

Women Workers in the Brick Kiln Industry in Haryana, India

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A vast majority of the country's workforce is in the unorganised sector, and consequently unprotected. In the absence of economic opportunities where they live, many migrate across the states of India to seek casual employment. Brick production depends almost entirely on migrant workers, half of whom are women. This paper looks into the socio-economic status of women workers in the brick industry of Haryana and underlines the fact that these workers have a very tough life. While bearing and rearing children remains their primary responsibility, they are invariably involved in economic activities for survival, thus playing roles in both production and reproduction.

Introduction

According to an estimate by the National Commission on Self-Employed Women (1988a), of the total number of women workers in India, about 94 per cent are in the informal or unorganised sector, whereas just 6 per cent are in the organised or formal sector. Thus, there is no exaggeration in saying that the unorganised sector in India is the women's sector. However, the plight of women in this sector is miserable as they work for extremely low wages, with a total lack of job security and social security benefits; hours of work are long, working and living conditions are unsatisfactory, and they are not protected by any government labour legislations.

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The unorganised sector comprises most activities that are carried out by small and family enterprises, partly or wholly with family labour, and are largely non-unionised. The most common characteristics of this sector are: (a) the small size of establishments that often consist of only one individual with perhaps a couple of hired workers; (b) casual nature of employment; (c) ignorance and illiteracy among workers; and (d) superior and dominating employers. This sector is either not covered by labour legislations at all or the establishments are so scattered that implementation of existing legislation is inadequate and ineffective. There are hardly any unions in this sector to act as watchdogs.

Brick making in India is a significant industry in the unorganised sector, confined mainly to rural and semi-urban areas. Nearly half the workers in this industry are women. While the Indian brick industry is the second largest in the world, next only to China, and has more than 100,000 operating units producing about 100 billion bricks annually, working conditions are hard and exploitative.

While studying the economic bondage of brick kiln workers of Muzaffarnagar district in Uttar Pradesh, Chopra (1982) found that the majority of the labourers were from the Scheduled Castes, of whom over 75 per cent were illiterate. Out of the sample of 340, only 69 workers reported having rebelled against their bondage. These workers were then forced by the kiln owners to remain on the site either to perform household duties in the latter's homes or to do agricultural work. The study showed that 45 per cent of the total number of workers were women. Working hours were extremely long, none of the respondents reporting less than 12 hours a day—40.4 per cent said they worked between 12 and 18 hours a day, while 54.3 per cent worked between 18 and 22 hours a day; 78.8 per cent of these workers were in debt.

The surveys of the Labour Bureau (Government of India 1988b) in the north Indian states of Punjab and Haryana found that women workers employed in brick kilns were mostly migrant labourers from areas within as well as outside these states. Women constituted nearly 44 per cent of the total workforce in the kilns, nearly 94 per cent of them working as helpers to moulders or loaders/unloaders. Women were not found doing work like digging earth, transporting mud and preparing the mud mixture for moulding, tasks carried out only by men. Brick kilns have no fixed working hours and usually the work is spread over 11 to 12 hours a day. It was noticed that almost 98.5 per cent of women workers in this

industry were illiterate. More than half the children did not attend school. Not a single male or female worker was reported to be a member of a trade union. No woman worker was aware of the beneficial provisions of various labour legislations. Most of the women were resided in temporary hutments which were erected in and around the kilns with material supplied by employers. There were no facilities such as separate kitchens, bathrooms, lavatories and creches.

Dharmalingam (1995) found that brick workers in a village in Tamil Nadu were underpaid, with no hope of a better future. Only 6 per cent of the main workers and 4 per cent of their co-workers/helpers were more than 40 years of age. About 60 per cent of the main workers had worked for more than 10 years. While some of the co-workers were under 15 years, all the main workers were over 15. The main workers had no connection with the employer, but only with a contractor. Co-workers were always under the control of the main workers. The wage of the main worker was determined by the number of bricks made, but the wage of the co-worker was fixed by the main worker on the basis of capacity. If rain destroyed the bricks laid out, then the main worker had to forgo his wage as well as that of his co-worker. Over 70 per cent of the main workers were in debt. The accident most often experienced in brick kilns was injury to the foot, a hazard occurring when mixing the mud mixture with a spade. An additional occupational hazard was exposure to heat and dust.

According to Gulati (1979) who analysed through a case study the work and family life of women in the brick industry, there is a rigid compartmentalisation of work on the basis of sex. Women are employed exclusively for carrying head loads, while all skilled and semi-skilled work such as moulding, shaping and stacking is done by men only. As a result, women's wages, for work which is not physically less exhausting than men's, are only about half the wages earned by men. Nevertheless, women cling to the brick industry because of uncertain work opportunities elsewhere and the continuity of employment that this industry offers. After 20 years, Gulati revisited the Scheduled Caste woman whom she had studied earlier to investigate any changes that might have taken place. Sadly, she found the woman in dire straits in all respects (Gulati and Gulati 1997). Therefore, on the whole, it appears from existing data that workers in brick production, including women, are highly exploited.

The Study

Our study was carried out between March 1999 and December 2001 to explore various aspects of the lives of women working in 547 brick kilns situated in five districts of the Hissar division of Haryana (Jind, Bhiwani, Hissar, Sirsa and Fatehabad) where the total number of women employed was estimated to be around 25,000.

Six types of tasks are performed for manufacturing bricks—from moulding to transportation of baked bricks. Moulders are called *pathar* in the local dialect, carriers are called *bharaayeewale* and unloaders *nikhashiwale*. Male workers who arrange bricks are called *beldaar*, firemen are known as *jalaayeewale*. The workers who transport bricks to customers are known as *ladaayeewaale* or *taraayeewale*. It is worth mentioning that all the operations in brick kilns are performed in pairs, usually by husband and wife. Women workers do not perform three types of tasks—they do not work as arrangers, firemen and transporters. Their work is mainly semi-skilled as helpers in moulding and in carrying and unloading operations. In moulding operations, they make cakes of mud and pass them on to their male partners. They carry raw bricks from the drying yard to the trenches on horse/pony-driven carts, unload baked bricks and carry them to the storage yard in hand carts or on their heads.

Our intentions in the study were to explore various aspects relating to the family, migration, women's working conditions and the socio-economic levels of the women workers and their families. A sample of 410 women workers was drawn using the multi-stage random sampling technique (Table 1).

Table 1
Method of Selection of Respondents

Districts	Total no. of kilns	No. of selected kilns (10%)	Total no. of women workers in the selected kilns	No. of women workers selected for the sample
Jind	92	9	410	68
Bhiwani	112	11	504	84
Hissar	152	15	679	113
Sirsa	123	12	553	92
Fatehabad	68	7	319	53
Total	547	54	2,465	410
Stages	I	II	III	IV

A structured interview schedule was used, and employers and significant persons were consulted to gather pertinent information. Field discussions with other informants were also held to verify the information collected from the women respondents.

The Findings

Age, Caste, Marital Status and Education

Work in brick kilns requires stamina and energy as the wages earned by the workers in this industry depend upon the amount of work done. Therefore, a good number of young women opt for this work, and are able to work and earn well. The majority of women workers in the sample were from younger age groups—more than 87 per cent were found to be less than 45 years of age (36.34 per cent of whom were between the ages of 26 and 35 years, and 30 per cent between 15 and 25 years). Almost all of them (84.15 per cent) were from the Scheduled Castes (Chamars, Valmikis and Dhanaks), 15.36 per cent were from the backward castes (mainly Kumhars) and just 0.49 per cent were from the higher castes.

Most were married—86.10 per cent. Ten per cent were unmarried and 3.90 per cent women were once married (widowed or divorced). It was noticed that widows and divorced women were a little elderly and came for work in the kilns along with the families of their sons. On the other hand, unmarried women workers migrated to the kilns mainly with their brothers.

Most of the women workers (91.22 per cent) were illiterate. A fraction (8.78 per cent) had some schooling, and of these 5.86 per cent in the sample had studied up to the fifth standard while 2.19 per cent had passed the eighth class exam. A negligibly small proportion of just 0.73 per cent had passed the ninth class.

Migration

As Table 2 shows, the largest number of workers were from the neighbouring states of Uttar Pradesh (32 per cent), Bihar (29 per cent) and Haryana (22.68 per cent). The second largest group was from Rajasthan (13.41 per cent), and there were very few from Punjab and Madhya Pradesh.

Table 2
Distribution of Women Respondents by Type of Work and State of Domicile

<i>Type of work</i>	<i>State of origin</i>						<i>Total</i>
	<i>UP</i>	<i>Rajasthan</i>	<i>Bihar</i>	<i>Haryana</i>	<i>Madhya Pradesh</i>	<i>Punjab</i>	
Moulders	127 (30.97)	14 (3.41)	119 (29.02)	47 (11.46)	5 (1.22)	6 (1.47)	318 (77.56)
Carriers	2 (00.49)	3 (00.73)	–	43 (10.49)	–	1 (00.24)	49 (11.95)
Unloaders	2 (00.49)	38 (9.27)	–	3 (00.73)	–	–	43 (10.49)
Arrangers	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Firemen	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Transporters	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Total	131 (31.95)	55 (13.41)	119 (29.02)	93 (22.68)	5 (1.22)	7 (1.71)	410 (100)

Note: Percentages in parentheses.

The majority of workers from Rajasthan were found to be involved in operations relating to unloading only. Out of a total of 43 unloaders, 38 were from Rajasthan. This could be attributed to their traditional skills useful in this industry. Table 2 shows that as many as 77.56 per cent women workers were moulders, 11.95 per cent were involved in fetching and carrying operations, while 10.49 per cent women unloaded bricks from the trenches.

All workers from Bihar and the majority from Uttar Pradesh performed only moulding operations, which required comparatively fewer skills. Among the local workers (natives of Haryana), most worked as moulders and carriers. Out of 49 carriers, 43 were from Haryana alone. This is because carrying operations require a pony and cart for carrying dried bricks from the drying yard to the trench, and it is relatively easier for local workers to bring ponies and carts along with them from their native places, whereas workers from distant places in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar could not do so nor purchase them locally as they were too poor.

Reasons for Migration

Table 3
Distribution of Respondents by Reasons for Migration

Reasons	District-wise distribution of the respondents					Total (410)
	Jind	Bhiwani	Hissar	Sirsa	Fatehabad	
Poverty	34 (8.29)	48 (11.71)	60 (14.63)	45 (10.98)	39 (9.51)	226 (55.12)
Unavailability of work at place of origin	10 (2.44)	36 (8.78)	15 (3.66)	11 (2.68)	5 (1.22)	77 (18.78)
Irregular work at place of origin	41 (10.00)	45 (10.98)	77 (18.78)	60 (14.63)	26 (6.34)	249 (60.73)
Lower wages in place of origin	52 (12.68)	49 (11.95)	91 (22.20)	74 (18.05)	38 (9.27)	304 (74.15)
Family quarrels	12 (2.93)	15 (3.66)	16 (3.90)	–	–	43 (10.49)
Indebtedness	35 (8.54)	50 (12.20)	62 (15.12)	46 (11.22)	40 (9.76)	233 (56.83)
Illness of family member	16 (3.90)	9 (2.20)	10 (2.44)	–	3 (0.73)	38 (9.27)
Husband's decision	15 (3.66)	23 (5.61)	24 (5.85)	14 (3.41)	6 (1.46)	82 (20.0)

Note: This is a multiple response table. Percentages (in parentheses) are of the total sample of 410.

The main 'push' reasons for migration were poverty, indebtedness, irregular availability of work, and irregular and low wages for both men and women in the women's places of origin (Table 3). About three-fourths (74.15 per cent) of the women had migrated because the wages for the same work at their native places were very much less. Slightly more than half the workers (55.12 per cent) had migrated because of poverty and a nearly equal proportion (56.83 per cent) had done so due to indebtedness. A large proportion (60.73 per cent) preferred to migrate because brick kiln work provides regular employment for at least eight months in the year. The other reasons reported were unavailability of work at their native places (18.78 per cent), family quarrels (10.49 per cent) and husband's decision to migrate (20.0 per cent). Some respondents (9.27 per cent) with sick family members migrated because loans were advanced at the kilns without interest for medical treatment.

Most of the women's families owned houses made of raw bricks at their places of origin. Only a minority owned *pukka* houses and others lived in huts.

Reasons for Entering the Brick Kiln Industry

For most of the women it was the husband's decision to work in the kiln. The chief attraction was that money could be obtained in advance for many important items of expenditure such as marriages, or purchase of a house or plot of land, making migration worthwhile. Besides, kilns offer steady work for the greater part of the year. Entire families can work together and live in the accommodation provided to them free of cost at the site itself. Many women workers said that since they do not possess skills for other types of jobs, their best option was unskilled work in brick kilns where their husbands need them as partners. Work timings are not fixed and one could work as late as 11 P.M. or begin early at 4 A.M. It is up to the worker to put in as many hours as possible, ranging from 4 to 12. Flexibility of work timings was an attractive feature of the work and the wages were considered good.

Table 4 shows that a little over half the women workers had been working in kilns for one to four years and that nearly one-third had been there for between five and nine years. Two per cent had been there for more than 20 years, with a capacity for high output.

Table 4
Distribution of Respondents by Length of Time Spent in the Industry

No. of years	District-wise distribution					Total
	Jind	Bhiwani	Hissar	Sirsa	Fatehabad	
1-4	32 (7.80)	44 (10.73)	55 (13.41)	50 (12.20)	31 (7.56)	212 (51.71)
5-9	21 (5.12)	24 (5.85)	34 (8.29)	31 (7.56)	12 (2.93)	122 (29.76)
10-14	7 (1.71)	9 (2.20)	11 (2.68)	-	6 (1.46)	33 (8.05)
15-20	7 (1.71)	5 (1.22)	10 (2.44)	9 (2.20)	4 (00.97)	32 (8.54)
21 and above	1 (00.24)	2 (00.49)	3 (00.73)	2 (00.49)	-	8 (1.95)
Total	68 (16.58)	84 (20.49)	113 (27.56)	92 (22.44)	53 (12.93)	410 (100.01)

Note: Percentages in parentheses.

Relationship with Employers

Women workers in brick kilns are at the bottom of the hierarchy. At the top are the employers and *munshis* (accountants). Below them come the *jamadars* (intermediaries), followed by male workers (husbands or brothers). All communications were routed from top to bottom. Women workers rarely dealt with employers and *munshis*, while their interactions with *jamadars* were occasional.

Extent of Sexual Exploitation

Collecting information on this aspect was difficult. The researcher had to ask many questions of husbands, employers, trade union leaders and the staff at the kilns. Only a few (6.34 per cent) of the respondents mentioned that women were either looked down upon or physically harassed. Around one-tenth (10.48 per cent) said there was no harassment. The women workers felt secure as they were with their families at the kilns. It was indeed unexpected that 83.18 per cent women did not respond and declined to discuss this issue.

The Off-season

Almost all (98.04 per cent) workers came to the brick kilns only for the season, that is, from October or November to May or June. However, a small proportion who did not have any property at their native places nor a proper house to live in remained at the kiln site even during the off-season.

About one-third (35.85 per cent) of the women workers who returned home did not work at all during the off-season and lived on the money earned during the season. They were, therefore, unable to save anything and improve their living standards. Distribution of off-season work was as follows: 40.73 per cent were engaged in agricultural work during the off-season and were a little better off; 8.78 per cent turned to construction work; 1.95 per cent worked as domestic servants; 6.83 per cent earned their livelihood by keeping cattle and earning money either by selling cattle or milk; 2.68 per cent helped their husbands in wood cutting, well digging and tailoring; and 3.17 per cent worked as vendors selling bangles and cosmetics, vegetables and fruits (Table 5).

Table 5
Distribution of Respondents by
Occupation at Native Places during the Off-season

Occupation	<i>District-wise distribution of respondents</i>					Total
	Jind	Bhiwani	Hissar	Sirsa	Fatehabad	
Agricultural labour	25 (6.10)	47 (11.46)	53 (12.93)	21 (5.12)	21 (5.12)	167 (40.73)
Construction labour	9 (2.19)	3 (00.73)	7 (1.71)	12 (2.93)	5 (1.22)	36 (8.78)
No work	21 (5.12)	19 (4.64)	41 (10.00)	46 (11.22)	20 (4.88)	148 (35.85)
Vendors	6 (1.46)	–	4 (00.97)	2 (00.49)	1 (00.24)	13 (3.17)
Domestic servant	–	3 (00.73)	3 (00.73)	2 (00.49)	–	8 (1.95)
Cattle rearing	7 (1.71)	8 (1.95)	2 (00.49)	5 (1.22)	6 (1.46)	28 (6.83)
Other	–	4 (00.98)	3 (00.73)	4 (00.97)	–	11 (2.68)
Total	68 (16.58)	84 (20.49)	113 (27.56)	92 (22.44)	53 (12.93)	410 (99.99)

Note: Percentages in parentheses.

Family Type and Income

Family size varied from two to five members (67.56 per cent), six to ten (24.15 per cent) and 11 to 15 (8.29 per cent). There were a few joint families among them. Payment for work done is on a piece rate basis, irrespective of type of work. Work is done in pairs (husbands and wives, brothers and sisters) and there is no division of wages by sex for tasks performed. During the season (November to June) 72.45 per cent families (Table 6) were able to earn more than Rs. 20,000; 12.44 per cent earned between Rs. 25,001 and Rs. 30,000; while 16.83 per cent families earned between Rs. 30,001 to Rs. 35,000. The proportion of families who earned more than Rs. 35,000 was 18.54 per cent. According to employers, family income can even be higher than Rs. 35,000 in a season.

One might conclude that wages in the brick kiln industry are among the highest in rural areas. A pair of moulders can mould at least 1,500 bricks in a day. The payment was Rs. 144 per 1,000 bricks. On this basis, the daily earnings of a single pair of moulders could work out to Rs. 216. If the pair work for 25 days in a month,

the monthly income would be Rs. 5,400. As the work season is usually spread over eight months, the total seasonal income for a pair of moulders works out to Rs. 43,200. Similarly, one pair of carriers in this industry can carry at least 5,000 bricks in a day on their pony carts. At the rate of Rs. 49.50 per 1,000 bricks, the total seasonal income works out to at least Rs. 49,500. A pair of loaders can unload at least 6,000 bricks in a day. At the time of the survey, the rate was Rs. 41.50 per 1,000 bricks. So their seasonal income was around Rs. 49,800.

Table 6
Distribution of Respondents According to Family Income

Income group (Rs.)	No. of respondents according to districts					Total
	Jind	Bhiwani	Hissar	Sirsa	Fatehabad	
1-10,000	4 (0.98)	5 (1.22)	7 (1.71)	3 (0.73)	2 (0.49)	21 (5.12)
10,001-15,000	5 (1.22)	10 (2.44)	11 (2.68)	5 (1.22)	6 (1.46)	37 (9.02)
15,001-20,000	7 (1.71)	9 (2.19)	18 (4.39)	12 (2.93)	9 (2.19)	55 (13.41)
20,001-25,000	12 (2.93)	18 (4.39)	24 (5.85)	30 (7.32)	17 (4.15)	101 (24.64)
25,001-30,000	6 (1.46)	9 (2.19)	15 (3.66)	19 (4.63)	2 (0.49)	51 (12.44)
30,001-35,000	15 (3.66)	17 (4.15)	16 (3.90)	13 (3.17)	8 (1.95)	69 (16.83)
Above 35,001	19 (4.63)	16 (3.90)	22 (5.37)	10 (2.44)	9 (2.19)	76 (18.54)
Total	68 (16.58)	84 (20.49)	113 (27.56)	92 (22.44)	53 (12.93)	410 (100)

Note: Percentages in parentheses.

Fortnightly Expenditure

In all the brick kilns of this area, employers give some money to their workers for their day-to-day expenses on the 15th day of the month. This money is actually paid to the male workers, *that is, women did not receive money for expenses separately*. They have to get their share from their male counterparts. We found that although women are not refused payment if they wished to be given their share of joint expenses, it is generally the male partner who takes the payment home. In the local language this advance is known as

pandhree ka kharcha (15 days' expense) and is adjusted at the end of the season when workers' accounts are finally settled against the total work done by them in the season and loans taken. Less than a third (29.51 per cent) of the women said that their families took less than Rs. 500, while 41.22 per cent managed on amounts between Rs. 501 and Rs. 1,000. Out of the total, 23.66 per cent respondents asked for a sum between Rs. 1,001 and 1,500, and 5.61 per cent recorded that they had taken between Rs. 1,501 and Rs. 2,000. To calculate monthly expenditure, this amount has to be doubled.

Amount of Debt and Source of Loans

The data (Table 7) revealed that more than three-fourths (77.81 per cent) of the families of these women were in debt. The amount of debt of about 51 per cent of the families was less than Rs. 5,000. Around 10 per cent of the families had debts totaling between Rs. 10,001 and Rs. 15,000, while 9.27 per cent of the families owed more than Rs. 15,000. Only 22.19 per cent families were not in debt. Loans had been taken from previous employers, landlords at their places of origin or banks.

Table 7
Distribution of Respondents by Amount of Debt

<i>Amount (Rs.)</i>	<i>No. of families</i>
Not in debt	91 (22.19)
1-5,000	209 (50.98)
5,001-7,000	11 (2.68)
7,001-10,000	20 (4.88)
10,001-15,000	4 (10.0)
Above 15,000	38 (9.27)
Total	410 (100)

Note: Percentages (in parentheses) are of the total sample.

Savings and Ownership of Durables

Most of the women said their families were unable to save. If any, the savings were low and not sufficient for improving their quality of life. Most of it was used on day-to-day expenses during the off-season.

Table 8 shows that most workers could afford only wrist watches, radios and a spade for use at work.

Table 8
Distribution of Respondents by Ownership of Durables

Response	Cattle	Radio	TV	Cycle	Sewing machine	Wrist watch	Gas/stove	Pony cart	Hand cart	Spade
Yes	49 (11.95)	365 (89.0)	61 (14.88)	32 (7.80)	15 (3.66)	265 (64.63)	10 (2.44)	49 (11.95)	43 (10.49)	318 (77.56)
No	361 (88.05)	45 (10.97)	349 (85.12)	378 (92.20)	395 (96.34)	145 (35.36)	400 (97.56)	361 (88.05)	367 (89.51)	95 (22.44)
Total	410	410	410	410	410	410	410	410	410	410

Note: Responses were multiple.

Household Work and Leisure

Like all women workers, the respondents had a dual role: at home they had to devote three to four hours to housework, doing the usual chores of taking care of children, cooking food, washing clothes, cleaning utensils, fetching water from tubewells, looking after cattle if any and collecting fuel for cooking. Our survey revealed that 66 per cent of the women workers performed all household chores, while about 34 per cent got help from other family members such as husband, daughter, son, mother-in-law, sister or brother-in-law. Of these, 10.98 per cent were husbands, 14.88 per cent were daughters, 2.19 were sons and 5.85 per cent other family members.

The data on leisure revealed that around 37 per cent of the women had no leisure. Favoured leisure activities included socialising with fellow workers, resting and visiting a temple. The only occasions of collective recreation and getting together with other fellow workers were during festivals like Diwali, Holi and Dussehra, and other religious activities. Although work timings were flexible, they preferred to work as hard as possible to earn more instead of indulging in recreation.

The respondents were asked about their social life and the habits of their husbands. The idea was to make an estimate of the burden of these women, as in many cases the husbands had bad habits like drinking and gambling. It was found that the husbands of over half the women drank every night, while around 25 per cent did so twice or thrice in a week.

Decision Making

Participation in the decision-making process is an indicator of power and control over the affairs of the family. Control usually rests with males, but this situation may vary in families where women work and contribute towards family income. In spite of this, their position in the family hierarchy mostly remains subordinate. The major decisions in families related to expenditure, occupation, marriage of children, purchase of cattle, plot or house, and migration.

The data reflected that there were just 17.31 per cent women who took decisions themselves, and these were either divorced, widowed or whose husbands were addicted to alcohol, lotteries

or gambling. However, in normal circumstances, it was the husbands only who took the majority of the decisions (39.76 per cent). In 34.39 per cent cases both husband and wife jointly took decisions. In about 8.54 per cent families, decisions were taken by other relatives, like the father-in-law, mother-in-law, son or brother-in-law. The findings confirm the view that even if the wife is working, decision-making power is mainly exercised by husbands, although there could be a marginal variation in individual families.

Conclusion

The lives of women working in brick kilns are exhausting and tough because of the double burden of working at home as well as at the work site. They hardly get any time for recreation or leisure activities. This section of migrant female labour is no better off than other poor women in the unorganised sector, with ignorance and illiteracy compounding their social and economic suffering. Although all of them contribute to family survival, it is unfortunate that they do not receive any independent income and have to depend upon men entirely.

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