

Original Research Article

Alternative livelihood for bidi workers: a study based on primary research on home-based bidi rollers of Solapur city of Maharashtra

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ABSTRACT

Background: Solapur city situated in the district of Solapur, is home to the largest number of bidi workers of Maharashtra. Women and children engaged in bidi rolling face abuse, financial domination and a varied range of occupational health concerns. The bidi workers thus emphasize the need for an alternative livelihood strategy. The research-based on the review of existing programs, policies, best practices and successful models (locally and globally) for developing an alternative livelihood, understand the magnitude of work satisfaction among bidi workers and their perspective on alternative livelihoods.

Methods: Descriptive and cross-sectional study design was adopted to conduct the study using a semi-structured interview schedule using a mixed-method approach. Data collection was done with the help of in-depth interviews with the workers, members of workers' association, individuals and other key informants. Content analysis, triangulation method and Microsoft Excel were used for the statistical analysis.

Results: The preliminary finding of the research indicates that bidi workers have the willingness to change their profession but they can only be accomplished if the right opportunities are provided. If there is a provision of training, 90% of the respondents are interested in making the shift to an alternative livelihood.

Conclusions: In this context, it is anticipated that the recommendation towards developing alternative livelihood option other than bidi rolling will help tackle the deplorable condition of the workers.

Keywords: Alternative livelihood, Bidi rolling, Bidi workers, India, Solapur

INTRODUCTION

India has more than 3.6 million bidi workers engaged in bidi rolling under miserable poverty and extremely hazardous conditions.¹ These workers constitute one of the most vulnerable segments of the country's workforce. With the gradual disappearance of the factory system and coming up of a wide-scale contractual arrangement, most of the workers have turned out to be home-based. This process has increased the involvement of women and child labour in bidi rolling activity. Women (71% of total

the workforce) and children (4% of the total workforce) engaged in bidi rolling face abuse, financial enslavement and number of health problems.^{1,2} Taking into consideration, the health concerns and exploitative work conditions associated with the bidi rolling has compelled the bidi workers to look for an alternative source of livelihood.^{3,4} The policies and legislative provisions for the welfare of bidi workers have done very little to improve the working conditions of bidi workers. The absence of organized production in the bidi industry makes it difficult to improve the working state of the bidi

rollers and in implement welfare laws. Also, the bidi producers to avoid these welfare arrangements have moved from manufacturing plant-based to home-based production, primarily to stop bidi workers alliances and maintain a strategic distance from the suitable execution of working condition and welfare laws.⁵

According to law, employers of bidi workers are required to issue identity cards to their workers to empower them to get welfare benefits. The trade-union argues that a large proportion of bidi workers do not have identity cards. However, government data suggests that just around 15% of bidi workers do not have identity cards.⁶ According to standard practice, it has been stated that only a single member of the family is to be issued an identity card, even if different individuals from the same family roll bidis.^{7,8} Most government-run plans for tobacco industry workers either stays on the paper or a privileged few draw all the advantages.

The scope of the study was to develop a better understanding of bidi worker's interests and needs. The study attempts to comprehend the working state of bidi workers locked in the unorganized home-based sector of the industry. The study examined the economic vulnerability of the bidi workers and explores the willingness among them towards alternative employment opportunities.

METHODS

There are 3 lakhs female bidi workers in Maharashtra.⁹ Bidi manufacturing plant has been in Solapur for 150 years. 50 % to 60% of Solapur's economic condition has relied upon bidi manufacturing.⁹ The bidi factory relies largely on female bidi workers. Around 71,000 people in Solapur are associated with bidi rolling.^{1,10} Bidi-rolling in Solapur can be found more in urban regions than in rural regions. The sites chosen for the study are well-known for bidi production.

An in-depth literature search was done and relevant studies were reviewed with the aim to design the interview schedule for the present study. The descriptive and cross-sectional study design was adopted to conduct the study using a semi-structured interview schedule. The interview schedule was divided into different sections and it contained questions related to socio-economic conditions of bidi workers, perception about alternative livelihood and satisfaction about the occupation, youth in bidi industry, perspectives of parents about the future of their children.

Inclusion criteria

All respondents in the age group of 18 to 62 years, both literate and illiterate who currently involved in the profession of bidi rolling were included in the study.

Exclusion criteria

Those who had left this profession of bidi rolling were excluded from the study.

The study was conducted from 21st July 2018 to 15th August 2018, in the administrative blocks of Solapur city in Solapur district of Maharashtra. Purposive sampling method was applied to select the blocks in Solapur City for data collection. Ten blocks namely Datta Nagar, Kuchan Nagar, Bhagwan Nagar, Ashok Nagar, Saibaba Nagar, Shastri Nagar, MIDC area Indira Nagar, Lodi Nagar, New bidi gharkul, Old bidi gharkul were selected for the study. Respondents were selected from each block for the personal interview by taking into consideration the accessibility, time constraint, financial resources and security scenario. The number and age characteristics of respondents are given in Figure 1.

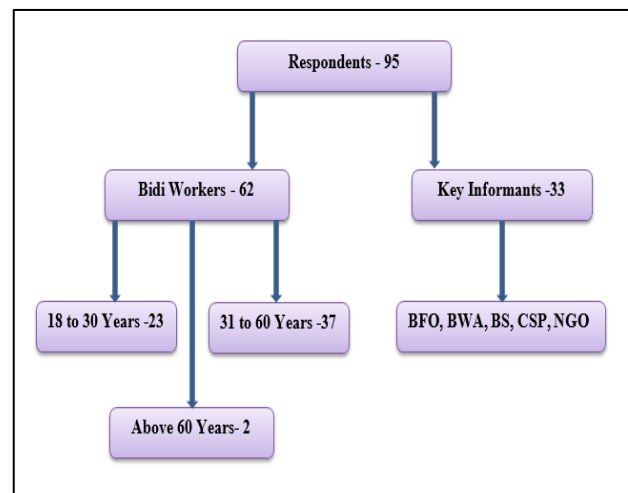


Figure 1: Number and age characteristics of respondents.

Data was collected from the bidi workers actively involved in the profession of bidi rolling at Solapur city using a semi-structured interview schedule. In-depth interviews were taken of the key informants by using an interview guide to know their perception on providing alternative livelihood for the bidi workers in Solapur. Secondary data was collected by doing an in-depth review of the available literature and documented successful models and best practices

Quantitative data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Content analysis was done for qualitative data analysis. Triangulation method was used for the analysis and cross-checking of the collected data.

Ethical guidelines were followed in all phases of this research. Duly signed informed written consent was taken from every participant after informing them about the purpose of the research. Anonymity and confidentiality of participant and their information were maintained.

RESULTS

In the present study, 22.22% of respondents involved in bidi rolling were below 18 years of age. The average age of children below 18 years in bidi rolling was 13.5 years. After analysis of primary data, it is evident that in women, the education level was very low (Figure 2) and did not possess any other skill apart from bidi rolling. In the present study, it was found that girls were focused on their education (Figure 3).

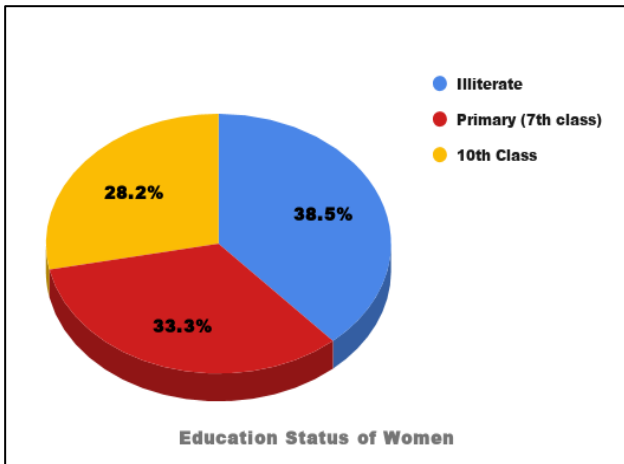


Figure 2: Education status of women.

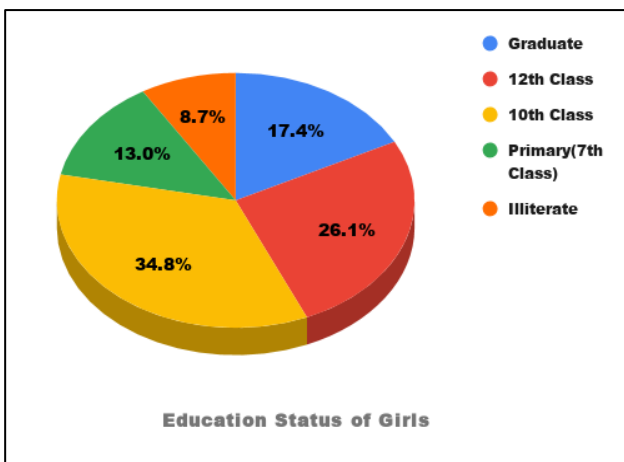


Figure 3: Education status of girls.

However, girls were interested in making their career in a different field (Figure 4). 92% of the parents were optimistic about their children's education prospects and future. It all signifies that direct dependency of occupation on literacy. The average monthly income of 61.21% of the respondents was in the range of Rs.2000-3000 per month, of 20.96% respondents it was in the range of Rs.1000-2000 per month and of 17.24% respondents, it was more than Rs.3000 per month. While

the fixed daily minimum wage for the bidi workers is Rs.210 per 1000 bidis rolled, on average the women receive only Rs.128 while the bidi factory owners claimed the figure to be Rs.165.^{11,12} Majority of the respondents (93.5%) said that they do not have any other source of income. Only one out of the 62 respondents owned some agriculture land.

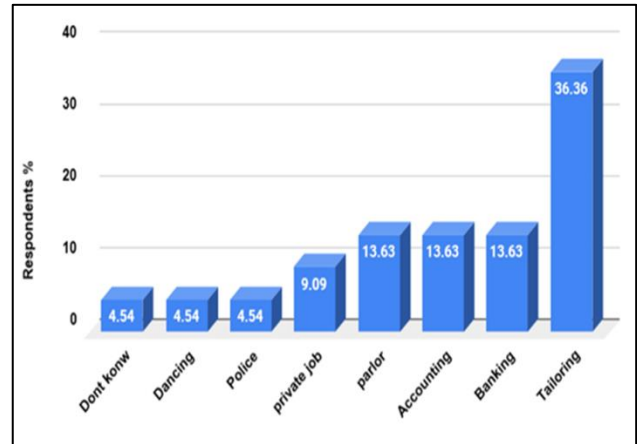


Figure 4: Girls interested to make their career in mention filed.

Opinion on the satisfaction of their current profession

74 % of respondents said that they were not satisfied with the wages they were getting. 63% of respondents said that they were in a state of mind to change their occupation of bidi rolling. 70.96% of the respondents said that they plan to continue as a bidi worker until they get other work. 24.19% respondents said they would continue until retirement and 4.83% said they would continue for less than 10 years.

Perspective on alternative livelihood option

Bidi workers were optimistic about the opportunity of an alternative livelihood option when they were asked about the alternative occupation. This was cross-checked by taking in-depth interview of some key informants (Table 1).

Girls (above 18 years of age) in the bidi industry and their perspectives on their career

Girls, more than 18 years of age involved in bidi rolling were asked about their education status and perspectives about their career. 22.7% of the respondents left education to help their family by contributing in bidi rolling at home. Young girls were keen on pursuing a career in other fields (Figure 4), however, due to economic constraints of family and patriarchal attitudes, they were not able to make the change.

Table 1: Perspective of bidi workers and key informants on alternative livelihood.

Perspective on alternative livelihood option	Respondent	The perspective of Key Informants on alternative livelihood			
		BS	CSP	BFO	BWA
Willing to change current occupation	83.9% of respondents are ready to change their occupation	“Yes, bidi workers need to change their current occupation”..(1)	“Yes, need to change the occupation because it’s occupational health hazards to them as well as their family”... (2)	“Yes, need to change their current occupation because the government is in a state of mind to close the bidi industry”(1)	“Workers need to change their current occupation because it’s injurious for their health”(1)
Not willing to change current occupation	16.10 % of respondents are not ready to change their occupation			"Because only the bidi industry has potential and textile, the garment industry is not enough for employment"(3)	“Textile and garment industry is not much employment-generating the industry”(2)
Facing problem to change their current occupation	56.50% of respondents said- “Yes.” 43.50% of respondents said- “No.”	"Yes, no one is ready to give work who is more than 40 years of age." (2)			
If the training provided they would switch over another occupation	90% of respondents would like to switch over another occupation.		Need to give them home-based work at mass level e.g. tailoring or any other work, but for that, they have to provide with training..(2)	“Bidi workers are not highly skilled, it’s important to provide them training for alternate livelihood”..(2)	
Work they would like to take up	There was a clear preference for tailoring (37), followed by industrial work (17), pickle making (16), papad making (13), and beauty parlour work (2). Mehndi designing (1), packing work (1), food processing (1) and phenyl production (1) was given the least and equal preference				

Welfare schemes

Various welfare schemes have been formulated and are under operation in the fields of health, social security, education, housing recreation and water supply for the well-being of bidi workers.¹³⁻¹⁵ In this study, it was found that only 11.3% of respondents were aware of the available welfare schemes. Those who were aware of the welfare schemes mention about welfare fund, assistance for the children's education, assistance for pregnant women and prime minister's skill development program (includes a course on tally, tailoring, beauty parlour, and fashion designing). They are aware of the schemes but had never benefited from them.

One of the members of the Bidi Workers Association and a civil society person had the following to say about the utilization of welfare fund-

“The welfare fund of bidi workers is not properly getting utilized by the government”
(BWA-2)

“The cess which is being collected on the production of bidi, the government not utilizing it properly for the welfare of the bidi workers as well as education of the children of bidi workers.”
(CSP-10)

The Saksham Saheli, Niramay Arogaya Dham, Solapur, Maharashtra

This program tried to find the answer to the anti-smoking legislation that led to a widespread crisis amongst the bidi workers in 2016. Through this initiative, 300 women were registered out of which 40 took the training of sewing/tailoring. However, only 4 out of the 40 were continuing the practice and leaving bidi rolling completely.

Review of programs, strategies, successful model and best practices

Right Sharing of World Resource (RSWR)

RSWR gave grants to Rural Women Development Trusts and Social Integrated Rural Development Society. Trusts and Society had given loans to bidi rolling women workers who were also part of the self-help group of bidi workers on the condition of repaying within a certain time. Bidi worker, women could start their shops and small ventures from these loans. The RSWR was trying to make micro-enterprise grants to help women in developing countries start their businesses.¹⁶

Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI)

VHAI had started a computer literacy and skill development program with 20 girls and boys who had passed matriculation. VHAI started working with 22 SHGs, after more than half a year of continuous follow-up, 17 groups had started their own ventures form which they were able to make money. E.g. chattu making, grocery shop, sale of cosmetic items, sale of puffed rice, processing and selling of rice, spices etc. VHAI also started organizing health checkup camps for the community on a regular interval and began taking bidi workers convention to a district level so that they could share their difficulties and demands.^{17,18}

Kerala Government

The Kerala government has taken one important initiative for the rehabilitation of bidi workers. The state had sanctioned Rs.20 crores for the rehabilitation of these workers to help them start their own ventures in poultry farming, stitching centres, mobile recharge centres, fancy shops, etc. According to the new scheme, 3,970 new jobs will be created for erstwhile bidi workers in the first phase. It is important to mention that in Kerala state there are 80,000 of bidi workers.¹⁹

Self-Employed Women Association (SEWA)

SEWA has initiated training programs in computer skills and tailoring for children of bidi workers in West Bengal and other intervention areas to discourage them from adopting bidi rolling as a profession.²⁰

Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal (MAVIM)

MAVIM is playing an essential role in giving micro-finance to the women of the Maharashtra State through SHG programs. The main objective of the livelihood and enterprise development strategies MAVIM is to promote sustainable livelihoods for poor women and their families. Also, MAVIM was providing skill training programs in various sectors as well as doing strengthening the SHGs through the rural livelihood mission.^{21,22}

Government initiative for rehabilitation of bidi workers

Providing alternate employment to bidi workers was initiated in the year 2008-09 by the central government. The data is available until 2014. Post-2014, one cannot say if the government has sanctioned any amount for the rehabilitation of bidi workers.^{13,14}

Table 2: Nagpur region initiatives are undertaken by the Welfare Commissioners since 2008-09.^{13,14}

Nagpur region (Maharashtra)		
Year	No. of participants	Expenditure (Rs.)
2008-09	83	117000
2009-10	76	148800
2010-11	33	64035
2011-12	24	43200
2012-13	25	48125
2013-14	25	48125
Total	266	469285

Table 3: The detailed information on vocational training course wise in Solapur.^{13,14}

Year	Name of the course	No. of participants	Place	Expenditure (in Rs)
2009-2010	Machine embroidery operator 210 hours	43	Solapur	64500
	Tailor (basic sewing operator) 270 hours	25	Solapur	37500
	Basics of beauty and hair dressing 150 hours	15	Solapur	15000
2010-2011	Garment making- tailor	24	Solapur	93600
	Information and communication technology	52	Solapur	55200
Total		159		Rs. 265800

Data shown in Table 2 and 3 suggest that the government had taken initiative for the rehabilitation of bidi workers but 97% of the respondents said that no one offered them other works in place of bidi rolling. This was also

mentioned in one of an article that the ministry of labour initiative to train and rehabilitation of bidi workers has proved to be a woeful failure.²³

DISCUSSION

Bidi rolling is most popular among the unorganized industry in our country. India has more than 3.6 million bidi workers engaged in bidi rolling.¹ Women and children were engaged in the profession of bidi rolling.^{1,2}

Earlier studies have explained that bidi workers are not adequately educated, less skilled and their income per annum is not more than Rs.25,000 to Rs.35,000. Bidi workers have a scarcity of agriculture land as well.^{2,24} Similar results have been found in the present study. Lack of education, skills, the dearth of income and land scarcity might have forced these bidi workers to work in such a hazardous profession. It was evident that the young generation was not interested to pursue bidi rolling like their family members. Study indicates that there is serious consideration of providing alternative livelihood options to the bidi workers along with training and market exposure to facilitate steady income.

Previous studies showed that the workers were being paid fewer wages in comparison to the minimum wage.^{6,25} The present study also found that bidi workers were being paid fewer wages than the fixed per day minimum wage as permitted by law. The study indicates that most of the bidi workers were unhappy with their profession and want to change their current occupation. The primary reason for this were meagre wages, hazardous working conditions and fear of the bidi industry shutting down. Earlier in 2016 bidi factory was shut down for two months which caused many people to commit suicide and some to engage in sex work (BWA, CSP).

The study done by VHAI explained the perception of bidi workers for an alternative livelihood.¹⁷ Study shows 95% of the bidi workers want to shift from bidi rolling to alternative livelihood if provided with an opportunity followed by training and handholding. In the present study, it was found that bidi workers are willing to change the current occupation but were faced with multiple challenges. Looking at the intervention provided by VHAI for bidi workers, that strategy could be used for bidi workers of Solapur. If the training were provided they would switch over to another occupation and they could start their own small ventures. For an alternative livelihood, they showed a clear preference for tailoring, followed by industrial work, pickle making, papad making, and beauty parlour. Mehndi designing, packing work, food processing and phenyl production were given as the least and equal preference. It was crosschecked through the in-depth interviews with key informants that bidi workers need an alternative livelihood option in order to move out of bidi rolling.

Previous research has shown that the younger generation is looking for alternative livelihood options but are facing difficulties in finding a new one.⁶ The present study found out that only 22.7% of girls who were above 18 years left school for the bidi rolling and helping their

family. Such was the frustration among these girls that when they were asked about the field in which they would want to pursue their career in, they readily mentioned any field other than rolling bidi.

A previous study explained that cess (levied on the production of bidi) was not being utilized by the government for the welfare measure of bidi workers.^{6,17} The present study found out that majority of the respondents were not aware of the welfare schemes and those who were aware (11.3%) mentioned that they were not benefitted. Also, members of bidi worker's association and civil society people mentioned that cess was not utilized properly, which should have happened for the well-being of the bidi workers and their family.

Right Sharing of world resources, Voluntary health association of India, Self-employed women association (SEWA), Mahila Arthik Vikas Mahamandal (MAVIM) all these organizations had previously promoted alternative livelihood options for the bidi workers.^{16,17,20,21} It was found that Saksham Saheli initiative by Niramaya Arogaya Dham, Solapur, Maharashtra designed and implemented an alternative livelihood intervention with the help of the community. However, through this initiative, only 4 out of the 40 people were able to leave bidi rolling work completely. A present study found out that this initiative needs technical and financial support to take it forward.

During secondary research, it was found that the Kerala government sanctioned Rs.20 crores for the rehabilitation of bidi workers.¹⁹ In the year 2008-09, the central government had also initiated alternate employment for bidi workers (data is available only till 2014).^{13,14} At the same time, Nagpur region with the help of Welfare Commissioners took an initiative at a regional level which also included Solapur.^{13,14} But field survey found that 97% of the respondents were not offered alternative work options for bidi rolling. This shows that there is a clear implementation gap in the initiative. Additionally, it suggests that bidi workers are not aware of their rights. So the central, state, local governments and civil society should work towards the rehabilitation and provision of alternate livelihood measures so that lives of the bidi rollers can be improved.

Limitations of the study were that the participants below 18 years of age were interviewed by their guardian. Purposive sampling technique was used due to accessibility and confidentiality for the data collection. Small sample size of the study due to the time constraint and financial resources of the study.

CONCLUSION

The employment conditions for the bidi workers are exploitative. Children younger than 18 years of age are being employed. They are not being paid the minimum daily wages. Majority of them are dissatisfied and is only

continuing because the work is home-based and there are not any other options available. They show a willingness to change their situation but this potential to change can't be actualized due to the unavailability of opportunities. As observed in the research, if there is training provided for some other kind of work, 90% of the respondents are interested to shift their profession. The next steps include spreading awareness on how working with tobacco is harming their health. Further, what is imperative right now is to develop a suitable model which can provide bidi workers with a better means of livelihood economically and socially.

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