

**State Level Consultation on the Rights of Beedi
Workers**

3 May 2017, Nari Seva Sangha, Kolkata

Organised by

National Forum for Beedi Workers - West Bengal

Introduction

The tobacco sector in India has achieved significant milestones in the regulation of cigarette industry in terms of advertisements, pictorial warnings and so on. However, the picture in the beedi industry is different.

Beedi production is largely home based and beedi rollers are primarily women and children. Beedis are produced in states such as Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Odisha, Kerala and Bihar. The chain of production in the beedi industry ranges from tobacco cultivation, tendu leaves collection, transportation of raw materials like tobacco and tendu leaves and home based production of beedi and centralised packaging and labelling. What used to be a factory based industry in the mid 1900s has eventually shifted to being home based and this is one of the reasons why its workers are largely women. It is estimated today that merely 10% of the industry operates out of factories.

To understand the beedi sector, issues of workers, policy framework and policy implementation, some civil society organisations in the three states of West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Tamilnadu came together under the banner of 'National Forum for Beedi Workers' and carried out field research and a policy review of the beedi sector. During field research and mapping of the industry, many issues were identified for welfare and rights of beedi workers.

Objective of the consultation

The field research and interaction with communities pointed out the gaps in adhering to the legal and policy framework. There were also significant challenges in establishing employee-employer relationship which underpins labour laws. It was observed that the issues of beedi workers have not been a priority issue for trade unions and civil society organisations for the past fifteen years.

Following the field research, state consultations were planned in each of the three states, namely, Madhya Pradesh, Tamilnadu and West Bengal. The West Bengal State Consultation was held on May 3, 2017 in Kolkata at Nari Seva Sangha. The objectives were:

1. To facilitate collective deliberations on the issues of workers in the beedi sector and on the state – industry accountability for the policy framework;
2. To build alliances with interested key stakeholders for prioritising the key issues for the beedi sector;

3. To prioritise strategic advocacy issues and to suggest pathways to address them in the future.

Profile of participants

Participants included representatives from civil society organisations in India particularly grassroot organisations working with beedi workers at the district level in West Bengal. Representatives of trade unions, other activists and beedi workers themselves – adults and children – attended the Consultation.

Setting the context

Dr. Abhijit Das

Dr Abhijit Das from Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) mentioned that CHSJ has been working on health rights for several years. CHSJ links health to social and economic issues and advocates for making public health services more useful for everyone. CHSJ was part of the National Forum for Beedi Workers. CHSJ's study on maternal health in West Bengal (in collaboration with the organisation ASHA) showed that women beedi workers were the most marginalised in accessing health services despite the health system being fairly good in the state.

There are 50 lakh beedi workers in India. There is need to introspect the various aspects/concerns related to beedi workers and explore pathways for collaborative work. Policies related to the beedi industry fall within state and central subjects thereby creating need for state level and national level advocacy on issues within the industry. Today those present have experience of working in the industry, being part of the chain in the beedi industry, working on health, on workers' rights. The expectation is to share various experiences, find areas of linking to the composite plan being developed for the unorganised sector and identify areas of advocacy.

Ground Realities of Beedi Workers in West Bengal

Ms Anchita Ghatak, Parichiti, Kolkata

Beedi manufacturing began in West Bengal in the 1930s and the industry has an estimated 14,84,670 workers in the state of which 11,61,870 are women. Beedi accounts for 85% of the total workforce in the tobacco industry. Beedi making is predominantly found in 8 districts of the state with Murshidabad accounting for the largest share with estimated figures of 12 lakh people associated with the industry with around 7 lakh people in Jangipur

subdivision itself. Workers are largely women, poor and majority of them belong to Muslim and Scheduled Caste (SC) communities.

A field study was conducted in West Bengal in parts of Murshidabad and Malda to identify key concerns of beedi workers with a focus on labour, livelihood, health, social security and related exploitation and key issues for advocacy which have been taken up by various stakeholders. Following are highlights of key findings from the study.

Role of the Munshi: The Munshi is the person who is the middleman between the beedi workers and the factories/companies. It is the Munshi who determines the quality of the beedis made and has the right to reject beedis of low quality. This intermediary system through the Munshi leads to large companies avoiding tax and the law remains unimplemented in reality.

Registration of beedi workers and access to identity cards: Beedi workers often don't have correct information about welfare schemes. Beedi cards too have often been issued in the name of the male head of the household although it is the women who are the workers. Munshis play an important role in ensuring Provident Fund (PF) registration of beedi workers. But the Munshis collude with the beedi companies and don't register workers for the PF. Munshis also mislead workers and make them withdraw the PF amount after 5 years – thereby beedi workers don't get the full benefits of PF and are deprived of pension. Most beedi workers are illiterate or semi-literate and highly dependent on Munshis for accessing welfare schemes.

Malpractice related to wages: Discrimination in wages is a major issue. The government had declared that the wage rate in 2016 in West Bengal was Rs 169 for rolling 1000 beedis. However, the rate being paid was lower than the declared minimum wage of the government. This wage rate is decided at a meeting between representatives of the Beedi Merchants' Association (BMA), trade unions and the government. However, no one from the government signs the agreement. It is a bipartite agreement between the BMA and the trade unions. Beedi workers are not paid for rejected beedis which are sold in the market by Munshis at lower rates.

Health issues: Beedi workers are aware about the negative health consequences of rolling beedis. They have shared many health concerns that they continue to face – calluses in hands, joint pains, fatigue, respiratory irritation, urinary tract problems, headaches, nausea, burning of eyes. Children of beedi workers are exposed to tobacco at an early age. Many women proudly display the beedi rolling skills of children but are unaware of health consequences on children. Although there are dispensaries and a hospital run by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, workers complain of unreliable services. They visit government health facilities, facilities set up specifically for beedi workers, private practitioners, as well as traditional healers

for their health problems, depending on factors like gravity of illness, distance from home, time available and costs.

Child labour: Unofficial estimates by trade unions and various researchers state that children comprise about 25% to 40% of the total beedi workers. Most beedi workers admit their children to school but since the children are beedi workers there is a high rate of drop out from middle school onwards due to economic circumstances. Typically boys migrate to other states for work and girls start rolling beedis at home. Beedi rolling is a family activity with children contributing at all stages of the process. The engagement of children has consequences on their health and education opportunities and overall development.

Organising efforts: Beedi workers are not perceived as skilled workers and women beedi workers are invisibilised due to their home based work. There is lack of oversight of the government on the companies and the issue of levying of tax on beedis is also an issue of concern since there is no agreement on this issue at the national level. All the large trade unions represent beedi workers but unfortunately women workers are hardly seen in leadership positions. NGOs too work with beedi workers but usually foreground other identities like woman, mother, instead of the worker identity.

Implications for advocacy – Sharing by participants

- Trade union representatives shared that majority are women workers since the men work in other activities in other states. Beedi rolling is perceived as a secondary income which is contributed by women who then accept whatever wage and welfare is provided to them in a *Ja Pacchi Mene Nicchi* attitude (*I accept whatever I am getting*). This is a big barrier in organising/collectivising beedi workers. In Dhuliyan, Murshidabad, trade unions have been able to organise some beedi workers. Currently the CITU national secretary has reached this position through her commendable efforts of organising beedi workers.
- Identifying workers is the job of the employers according to the law with buying and selling of beedis to be undertaken as per log book. But no one knows how much is collected as cess. Only 40% of the profit is disclosed as production by the companies since declaration of production amount is as per self assessment by employer. This leads to a large amount of tax being avoided. The excise department of the government has no oversight.
- Government is unable to make employers mandatorily identify workers. All employers are disclosing the same numbers of workers i.e. 20 lakh workers.

Therefore majority of workers are hidden. Fake identity cards (of those dead, those who are not workers) are also a big concern.

- Taxing beedi continues to be a major issue of advocacy for anti tobacco efforts. All efforts towards taxing beedi and disclosure of nicotine levels on beedi packets have been blocked by tobacco companies.
- Need minimum wage to be set by central government and ensure implementation of minimum wage (of West Bengal) so that workers lives are improved and they get benefits of the welfare measures. There is need for all unions to organise together on this issue. CITU already is on board on this issue with its 2 lakh members.
- Need for alternative livelihood options so that women and families can explore occupations beyond the beedi industry. CITU had undertaken a signature campaign on this issue and had submitted it to the state government.
- The process of doctors having to certify beedi workers so as to be issued cards creates additional levels of challenges for beedi workers. Many of them have to go multiple times to get their cards made. For those who have cards, many of them are unable to access benefits through due to lack of awareness. There is need for creating large scale awareness among beedi workers on this issue.
- Recent directive of the government - of beedi cards being part of ESI cards - has created confusion since ESI cards are for accessing free health services whereas beedi workers cards were for not only health but for availing other social security benefits also. There is need for clarity on the new cards for beedi workers.

Registration and Entitlements of Beedi Workers

Mr Prithwis Basu, Sramik Sangram Committee

Mr Basu mentioned that approximately 83 lakh workers are in the beedi industry in India and as per government records almost 20 lakh of them are in West Bengal. Majority of the beedi workers are women/children and minors. In West Bengal the industry is scattered across Murshidabad, Malda, North 24 parganas, Howrah, Hoogly, Bardhaman, Purulia, Medinipur, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Bankura and Birbhum districts.

The major concern of beedi workers in the state is that instead being directly working under the companies, they are working under contractors and subcontractors as 'Ghor Khata' workers. The result is that they are getting only one third of the official declared minimum wage (Rs 206/- for Kolkata, North and South 24 Parganas, Rs 197 to Rs 206/- for other districts).

Taking advantage of the 1966 Beedi, Cigar and Tobacco Workers law, employers are appointing contractors and sub contractors and claiming that they are buying beedis and not making them. This way, employers bypass the law and its protections related to factories and industries. Workers are being discriminated from all benefits including minimum wage. Alongside, employers in collusion with officials in the government tax department are making profits from not having to pay production cess. Proper collection of this cess would have led to more welfare activities for the beedi workers. Currently due to government apathy workers are not getting benefits from the various provisions in the government welfare schemes such as – housing loan, holiday benefits, setting up cooperatives, loan for treatment of major illnesses, buying spectacles etc. Even for their identity cards workers have to go to the medical officer under the district labour commission. Unfortunately, this department is controlled by a group of touts/agents resulting in a few influential persons benefiting from welfare schemes through unscrupulous means, majority of who are not even beedi workers.

Mr Basu also shared that recently the state government has announced electrification project for beedi workers houses. As per central rules, if housing loan is approved only then will the beedi worker get Rs 20,000/- in two instalments. If housing is made through beedi cooperatives then government will provide electricity, road, sewage and landscaping. To avail these schemes, the worker will have to produce identification papers of at least one year, which is not possible for workers in remote rural villages.

Therefore, the sad state of beedi workers is a result of an unhealthy collusion between the government and employers/contractors/agents. Ultimately the beedi worker gets lost in the maze of the employers, agents, contractors, inactive unions and government supported syndicates. The real beedi workers are in a pitiable condition today. They were in such a state even during their favourite state government for over the past three decades. Because it was during this period that the agency system of employment of beedi workers were finished and a system of direct employment was started. Instead of focusing on ensuring minimum wage, PF, leave, maternity benefits, bonus, government identity cards and other benefits at the time – the then government favoured the agents and touts – and tuned the beedi worker into hapless marginalised bonded labourer.

Workers associated with this industry face numerous health problems – tuberculosis (TB), vision problems, gastric issues, anaemia, spondilitis, giving birth to ill babies – the reality in every beedi household. Adding to this is working in low light and unhealthy work environments. A major issue is involving children in the beedi making process particularly in the ‘petro’ process which involves binding threads on sets of beedis. Many children suffer tobacco inhalation related diseases such as under nutrition.

Another path of discrimination is forcing beedi workers to make beedis from poor quality kendu (tendu) leaves and tobacco – otherwise threatening to cut the tobacco cost from their wages. The Tripartite Quality Management Committee of 1994-95 is on paper only. Workers do not get minimum protection also from the 1966 law. Kendu leave pickers are supposed to get Rs 225/- (unskilled worker) or Rs 293/- (skilled worker) as declared by the government. However, a little investigation will reveal how large tendu field owners, employers do not even pay half of that amount.

Following are the advocacy issues shared by Mr Basu.

1. There is need for reform of the 1966 law.
2. The industry should be completely within the factory system and any other process of employment should be abolished.
3. The agency system should be abolished.

4. Government identity cards and other welfare schemes should be made available from block/anchal level.
5. All women beedi workers and their children should be mandatorily under the ICDS system.
6. PF, bonus, leave and other benefits should be provided as per the Factories Act.
7. Those workers who have received EPF benefits, they should be able to access their EPF money without any hassles.
8. For treatment of occupational health related illnesses, government should be forced to send adequate medicines and doctors at block level.
9. Need to pressurise the government that in instances where employers are not able to pay minimum wages to beedi workers, their production should be stopped.
10. The corrupt nexus of the excise, customs and sales tax departments should be broken and proper cess collection should be ensured so that more funds are available for beedi workers welfare.
11. Ensure a help desk at block/mandal/municipality level (where there is high concentration of beedi workers) at block level to implement state/central welfare schemes of the government.
12. Setting up of cooperatives/housing cooperatives of beedi workers should be given a priority and made part of state action plans.
13. Need legal measures to ensure government/cooperative control over kendu leaf/tobacco trade.
14. The labour welfare department should conduct regular camps in beedi worker majority areas to address their issues and grievances.

At the first level, there is need for advocacy by Sangathans and pressurising the government to ensure proper survey of beedi works/listing of employers and collecting their production and full business date, breaking the government department- employer corruption nexus, undertaking law reforms are stopping the government apathy towards beedi workers.

At the second level, there need for collectivisation of beedi workers, district wise finalise and make popular slogans related to major demands, explore possibility of a state convention, conduct protests at mahakuma/district level, undertake a rally to the labour department and demand for release of block wise data on employers and agents.

At the third level, expand membership base (of unions/collectives), set up village/anchal committees and conduct monthly meetings at village/anchal level.

Mr Basu then asked the audience whether cooperatives were the way to ensure benefits for beedi workers – both in product profit and in benefits for welfare schemes. Experience of the Kerala Cooperative model shows that the model is now in danger due to high production cost (due to addition of pictorial warnings, high taxes on selling in Arab countries and banning of child labour). In Bankura there are 26 cooperatives (e.g. Usha beedi, 708 beedi) but these cooperatives are also facing marketing challenges. Earlier there was a good market but now low cost beedis are undercutting cooperative beedis. Cooperatives can also have their own housing for beedi workers in West Bengal as seen in Kerala cooperatives but this will be possible if the state government provides land.

Sharing by participants

Advocacy efforts on law amendment: Beedi manufacturing falls within the 1966 law. But the industry itself over the years has changed from a factory based manufacturing process led by male workers to a home based enterprise with primarily women workers. Making it a home based industry has weakened the position of workers and has led to employers avoiding laws. There have not been any organised efforts in law amendment other than a private members bill introduced by Mr Ajit Saha in 1993 in parliament to amend the law. The Central Advisory Committee for beedi workers was changed into a tripartite body in 1996. But this committee is also not functional and has met only once since its formation. There was no public organised outcry to law reforms in favour of beedi workers.

Schemes for beedi workers: Mohammad Azad from the Murshidabad Beedi Workers' and Packers' Union shared that there are 12 lakh beedi workers in Murshidabad of which 6 lakh workers are in Jangipur alone. He mentioned that it is important to understand the changing nature of some of the government schemes and its implication. Following are the highlights shared by Mr Azad.

The Housing Scheme for beedi workers has changed and a portion of the money will come from the BWWF (Beedi Workers Welfare Fund). There is no idea how much the state government will provide. They have not declared the state government amount as of date. Under the scheme only 2400 housing units will be created which will leave most of the workers out of the housing benefit.

Clarity on new job cards: Beedi dispensaries will be transferred to ESI as per the new central government directive of 1.9.2016. All beedi cards will be handed over to ESI and the beedi workers will be issued an ESI card. But the ESI card will take care of only health entitlements through ESI but what about other entitlements which were part of the earlier beedi card? There is no clear guidance from the labour commissioner regarding this.

Who should implement minimum wage? As per rules it is the Labour Ministry since beedi is an all India activity. Then why is minimum wage set at state level? The other challenge is that the state government has set the West Bengal minimum wage at Rs 196 per 1000 beedis but neighbouring Jharkhand has wages lower than West Bengal. This leads to employers having branches in districts in Jharkhand that are adjacent to Murshidabad in West Bengal so that they can have greater profits from lower wages paid in Jharkhand. The advocacy demand should be for all India minimum wages.

Provident fund (PF): As per PF rules if an employer has 20 workers and more then it is mandatory for PF facilities for workers. By June 2017 all beedi workers will be required to submit application for coming under the PF benefits by declaring the name of their employer. But employers are saying they are giving 100 percent PF. The reality is that employers are not giving PF to all workers and this is because of

the Munshi practice. These middlemen are the major hurdle towards realising workers rights. The *Kena Becha System* promoted by the Munshis disempowers the worker- under this system there is no PF, no bonus or any other benefits. This system helps employers bypass all laws.

Housing: There are two types of cooperatives – Beedi Shramik Shomobay Samiti and Beedi Workers Housing Cooperative. The first type of cooperatives is local cooperatives with local markets. Such cooperatives are not the solution since these cooperatives do not have enough capital to markets of Delhi. The second type of cooperative i.e. the housing cooperative - West Bengal can draw lessons from Maharashtra where one housing cooperative has provided housing to 10,000 beedi workers. This cooperative in Maharashtra also has schools and hospitals. Such efforts are also possible in West Bengal near Farakka in Murshidabad but land is required from the state government for this initiative. There is unused land of Farakka barrage. The trade union had submitted request for using that land, but the request has not been taken into account by the state government.

Number of beedi workers: There is need for a survey to determine the number of beedi workers and how many of them have cards. As of now in the total figures many are involved – children, entire families, fake cards holders. Government does not have accurate figures.

Rights awareness: Need to build awareness about rights and entitlements among beedi workers since majority are not aware of their rights. Will getting cards lead to benefits? The card promises a lot but majority of workers are not able to avail all benefits. Example: Under student scholarship many received scholarship money after they passed school and got married. Now scholarships are linked to the national portal to address the issue of duplication of receiving benefits from different schemes. There is a Beedi workers hospital in Murshidabad. Another one (50 bedded hospital) is being built in Jhalda. There is provision for children getting stipend to complete for the labour. Child labour project schools are in bad shape in the state.

Workers need support to access benefits from various schemes. Need panchayats to be part of this process and facilitate this process. There is need to explore whether beedi cards need to be linked to aadhar cards to get behind fake cards.

Earlier many beedi workers did not have bank accounts and so could not access benefit of cash transfer. But Jan Dhan bank accounts have helped many access cash benefits. Zero balance and dormant accounts are being discouraged by the central government which is a good effort in this regard.

Child Labour and the Beedi Industry

Children's Voices

Tasmeena is in class 9 and from Dhuliyān. She lives with her mother and three sisters. Her father is no more. She is the youngest of the siblings. Tasmeena has been rolling beedis from the age of 10. She does not like making beedis but has to since she has to supplement the family income. Her income from beedi making is paid to her mother. Weekly, between all 4 of the family, they make Rs 1000 – Rs 1500. She goes to school twice since she is not able to take out more time from beedi making. *“I want to go to school but my mother does not allow it. I also want to go for dance classes”*. Tasmeena is not aware of Child Protection Committee in her area.

Shakina Yasmeen lives with her mother, three sisters and two brothers. Her father is no more. Sakina is a student of Class 9 and comes from a very poor economic background. *“I am not able to go to school regularly because of making beedi. I need to contribute to the family income. Teachers in school scold me for not attending school. If there are other opportunities then we will not make beedis”*.

Both Tasmeena and Sakina live in the Notun Bazaar area under Dhuliyān Municipality in Murshidabad. Their experiences are the experience of majority of child beedi workers like them. Children work for 4 to 5 hours daily making beedis and adding to the family income at the cost of missing out on education and a better future.

SCPCR Chairperson, West Bengal, Ms Ananya Chakraborti hearing the stories of the two girls recommended for greater civil society involvement in generating awareness about child protection committees at village level, advocacy with school principals and teachers for tracking of drop outs and children with irregular attendance in school.

A study on child labour in beedi industry and other occupations in Dhuliyān Murshidabad: presentation on a study by Marfat. Arup Das

The Marfat study revealed that children contribute significantly to the beedi industry. The study showed that 52% of households surveyed had child labour (51.8 % of girls are labour and 32.8% boys are labour) with the percentage being higher in BPL households (55%). Around 70% households depend on beedi in some way or the other. Low expenditure per head in beedi rolling families indicates the strong association of poverty and beedi rolling household/community. 30% of the labour force is below 18 years of age comprising of women and girls. This leads to increased vulnerabilities. A single child beedi labourer contributes about 21.4% of the monthly income of beedi making households. 25.5% of child

beedi workers reported health problems, such as back and spinal pain and ARI being the two major health problems.

Marfat believes that for children it a double edged sword – because of beedi the child is able to continue studies and because of beedi s/he is not regular in school. It is this extra income that is funding education. Therefore there is need to make educational institutions child friendly. South Kannada district and Tirunelvelly districts in southern India have similar profile of beedi workers. But a study there showed different things – the reasons are higher wages (Rs 241/-). Murshidabad Dhuliyani is probably one of the few areas in the country where a large area is operating with very low wages as compared to the official rate.

Families are encouraging girls to be in beedi making. Their beedi making skills ensure them a good marriage and if not married then she still continues to be an earning member for the family. Is this what is desired for children? Where are the rights of the child? Is economic value the only value of the girl? West Bengal is in a critical position related to child rights. Is this the only way in which children will become citizens of this country? These are questions that need to be thought through and alternatives acted upon by all advocates.

Marfat proposed for campaign for cards and entitlements with government and trade unions, coordinated anti child labour campaigns (particularly advocacy with District Child Protection Unit), research on occupational health.

Occupational Health of Beedi Workers

Occupational Health Problems of Beedi Workers

Dr Punyabrata Gun, Shramajibi Swasthya Udyog, Kolkata

Dr Gun mentioned that the beedi industry should not be seen as a desirable industry since making beedis and consuming beedi is unhealthy. So occupational health for beedi industry should not be seen linearly for the beedi industry. It is different from other industries. Dr Gun shared his findings from review of existing occupational health studies in India.

- Beedi workers suffered from Occupational Dust Diseases—Tobacosis and problems from prolonged sitting posture.
- Most common morbidity was weakness and fatigue followed by lower backache.
- Occupational diseases are discussed in Community Medicine only.
- Most of the government hospitals/ clinics do not even have a spirometer.
- Occupational diseases should get proper importance in medical curriculum.
- Government health care facilities should be equipped to diagnose and manage occupational diseases.

Dr Gun shared that Shramajibi had developed and used study formats for their study on health of jute workers and workers in the zari industry. These could be adapted for future studies on beedi workers. Dr Gun recommended for an occupational hazard study for beedi workers.

Health Hazards of Beedi Workers in India

Dr Narendra Nath Naskar, Director, All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, Kolkata

Dr Naskar highlighted the occupational health hazards of beedi workers. He mentioned that tobacco in beedi contains 4000 active chemicals and about 50 carcinogenic agents, CO, nitrosamines, radioactive elements such as uranium, heavy metals like cadmium, VOC like ketone aldehyde and particulate matter. The health hazard is exacerbated due to beedi rolling in dusty environments, in ill ventilated rooms by those who undergo little or no health screening. Common morbidities among beedi workers were Cough (64%), Musculo Skeletal Disorder, Body ache, Eye strain, Asthma, TB, Swelling of lower limbs, Gynaecological & Obstetric problems and Arthritis. A study on health conditions of beedi workers showed that 38% reported to be of poor Health condition, Cough (64%), Expectoration (49.5%), Sneezing (13.2%), Chest pain (17.4%), Breathlessness (25.6%), Burning of the eyes (9.8%), Headache (6.6%) and Other skin problems.

Dr Naskar recommended that what is required for beedi workers were PPE, regular awareness programmes, regular health check-up, proper implementation of beedi workers welfare fund, revision of daily wages for beedi workers and monitoring of disbursement of wages to workers and continuation of research work. All stakeholders such as government, NGOs, health institutions, trade unions all had an important role to play in reducing occupational health hazards of beedi workers.

Way Forward

Following were the suggestions from the participants on how the National Forum for Beedi Workers (NFBW) can take forward the work and the possible next steps for the alliance.

- Occupational health hazard study for beedi workers
- Study on estimates of beedi workers
- Debunking the notion that beedi work is good for women since it is home based work – if we want women workers to have their identity then need to think whose work, what for and what will realising work rights for women lead to.

- Strengthen the network – at state level, at district level, connect to other state networks. Develop an institutional framework for the network (NFBW).
- Strengthen engagement with trade unions.
- Need to link with community level child protection mechanisms and make it stronger so that return to school is realised.
- Need community based sensitization and awareness initiatives.
- Need to collectivize beedi workers. All beedi workers need to come together. Initial steps have been taken to register a forum of women beedi workers so that they can collectivise and demand for their rights. Such efforts need to be strengthened in future.
- Need to reduce dependency on beedi. This will only be realised if the government (labour commission) hears civil society demands. Village level survey is required – to undertake fact finding of lack of benefits/entitlements. Government needs to develop and share such reports since earlier report submissions and petitions to labour commission have fallen on deaf ears.
- Women want to be rehabilitated elsewhere – 25 years back there were 2500 male workers and 500 women in a beedi factory. Later males migrated out since beedi was not generating adequate income for the household. The result was women took their place as beedi rollers. That is why women are given priority and not their health or rights. The Murshidabad union will conduct beedi workers awareness and health check up camp. This will also include a PF awareness camp.
- Need to encourage alternative livelihood options for young women. Need to ask women and girls as to what they want and what is possible in those areas.
- Child labour is encouraged due to economic reasons and children are denied educational opportunities. The earlier programme of financial incentives for child labourers attending schools has now withered away. However, there have to be strategies that ensure all children are in school and can complete school education.
- Schools have to be made accountable to root out child labour.
- Explore linkages for training through Skill India Mission and other government programmes – opportunities, job/market linked skill development at state/district level.
- Crèches are needed so that beedi workers can keep their children away from tobacco while they are at work.