

Ms. Sana Contractor, CHSJ shared the details of the research methodology and findings of the study on the beedi workers carried out in the three states viz. Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. It was essentially a scoping study conducted to assess the situation of beedi workers in different states.

She remarked that methodology includes mapping of beedi industries, profiling of beedi workers, understanding of administrative structure for addressing the welfare regulation meant for beedi workers and review of literature. FGDs and in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants and other stakeholders.

### **Findings of the study can be jotted down as :**

- Exact estimates of beedi workers not known in the absence census
- Beedi workers mostly belong to vulnerable and marginalized communities/groups including women and children.
- Beedi industries involves multiple stakeholders include state, industries, trade unions, CBOs, media, academia and the marginalized communities.

- Beedi workers face identity crises due to non issuance of id-cards and exploiting loopholes and poor employee-employer relationship.
- Despite a fairly strong regulatory framework, its effective implementation seems to be missing.

## **Advocacy for the Rights of Beedi Workers - Ms. Meena Gopal (Discussant)**

Ms. Meena Gopal from TISS, Mumbai expressed her views on the advocacy strategies for bringing rights to the marginalized beedi workers. She asserted that any strategy for the empowerment of beedi workers needs to bring together different stakeholders. She also stressed that different social movement for organized workers from different occupation should raise their voices collectively to be heard.

Ms. Meena observed that there are 3 level of advocacy. One is at the ideological level. This is important because women are not at all considered as wage workers and are not given voices to speak for their rights.

At the second level research is an important tool for challenging policy level issues. Micro studies help to generate evidences for it. And lastly, public discourse to establish the accountability of the employers towards beedi workers and raising demands to the state for the welfare of the beedi workers.

She also remarked that often beedi workers are just considered as victims and state wave off its responsibility just by giving some compensation to them. The NFBW needs to challenge it and establishing the rights of the beedi workers.

### **Voices from field:**

#### **Workers' Issue with Middlemen/Contractors in Tirunelveli district of Tamil nadu - B.Dharmakkany**

Ms. Dharmakkany discussed the workers issue in context to the existing situation in Tamil Nadu. She observed that the occupational life of Beedi workers are characterized by low wages, piece rated remuneration, lack of social security and absence of organization. The Beedi workers are in the

clutches of contractors and sub-contractors. Beedi workers are usually home based workers.

The beedi companies promote commission agents and contractors to deal the business with the workers for making more profit. Hence the agents and contractors can exploit the workers as much as they can, and will pay less wages than the companies.

Ms. Dharmakkany also reflected that in some places the workers have to produce 1100 beedies instead of 1000 beedies with the given quantity of raw materials. The present system of functioning of the beedi industry promotes child labour also. Beedi rolling women are very much exploited in multiple ways by different companies, agents and contractors. The level of exploitation varies from companies to contractors and to commission agents.

She added that since the raw materials given by the commission agents is not sufficient to roll 1000 beedies they have to get loan or interest beedi from other workers. Due to the system of commission agents the workers fall prey to money lenders and hence they are squeezed by the money lenders. Women workers are also economically and sexually exploited by the money lender.

In one sense, it is possible to say that the labour enforcement mechanism is weak in the beedi sector.

### **Issues of Tendu Leaf Pluckers in Madhya Pradesh- Mr. Kedar Rajak**

Mr. Kedar from Gram Sudhar Samiti discussed the vulnerability issues of tendu leaf pluckers. 90 percent of the tendu leaf pluckers/collectors belong to the marginalized communities including tribal and schedule caste. He oriented participants that the normally tendu leaf plucking/collections takes in the month April/May every year. It hardly continues for 20-25 days in a year. For collecting 100 bundles of tendu leaf, the worker gets Rs.125 which is less than minimum wages under MGNREGA.

The agent or the contractors while putting entries in the labour card, cut down 100 bundle as their commission. Workers are not paid for actual amount for the tendu leaves plucked by them. A part of the amount is being deposited in the other persons in whose name contractor makes the entry.

Mr. Kedar highlighted that there is also provision for the payment of bonus to the tendu leaf collectors. However, due to incorrect registered entries for lesser bundles than actually plucked by the workers, they are paid less bonus than their actual entitlements. The leaf collectors are also not aware about the insurance and other welfare schemes meant for them.

### **Discussion:**

- Since the tendu leaf plucking is a short term employment, what the workers do to earn their livelihood for rest of the year? Though the dependency is low on tendu leaf collection but it provides additional employment to the tendu leaf pluckers. Other times they work as wage labourers in agriculture farms or construction sites or migrated to other cities to earn livelihood.
- Government issues fresh ID cards to tendu leaf pluckers/collectors every year. We are constantly demanding for issuing the same at least for a period of 5 years, so that pluckers can access the benefits of social security schemes meant for them.
- Madhya Pradesh is one of the largest producers of tendu leaves and the government is earning huge revenues out of it. However, the wages given to the tendu leaf pluckers is less than minimum wages under MGNREGA.
- Forest Rights Protection Act, 2006 aims at the elimination of the monopoly of the forest department on forest produce. However, tendu leaf as forest produce is not included under Forest Rights Act, 2006.
- Entire family including the children above 5 years of age are also involved in the collection, sacking and binding of tendu leaves.
- Previously, trade unions haven't had very active response on the economic and sexual exploitation of women workers in beedi industry. However, now it has emerged as a critical issue.
- Beedi workers are working in isolated manner having no space for collectivization of beedi workers.
- The benefits of social security schemes hardly reach to the beedi workers.

## Session 2: Social Security & State Accountability

Dr. Abhijit Das moderated the panel discussion on social security and state accountability. The key speakers to the session were Ms. Sandhya Gautam (CHSJ), Ms. Shikha Joshi (SEWA M.P), Mr. Ajay Yadav (ISR D M.P) and Ms. Chandralekha (ASHA, W.B).

### **Finding of the Study on Social Welfare Schemes: Ms. Sandhya Gautam**

Ms. Sandhya Gautam while discussing the findings of the study on the status of social welfare schemes oriented the group that there are number of welfare schemes including free treatment, maternity benefits, financial aid for making spectacles, scholarship for students, financial support of daughter's marriage & for once last rites, housing schemes etc. However, the benefit hardly reaches to the beedi workers due to poor implementation, lack of political will and lack of awareness. No grievance redressal system is in place to rectify the situation.

The study reveals that enrolment procedure is not uniform. Enrolment of workers and renewal of ID cards has been suspended since April 2016.

She also discussed the various occupational health hazardous commonly observed among the beedi workers.

### **Issues related to Social Security Schemes: Ms. Shikha Joshi (Discussant)**

Ms. Shikha critically examined the structure of the beedi workers' welfare fund. Welfare fund is set up central level and the states are held responsible for implementing social welfare schemes. The tussle between state and the centre leads to its poor implementation.

She observed that there is hardly any meeting of advisory commission of the welfare board. Though it's a demand driven program, however any initiatives are taken to raise awareness about the welfare schemes for beedi workers. Due to poor literacy rates, the uptake of the schemes is very low. The application forms for welfare fund schemes were in English language and that

too are available to workers from contractors at the cost of Rs.2 for each form. Access to the schemes is very difficult and delayed reimbursement of entitlement further de-motivates the workers to its uptake.

She again pointed out the fact that very often, beedi hospitals are located in remote areas and mobile dispensaries are rarely functional.

Lastly, there is strong urge of the time to come together to collectively raising the demands for activation of the state welfare boards.

## **Voices from the field:**

### **Access to Welfare Schemes: Mr. Ajay Yadav**

There is no publicity of the welfare schemes especially meant for the beedi workers. And even if they are aware about the schemes, the beedi workers are afraid to apply for accessing its benefit said Mr. Ajay Yadav. There is atmosphere of despair.

No new enrolment of beedi workers since April 2016 and old ID cards are being rejected. There is no political will to pass on the benefits of the welfare schemes to the beedi workers. This resulted in poor implementation of various welfare schemes.

Mr. Yadav acquainted the group that the state government has no objection to provide the beedi worker the benefits from dual schemes. However, the provisions of centrally sponsored schemes debarred them to access the benefits, if beedi worker is accessing any benefits from any schemes of the state government.

### **Issues of the Muslim Women: Ms. Chandralekha**

Ms. Chandralekha discussed Muslim women issues in beedi industry. She said that in West Bengal more than 90 percent Muslim women works in beedi rolling industry. They are under the vicious cycle of distress. While it is presumed that home based work is more suitable for Muslim women. However, they are meant to doubly suffer being at the mercy of husband, who often works as migrant labourers. They are often subject to domestic violence due to practice of polygamy and multiple pregnancies at short interval.

Young children are also forced to work in beedi rolling jobs and turns out to be school dropout. Girls who are good at beedi rolling work get married quickly.

Ms. Chandralekha acknowledged that it is more difficult to organize Muslim women as compared to non Muslim due to religious and cultural barriers. Also Muslim women workers were hesitant to collectivize themselves to demand for their rights as owners of the beedi industries are also Muslim.

### **Discussion:**

- Trade unions are making efforts to organize beedi workers but it is difficult to estimate the percentage of beedi workers included in any trade unions as there is no exact estimates available for the total number of beedi workers.
- Poor leadership skills are visible among the beedi workers. And trade unions are very often limited to city periphery while most of the beedi workers reside in rural areas.
- Organizing beedi workers in not an easy task as most of the beedi workers are home based workers.
- Focusing on alternative occupation of the coming generations of the beedi workers needs to be taken into account.

### **Session 3: Group Discussion & Plenary Session**

Three parallel group discussions were conducted during the national consultation to address the issues of accountability, gaps in enforcement & policy and protection of workers' rights. Plenary session was moderated by Ms. Anchita Ghatak (Parichiti) Each group has a separate theme for discussion and have a group facilitator and a rapporteur.

<b>Group</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Moderator</b>	<b>Rapporteur</b>
Group 1	Regulations	Mr.B.Nalan	Ms. Smriti Shukla
Group 2	Social Security/ Welfare	Mr. Arup Das	Ms. Seema Jain
Group 3	Health/Health Care	Mr.Arun Tyagi	Mr. Meghendra

During the group discussion, each group discussed key issues that need to be initiated to make the state accountable for the rights of the beedi workers, short term & long term strategies to address these issues and role of key stakeholders.

(in group 1-Regulations)  
2. (in group 2-Social Security/welfare)

## **Group 1: Regulations**

Key points of discussion carved out of the group discussion can be jotted down as:

- Mainly a home based occupation that doesn't allow workers to raise their voices collectively.
- 90% of beedi rolling works is done by women. Men and children are mostly involved in labelling and packaging works.
- Labour enforcement needs to be strengthened. Kerela Dinesh beedi cooperative model can be adapted/adopted.
- Need to eliminate the practice of middlemen/contractors in beedi industry.
- Instead of home based, works in sheds needs to be promoted.
- Commission agent runs beedi industry in evening hours which increases the chance of sexual exploitation.
- Regulations required ensuring minimum wages to each beedi workers.
- Health of beedi workers especially women are affected by long hours of works without any break.
- Crèches needs to be established for care of infants and young children.
- Needs to study the possible impacts of proposed labour code on beedi workers.
- Strengthen advocacy actions through PILs and raising demands for monitoring cell.
- Identifying volume (number) of beedi workers is necessary to set further strategies
- Key stakeholders include trade unions, factories, labour department, health department, WCD, gram panchayats and banks.

## **Group 2: Social Security/ Welfare**

Key points of discussion includes

- Key issues to be focused include improved access to health care schemes & facilities, raising demands for housing issues and provident fund schemes for Beedi Workers.
- Raising collective voices for increasing the financial provisions under death claims, incentives under maternity benefit schemes, financial support for girl's marriage etc.
- Advocacy actions for timely disbursement of all pending claims/benefits within 90 days.
- Raising demands for activation of state welfare board to strengthen coordination between centre and state.
- Ownership of women under housing schemes and provision of rented housing schemes for marginalized workers.
- Strengthening of women leadership among women beedi workers.
- Strengthening of trade unions/networks for B.Ws and bringing convergence among different trade unions belonging to different occupations.
- Documentation and evidence generation for strengthening advocacy actions.
- Bringing together different stakeholders from regional, state and national level
- inclusion of women members in trade unions
- Key Stakeholders include beedi workers & their collectives, NGOs & CSO networks, trade unions, central beedi workers welfare board, departments (labour, WCD, health, education etc), academicians and media.

## **Group 3: Health & Health Care**

Key learning drawn from discussion includes

- Identifying various occupational health hazards of beedi works

- Advocacy to emphasize on preventative health care rather than reimbursement for spectacles and treatment of chronic illness like TB.
- Increased health coverage under healthcare schemes
- Raising demands for appointment of lady doctors in beedi hospitals.
- The task for enrolment of beedi workers and renewal of ID cards should be again handed over to labour department.
- Registration of contractors should be mandatory
- CSR money can be tapped for the welfare of beedi workers.
- Instead of ESI/Bidi Hospitals/Gen Hospital benefits can be accessed through State Hospitals. Integration of Bidi Hospital service delivery with state owned public health structure.
- The welfare fund should be diverted to States. (TN - ESI is accessible with bidi card)
- Health networks, CSOs, trade unions, public health system, state health research institutes and beedi workers should be considered as key stakeholders.

### **Discussions:**

- Needs to have some regulatory mechanism in place to put a check on the contractors or it should be eliminated completely.
- Cooperative model is not very successful unless it is owned and supported by the state. Strong political will is required to replicate the cooperative model at large scale.
- Needs to strengthen the collectives of beedi workers and inculcating leadership skills among beedi workers.
- Tapping CSR money from beedi industries for the welfare of beedi workers seems to be a very ambitious goal.
- Need to focus on pragmatic ways to strengthen advocacy actions for the rights of the beedi workers.
- Central welfare board has sought suggestion from central labour union members to bring reforms in proposed labour code. We all should contact central labour union members in our state for suggesting reformative measures in proposed labour code.

### **Plenary Action**

As the present project will be winded up by 15<sup>th</sup> Aug 2017, there was urgent need to take up some voluntary actions by its member CSOs, academia, researchers, trade unions and others to continues its advocacy actions through NFBW. To coordinate the work of NFBW at national as well as at state level, it was decided to form coordination committee on voluntary basis. It was collectively decided that CHSJ will continue as the secretariat for NFBW.

The names proposed and agreed upon for the coordination committee includes:

- Mr. Arup Das - West Bengal
- Mr.Arun Tyagi - Madhya Pradesh
- Ms. Shikha Joshi - Madhya Pradesh
- Ms.Meena Gopal -Tamil Nadu
- Mr. Rajdev- Uttar Pradesh
- Mr. Vivekanand- Bihar
- Ms. Usha -Karnataka
- CHSJ Team - National Level

Mr. Arun Tyagi offered vote of thanks to all the panellist, representatives from different states, CSO members, academia and trade union activist for their vibrant participation in the consultation.