CASE STUDY

1. Shanta of sunnadakeri has been doing agarbatti work for the past 15 years. Shantaben says, "After my marriage, my husband was working in a mill but as the mills closed down, he took up work in a factory. Most of our income was spent by him drinking alcohol. As it became difficult to support a family of two sons and two daughters, I started doing agarbatti work. Earlier we used to get Rs. 2.50 per thousand agarbattis, today we get Rs. 4.50. The owners give us flour, bundles of sticks and the brown powder. We prepared dough from the raw materials given, but since the powder is very fine, it spreads in the air. From one kilogram of dough, we can make 2,000 agarbattis. All five members of my family start working at 8 in the morning, until 4 in the evening and we produce 5 to 6 thousand in a day. The owner checks the exact weight of the finished agarbattis against the raw material that he had given and calculates our wage on a piece basis. If the weight is less, money is deducted at the rate of Rs. 20 for one kilogram from our due wages. Our wages are given every month. Due to sitting the whole day, we feel pain in our waist, hands, shoulders and abdomen. Sometimes our hands get bruised. The black powder goes into our nose, ears and throat. Our clothes turn black so we have to use more soap. If one or two of us ask for an increase in wages, the owner says, "stop working". There are many of us in this industry. There is a lot of hard labour in agarbatti work and the remuneration is very less, but what can we do? We have to do".

2. Rathna live Shanthinagar aged 45 years old has studied upto the second standard and got married at the age of 17. She have three sons and three daughters. She says "after my husband was diagnosed with having T.B., I started stitching clothes and bags. But the income was not good so I started learning this work from my neighbour. I used to get Rs. 1.10 per thousand agarbattis. My two daughters and three sons make agarbattis after their school hours. My eldest daughter goes to a trader’s shed to make agarbattis from 8 in the morning to 7 in the evening. I wake up at 5 in the morning, complete the
household chores, involving cooking, washing clothes and utensils by 9 in the morning. From 10 in the morning to 8 in the evening I roll agarbattis. At 7, my daughter returns from the factory and cooks food. At that time, I spread the agarbattis for drying. Then my younger son prepares them in bundles of 200. After the children go to sleep, I finish the household work (utensils) and go to sleep at 11 at night. I have been doing this work for the past 12 years. At the end of the day, I feel pain in my back, knees, hands, shoulders and abdomen. If the raw material is of poor quality, we also bruise our palms. This is my daily his to earn our livelihood."

3. "We are well aware that as beedi workers we are exposed to a variety of diseases. But as we are not qualified to do any other job, this work is unavoidable. We have no access to loans under the Village Development Programmes or employment schemes launched by the government. Only the rich and powerful have access to those funds. Under these circumstances, what can people like me do?" asks Rajasree, an outspoken beedi worker.

4. Beedi rolling is essentially a home-based industry and this too is an important factor that few recognise. "It is not just inhalation of tobacco dust that causes health problems for these women. There are other factors that affect their health -- like lack of nutritious food, clean environment and pollution. Working in a dark, ill-ventilated room affects their health adversely," says Manjula of the RLHP, an environmental group in Mysore.

5. "Only when our children are sick or when we have guests we don't work. But we lose Rs 40 per day if we don't work. So we make up for it by working for longer hours later. We stop working and go to sleep only when our backs begin to ache and we find it impossible to continue," says Maryamma, aged 65.
6. And provision of some facilities has not meant the end of exploitation. "Of late, not only the work of rolling beedis but also labelling them is being done on a contract system. Agents hold back payment wherever possible and reject at least 50 to 100 beedis out of the 1,000 beedis that we roll in a day. He dilly-dallies in giving us our pass books and does not make the entries of payments." says Zarina, aged 23 years a beedi worker in Medar block. Other shocking facts include the cutting of the maternity allowance by half if the baby is female.

7. In the research study also many women of the slum said, “During menstruation a woman is considered impure or contaminated/dirty”. So, all kinds of restrictions are imposed on her.

8. Rukmini, aged 15 said, “if at all we have to go to temple (during menses)... we first take head bath... i.e. a purifying bath...and then go”.

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