



Work, Poverty, and Survival: Socioeconomic Realities of the Brick-Kiln Workers in District Chakwal

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of brick-kiln workers in District Chakwal to understand the complex interplay of labor, poverty, and survival within the informal brick-making sector. Framed within a constructivist ontological perspective, the research recognized reality as socially constructed and context-dependent, shaped by historical, cultural, and economic forces. Epistemologically, the study adopted an interpretivist stance, emphasizing the importance of subjective meanings and the co-construction of knowledge between researchers and participants. Using a qualitative methodology, data were collected from twelve respondents through semi-structured interviews with male and female kiln workers, including seasonal migrants and bonded laborers. The research reveals how poverty compels entire families, including women and children, to engage in this informal sector, perpetuating cycles of deprivation and limited access to education, healthcare, and basic living amenities. The absence of formal labor rights exacerbates their vulnerability to exploitation and poor health outcomes. Participants' accounts highlighted not only economic marginalization but also the lack of access to basic services and legal protection. The study contributes to the understanding of labor relations in informal economies by emphasizing the voices of those often excluded from policy discourse.

Introduction

The brick kiln industry in Pakistan has a long-standing history dating back to the early 1900s during British colonial rule. Following the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the country experienced rapid growth in the construction sector to rebuild infrastructure and housing, which led to the expansion of brick kilns. Initially, traditional techniques such as hand-molding and open-field firing were employed. Over time, the industry evolved with the introduction of hybrid and tunnel kilns, which integrated modern technology to improve efficiency and reduce environmental impact (Government of Punjab, 2022).

Despite technological progress, a significant number of brick kilns in Pakistan still operate using outdated, environmentally hazardous methods. A survey conducted by the Government of Punjab in October 2022 revealed that out of 10,394 operational brick kilns in the province, more than 78% still used traditional, polluting technologies. Similarly, a report by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in March 2019 identified approximately 800 brick kilns in the province, with nearly 300 located around Peshawar (EPA KP, 2019). In order to minimize production costs, kiln owners often use low-grade fuels such as substandard coal, used oil, old rubber tires, and plastic waste. The combustion of these materials under inefficient processes results in the emission of toxic gases, posing serious health risks to nearby populations.

Workplaces with a largely uneducated workforce often witness severe consequences in the form of illnesses and accidents. In the brick kiln industry, many laborers are exposed to toxic gases, placing them at high risk for developing serious, potentially fatal health conditions. A healthy workforce is one of the most valuable assets in terms of productivity and economic contribution (World Health Organization, 2010). However, limited awareness and inadequate safety measures contribute to high accident rates and unsafe working environments in brick kilns. Low literacy rates among the working class often correlate with a lack of awareness regarding occupational safety protocols. Researchers have shown that health and safety education significantly influences workers' engagement in risk-related behaviors (Clarke, 2006). Therefore, knowledge and awareness serve as key mediators in the relationship between supervisory responsibility and risk-taking behavior.

In addition to environmental concerns, the issue of bonded labor remains a critical human rights violation in the brick kiln sector. Owners frequently exploit the financial vulnerability of workers, leading to conditions of forced or bonded labor. In response, the Sindh provincial government has taken steps to regulate the industry by registering 740 brick kilns under various labor laws, including the Sindh Prohibition of Employment of Children Act, 2015, to combat child labor and bonded labor practices (Government of Sindh, 2022).

Many families reside on brick kiln sites, where daily labor extends beyond individual work to include family responsibilities, such as caring for younger siblings. In these settings, children often engage in labor rather than attend school—a trend reflective of broader national patterns. While in some contexts children may balance school and work, in Pakistan the majority of child laborers are entirely excluded from educational opportunities (International Labor Organization, 2021). Child labor remains a serious issue in the brick kiln industry, where children are subjected to extended workdays—often up to 16 hours—under hazardous and exploitative conditions. They receive extremely low wages, sometimes as little as Rs. 300 per day, and are routinely exposed to extreme temperatures, dust, and toxic fumes, which pose severe health risks (ILO, 2021).

Similarly, women residing at kiln sites not only participate in manual labor but also bear the burden of domestic responsibilities. They often work alongside men in physically demanding roles while managing household duties. The widespread use of coal and other substandard fuels at kilns produces dense black smoke that is inhaled continuously by those who live and work there. This environmental exposure contributes to a range of health issues and is particularly harmful to pregnant women, increasing the risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2020).

In Pakistan, brick kilns play a significant role in the country's economic development. However, the industry is also marked by widespread labor exploitation and bonded labor, severely impacting the lives of low-income workers and their families. Despite their economic importance, brick kilns

in Pakistan remain deeply entrenched in exploitative labor practices, highlighting an urgent need for policy intervention and social reforms to protect vulnerable workers and eradicate bonded labor in the industry.

Objective of the study

The primary objectives of this study were to examine the socioeconomic characteristics of brick kiln workers in Pakistan and to identify the various problems they faced in their work environment. The research also aimed to highlight the specific challenges experienced by women laborers in managing household chores alongside their demanding jobs. Furthermore, the study sought to investigate the health risks and unsafe working conditions prevalent in the brick kiln industry. By addressing these objectives, the study intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of the hardships endured by these workers, which was essential for informing policies aimed at improving their welfare and working conditions.

Literature Review

The brick kiln industry in Pakistan plays a vital role in the country's economic structure by providing employment to millions. However, this economic contribution comes at the cost of severe labor exploitation, especially in rural and marginalized communities. Pakistan ranks ninth on the Global Slavery Index, with an estimated 3.18 million individuals living under modern slavery conditions (Global Slavery Index, 2023). Among the high-risk sectors for forced labor are agriculture, carpet weaving, coal mining, and particularly brick production. Approximately 20,000 brick kilns operate across Pakistan, employing over 4.5 million individuals, including nearly 1 million children and a significant proportion of women (Walk Free Foundation, 2023). Despite their crucial role in the economy, brick kiln workers face hazardous working conditions, chronic health issues, and socioeconomic marginalization.

This study aimed to examine the socioeconomic characteristics of brick kiln workers, identify the challenges they face in the workplace, particularly the health risks related to musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), and understand the added burdens borne by women laborers who juggle work and domestic responsibilities. By exploring these areas, the study sought to contribute to the growing body of research advocating for improved labor conditions and policies in Pakistan's informal work sectors.

Brick kiln laborers in Pakistan often come from economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized backgrounds. They generally lack formal education and vocational skills, which restricts their access to better job opportunities. Many are trapped in cycles of debt bondage, having taken advance loans from kiln owners, which forces entire families, including children, to work to repay the amount (Siddiqui, 2019). Women constitute nearly half of the workforce and are often unpaid or underpaid for their labor, while children contribute to income at the cost of their education. These workers live in poor housing conditions near the kilns, with limited access to basic healthcare, clean water, and sanitation, which exacerbates their vulnerability.

The physical labor involved in brick making is intensely demanding. Workers are engaged in repetitive tasks such as molding, lifting, carrying, and stacking bricks, often in extreme weather conditions. These tasks are typically performed manually, without any ergonomic tools or mechanical support, leading to a high prevalence of musculoskeletal disorders. According to Ijaz et al. (2020), each stage of the brick-making process is associated with different forms of physical

strain that can lead to tissue degeneration, muscle cramps, acute pain, and joint dislocations. Commonly affected areas include the neck, shoulders, elbows, hands, wrists, knees, and ankles.

Repetitive and forceful tasks such as dragging, throwing, bowing, and lifting heavy loads significantly increase the risk of injury, particularly in an already malnourished and fatigued population. Prolonged hours, often encouraged through incentives like double wages for double shifts, further increase the risk of MSDs. Most workers are unaware of these risks and lack access to medical facilities for diagnosis or treatment. Moreover, the absence of regulatory oversight means that kiln owners face no accountability for ensuring safe working environments (Ijaz et al., 2020).

Women in the brick kiln industry face a double burden: they perform physically demanding labor at the kilns while also managing household responsibilities such as cooking, childcare, and cleaning. Their work is often undervalued, and they are frequently excluded from formal wage agreements, receiving compensation only through male family members. The dual strain on their bodies and time leads to elevated stress levels, poor physical health, and limited personal autonomy (Rafi & Ali, 2021). Cultural norms often prevent women from voicing their grievances or seeking medical help, leaving many to suffer in silence.

In addition to physical hazards, the poor living conditions of brick kiln workers contribute to their deteriorating health and well-being. They typically reside in temporary shelters made of mud or tin, located near the kilns, where exposure to smoke, dust, and chemical pollutants is constant. These conditions increase the incidence of respiratory illnesses, eye infections, and skin diseases. The lack of educational facilities means children are deprived of schooling, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and exploitation. Financial insecurity, low wages, and absence of social protection contribute to a generally poor quality of life for these laborers.

Although brick kilns serve as a major source of employment in Pakistan, they operate under conditions that are physically, socially, and economically exploitative. This study highlights the critical challenges faced by workers, especially the high prevalence of musculoskeletal disorders caused by repetitive and physically demanding labor. Women workers bear a disproportionate burden due to their dual roles, and their contributions often go unrecognized. Immediate attention is required from policymakers, labor rights organizations, and health professionals to enforce occupational safety regulations, provide healthcare access, and initiate social protection programs. Addressing these issues is not only a matter of workers' rights but also essential for sustainable economic development in Pakistan.

Material & Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of brick kiln workers in District Chakwal, Pakistan, with particular attention to their labor conditions and associated musculoskeletal disorders. A total of twelve respondents—both male and female—were selected using purposive sampling. This approach was chosen to ensure the inclusion of participants with direct and relevant experience in brick kiln labor, thereby facilitating an in-depth understanding of the research topic. The research was grounded in specific ontological and epistemological positions. Ontologically, the study assumes that reality is socially constructed and shaped by the workers' interactions with their labor environments. Epistemologically, it recognizes subjective knowledge as valid and emphasizes the importance of understanding the participants' perspectives, meanings, and interpretations of their work and health conditions. Semi-structured

interviews were conducted in the local language to encourage openness and allow flexibility in responses. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed and translated into English for thematic analysis. Both gendered experiences and broader socioeconomic contexts were examined to provide a holistic view of the issues faced by the respondents. Strict ethical considerations were followed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of their right to withdraw at any point without any consequences. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by assigning pseudonyms and ensuring that no identifiable information was disclosed. The study was conducted with cultural sensitivity and respect for the dignity and well-being of all participants.

Data Analysis

The collected data were systematically organized and analyzed using qualitative method to uncover the underlying socioeconomic conditions of brick kiln workers in District Chakwal. Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative interviews and observations to identify recurring patterns related to labor exploitation, gender roles, and living conditions. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by the workers, highlighting key areas of concern such as poor workplace safety, inadequate healthcare access, and the impact of poverty on family survival strategies.

Migrant Brick Kiln Labors with Lower Socioeconomic Status

Migration is a global phenomenon. Uneven economic development, inter-regional disparity and differences in living standards between socioeconomic groups are some important reasons responsible for migration. Avenues of better employment and higher wages serve as pull factors, where as non-availability of employment opportunities in backward regions, draught and scarcity conditions are push factors. Sociologists have emphasized social and cultural consequences of migration. One of the important characteristic is that the migrants tend to be sex-selective, with men dominating the migratory flow. The rich people migrate willingly for better and comfortable life, while the poor people migrate due to economic hardships. The uneven development between village and town and between different areas has resulted in the large scale labour migration from one area to another. This type of migration causes movement of working force (Kainth, 2010).

The majority were migrant laborers who had fled Afghanistan during periods of conflict and resettled in Pakistan. Some initially migrated to Peshawar but later relocated to Punjab in search of better living conditions. A few of the interviewed workers were originally from Muzaffargarh, a region particularly vulnerable to floods and other natural disasters. The migration of these brick kiln laborers was largely driven by unstable economic conditions and adverse political circumstances, which left them without a stable source of income.

One of the interviewed laborers stated:

"My family and I moved from Kabul to Peshawar approximately 44 years ago, when I was a child. Many of my male relatives were killed, and our homes and businesses were destroyed during the ongoing Russian-Afghan conflict. My father was also murdered. We traveled part of the way to Pakistan by bus and the rest on foot. After arriving, I began working at a brick kiln in Peshawar alongside my uncles. That kiln shut down after ten years, so I moved to Chakwal. Since then, I have been working at this kiln, but I have not been able to improve my social status."

The respondent's testimony reveals the complex interplay between forced migration, structural violence, and socioeconomic immobility, which can be analyzed through several sociological lenses. First, the laborer's account aligns with conflict theory, particularly as articulated by Karl Marx, which emphasizes how structural inequalities and power imbalances lead to the exploitation of marginalized groups. The respondent's forced migration due to the Russian-Afghan conflict reflects how political and military upheavals disproportionately impact lower socioeconomic classes, pushing them into exploitative labor markets across borders (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2014).

The respondent also highlights generational labor continuity, having joined his uncles in kiln work as a child and remaining in the same occupation for decades. This exemplifies Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*—a system of dispositions shaped by social conditions—which explains how individuals internalize and reproduce the constraints of their social environment (Bourdieu, 1984). Despite relocating and working for over 30 years, the respondent notes he has not improved his social standing, demonstrating limited social mobility. This stagnation supports the idea of structural reproduction of poverty, where socioeconomic positions are maintained across generations due to systemic barriers such as lack of education, job mobility, or social capital (Willis, 1977).

Moreover, the respondent's journey reflects the concept of instability (Standing, 2011), where migrants often face unstable, low-paid, and insecure employment. Brick kiln labor, particularly in South Asia, is characterized by informal arrangements, lack of labor rights, and exploitative conditions that reinforce social marginalization (ILO, 2020). His experience of walking part of the journey into Pakistan, and beginning labor as a child, also underscores the intersection of displacement, child labor, and economic vulnerability, further embedding him in cycles of hardship. Lastly, this narrative can be viewed through a gendered lens, where the death of male relatives (and specifically the father) shifts economic responsibility to the surviving males, often children. This reinforces the patriarchal expectation of male breadwinners in traditional Afghan and Pakistani societies (Kabeer, 2000).

Another respondent stated that;

"I belong to Mianwali and work here at the kiln along with my cousins. I am illiterate so couldn't find a good job in the native area. My children think that I am a bus driver here. I live 8 months here and go back to my native area."

This statement reflects multiple intersecting dimensions of class, education, labor migration, and social stigma. It highlights the structural constraints that lead to precarious forms of labor, especially among uneducated rural populations in Pakistan. This reflects Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, where lack of formal education limits access to secure and prestigious employment (Bourdieu, 1986). In rural Pakistan, such inequalities are exacerbated by a lack of local industrial development and poor state investment in education. The individual's movement from Mianwali to a kiln site (likely in Punjab's industrial belt) for eight months annually is a form of circular labor migration. Migrant laborers often rely on kinship ties, as indicated by "working with cousins," to find work and housing—what Castles & Miller (2009) describe as social networks facilitating labor migration. Moreover, a key sociological insight emerges from the statement, "My children think I am a bus driver." This indicates the stigmatization of kiln labor, which is seen as degrading or shameful. Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma and impression management explains this concealment as a strategy to avoid social devaluation. The kiln worker performs a more socially respectable occupational identity (bus driver) to maintain dignity in the eyes of his family. The

seasonal migration ("I live 8 months here") also reflects the disruption of family life and emotional alienation, common among precarious labor migrants. This mirrors findings in the literature on split-household strategies in South Asia, where economic survival requires physical separation from family (Deshingkar & Start, 2003).

Poor Working Conditions

Brick kiln workers are exposed to poor health conditions primarily due to prolonged working hours, often exceeding 10 hours a day. The absence of personal protective equipment (PPE) significantly increases their vulnerability to occupational hazards, a situation worsened by the high rate of illiteracy among the labor force. Major pollutants such as sulfur dioxide and black carbon—emitted during the coal-intensive brick-baking process—pose serious health risks. Furthermore, the extensive use of dust-generating materials in various stages of production contributes to elevated levels of particulate matter, deteriorating the immediate working environment. Studies have identified a strong correlation between the nature and duration of work, lack of PPE usage, and the prevalence of respiratory ailments among kiln workers (Muzamil & Javed, 2024).

The researchers observed that the working conditions of brick kiln laborers were extremely poor. Workers were neither provided with precautionary tools nor equipped with the knowledge or skills necessary to manage workplace hazards. For example, it was noted that the *jalai wala* (fire handler) lacked proper footwear, despite his direct contact with fire—a task that requires specialized protective shoes. Additionally, most workers were exposed to extreme summer heat without any safety measures in place.

During field visits, it was also observed that workers lived in makeshift accommodations—typically a single, overcrowded room shared by multiple individuals. These cramped living spaces offered no privacy or separation by sex and were inadequate in size and comfort. When questioned, the workers reported that there was no concept of labor rights at the kiln site, and law enforcement agencies showed no interest in enforcing existing labor laws. Due to widespread illiteracy among workers, most were unaware of their legal rights and protections.

Respondents shared that they typically work 10 to 12 hours a day, beginning as early as 3 a.m. They and their families live in unhygienic and unsanitary conditions. It was further revealed that the workers are only paid on the days they work—there is no compensation during illness or absence. They reported being paid Rs. 1000 for every 1000 bricks produced, meaning each worker must produce at least 1000 bricks per day to earn Rs. 1000. This piece-rate system places immense physical and financial pressure on workers, reinforcing their economic vulnerability.

Brick kiln workers face a heightened risk of slips, trips, and falls due to uneven mud floors, the absence of designated walkways, and narrow passages between work areas. There is no artificial lighting in the workplace, and the available natural light is insufficient. The *paatla* workers typically labor for 10 to 15 hours a day, starting as early as 2 a.m. Their schedule usually involves working from 2 a.m. to 8 a.m., followed by a two-hour rest period. They resume work from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m., take a one-hour lunch break, and then work again from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. After 8 p.m., they conclude their workday and attend to miscellaneous tasks, resulting in a daily workload of 8 to 10 hours, mostly during daylight hours.

The workplace lacks sanitary latrines and bathrooms. Workers construct temporary bathing facilities but rely on nearby fields or open spaces for urination and defecation. Drinking water is generally supplied by the kiln owner through bore wells or wells. First aid facilities are not

available on-site. In the event of an accident or medical emergency, the kiln owner initially covers medical and hospitalization expenses but later deducts these costs from the worker's wages. Such unexpected expenses can significantly reduce a laborer's seasonal earnings and contribute to lost workdays due to required rest. This situation similarly affects pregnant and lactating women, as well as children under five years of age.

Workers often receive an advance payment from kiln owners at recruitment, ranging from Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 20,000, depending on their needs and their relationship with the owner. Additionally, small wage installments are paid every ninth day after eight days of continuous labor for daily maintenance. The owner maintains informal records tracking each worker's brick production, days worked, borrowed money, and advance payments.

Brick kiln workers frequently endure 15 to 16 hours of labor outdoors without any shelter or shade. Those paid on a piece-rate basis have no fixed working hours and must often work longer to increase their earnings. Depending on their assigned tasks, workers spend extended periods engaged in strenuous physical labor. Living on kiln sites, these laborers often function as captive workers bound to their contractors and owners. The combination of long hours, harsh working conditions, and lack of basic facilities clearly indicates exploitation (Kazi & Bote, 2019).

Health Challenges Faced By Brick Kiln Workers

Work at the brick kiln is extremely strenuous, leading workers to experience physical pain, muscle fatigue, and joint problems from a relatively young age. Nearly all kiln laborers reported suffering from severe bodily aches as a result of the physically demanding nature of their work.

One of the respondents stated that;

“The work at kiln is so tiring that when we get a bed at night we become unconscious. We are so much tired throughout the day that upon reaching home we can't find energy to sit and talk with our children. Presently I am suffering from muscular strain issue and I take panadol or ponistan to relieve my pain. However, despite having severe physical issues I have never seen a physiotherapist or a specialist.”

The lived experiences of brick kiln workers reflect a profound embodiment of labor exploitation and structural neglect. The physical exhaustion described by workers reveals the toll of long working hours, physically demanding tasks, and the absence of institutional health support. This aligns with Marx's theory of alienation, where the laborer becomes estranged not only from the product of labor but also from personal well-being, family life, and social interaction (Marx, 1978). The normalization of pain and reliance on over-the-counter medications like Panadol or Ponston, instead of formal medical care, underscores a systemic lack of access to occupational health services—particularly in informal labor sectors. Furthermore, Foucault's concept of biopower helps frame how the bodies of workers are regulated and disciplined through exploitative labor regimes that value productivity over human health (Foucault, 1977). The worker's narrative also reflects how class and structural inequality shape health-seeking behavior, where illiteracy, poverty, and marginalization prevent access to specialized care or physiotherapy, thereby reinforcing cycles of vulnerability and bodily depletion.

Poverty as a Fundamental Cause of Brick kiln Labor

Poverty remains one of the most pressing social issues globally. This is evident from its central position in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were endorsed by 189 United Nations member states. Among the eight core MDG targets, the reduction of poverty and hunger was identified as the top priority. However, monitoring and evaluation reports show that poverty reduction remains one of the least achieved targets, often marked in red, indicating significant gaps. Poverty is commonly associated with underdevelopment, low productivity, limited income, and restricted access to opportunities for personal and economic advancement.

In addition to inflation, the minimum wage plays a crucial role in influencing poverty levels. For instance, in 2019, Indonesia recorded one of its lowest average minimum wages at IDR 2,455,662. The rate of wage growth also declined—from 8.11% to 6.63%. These wage trends significantly affect the poverty threshold; when minimum wages are low, poverty rates tend to rise, whereas higher minimum wages contribute to a reduction in poverty. Therefore, adequate and fair wage policies are essential for enabling individuals and households to overcome poverty and improve their socioeconomic conditions (Angerani, Nurjanah & Nikensari, 2024).

One of the respondents shared:

“I work at the brick kiln because I have no other skills or education. I began this work after my family was displaced from our native village, and I have experienced times in my life when we had nothing to eat. I have no complaints against the kiln owner or anyone else because, in my view, it is better to work under difficult conditions and earn something than to go hungry. However, as a human being, there are basic needs like education and healthcare that cannot be met with the small wages we receive. I have seven children, including four sons, and we all work together at the kiln. Despite this, we are unable to enjoy many of the comforts and luxuries that others take for granted.”

The respondent’s narrative reflects the intersection of structural poverty, lack of social mobility, and intergenerational labor exploitation—hallmarks of informal labor economies in developing countries. The respondent’s lack of education and vocational skills, compounded by forced displacement, has led to limited livelihood options, trapping him and his family in a cycle of poverty and informal labor. This supports Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of capital forms, particularly the absence of cultural and social capital, which restricts access to better opportunities and reinforces class-based inequalities.

His acceptance of harsh working conditions in exchange for survival indicates a form of resigned agency—a survival mechanism seen among marginalized workers who normalize hardship as an alternative to starvation (Standing, 2011). The presence of multiple family members, including children, in the same labor site further reflects the commodification of child labor and the erosion of childhood due to economic necessity, a phenomenon widely documented in South Asian labor studies (Ray, 2000).

Moreover, the inability to access basic needs like healthcare and education, despite long hours of labor, highlights the failure of the state in ensuring social protection. According to Wacquant’s (2008) concept of advanced marginality, this form of exclusion represents not just poverty, but systemic disconnection from the institutional structures—like healthcare, education, and labor rights—that uphold citizenship and dignity.

Another respondent stated:

“I began working at the brick kiln when I realized that my only choice was to either die of hunger or earn something to survive. I have nine family members who rely on me for support. I started working as a child 13 years ago after dropping out of primary school, as my father lost both of his legs in a road accident. Since then, both my ailing father and mother have been dependent on me. I work at the kiln to earn enough money to buy food and medicine for them. But deep down, I feel that for people like us—who are poor—our fate is to die either from hunger or from illness.”

The respondent’s account powerfully illustrates the structural violence embedded within systems of poverty and informal labor in South Asia. Structural violence, as defined by Johan Galtung (1969), refers to social structures—economic, political, and cultural—that systematically harm or disadvantage individuals by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. In this case, the early termination of education, child labor, and the burden of supporting an entire family after a parent’s disability reflects how institutional neglect perpetuates cycles of poverty and vulnerability.

This situation also aligns with Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of social reproduction, wherein individuals born into disadvantaged circumstances often remain trapped in similar socioeconomic conditions due to a lack of cultural and economic capital. The respondent’s experience of dropping out of school due to financial distress and becoming a lifelong laborer demonstrates how poverty restricts mobility and reinforces generational inequality.

Additionally, the internalization of suffering—expressed through the fatalistic view that the poor are destined to die from hunger or disease—resonates with Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony. This concept explains how dominant ideologies become so deeply entrenched that oppressed groups begin to accept their marginal status as natural or inevitable (Gramsci, 1971). The resignation in the respondent’s statement reflects a broader socio-cultural narrative in which poverty is normalized and unchallenged, further entrenching systemic inequality.

Female Labor Force in Brick kiln

During fieldwork, the researchers observed that female workers at the brick kiln were exclusively assigned the task of shaping bricks. The majority of these women worked alongside their male family members. It was also noted that young girls and unmarried women were largely absent from the kiln site. Further inquiry revealed that, within the prevailing cultural norms, unmarried girls are generally not permitted to engage in paid labor. In many cases, when unmarried women do work, their fathers and brothers are socially perceived as benefiting improperly from their earnings.

One of the female brick kiln worker stated that;

“I got married when I was quite young. Since then, my husband and I have worked at the kiln to help pay our bills. At first, I struggled to balance my kiln job, my kids, and my family while also taking care of the housework. Because kiln labor is so exhausting, there isn’t any energy left over to work at home.”

The respondent’s account reflects the gendered division of labor and the double burden that women in informal labor sectors often face. In many patriarchal societies, including South Asia,

women are expected to perform unpaid domestic work in addition to contributing economically. This results in what sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1989) termed the “second shift”—the phenomenon where women, even after completing a full day of paid labor, return home to perform household chores, childcare, and caregiving duties, often without recognition or support.

Her narrative also highlights how informal labor markets—such as brick kilns—exploit both men and women, but disproportionately impact women due to their simultaneous reproductive and productive roles (Kabeer, 2015). Despite contributing to household income, women are rarely relieved of their domestic responsibilities, leading to chronic fatigue, stress, and health risks. Furthermore, the lack of structural support such as childcare, maternity benefits, or flexible hours deepens their marginalization within both the labor market and the household (Chant, 2008).

This situation can also be understood through intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), as gender, class, and labor status intersect to place women like the respondent at a distinct disadvantage. Her struggle is not just about poverty or work—it is about being a working-class woman in a system that undervalues both her economic and domestic contributions.

One of the other brick kiln female worker stated that;

“ I had miscarriage three times as we lack ability to afford good treatment and a balanced diet required during pregnancy. Since, there is no concept of taking supplements as they are quiet expensive. The kiln industry doesn't provide health security to it's pregnant female labors. Even throughout pregnancy I used to work at kiln since we were supposed to repay the debt amount.”

The respondent's experience highlights the intersection of gender, health disparities, and economic exploitation within the informal labor sector. The repeated miscarriages and lack of access to adequate healthcare underscore the profound vulnerabilities faced by pregnant women working in hazardous environments such as brick kilns. This reflects what Farmer (2003) describes as structural violence, where social structures systematically deny marginalized groups—particularly women—access to essential resources like healthcare, resulting in preventable suffering and poor health outcomes.

Moreover, the absence of health security and maternity protections in the kiln industry exemplifies the neglect of labor rights in informal economies (Chen, 2007). Women laborers are forced to continue physically demanding work during pregnancy to repay debts, illustrating the debt bondage and economic coercion mechanisms that perpetuate their exploitation (Kabeer, 2011). This situation also aligns with intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991), which emphasizes how overlapping social identities—such as gender, class, and occupational status—compound disadvantage and marginalization.

The respondent's lack of knowledge and access to nutritional supplements further reflects the health inequities tied to poverty and education deficits, reinforcing the cycle of poor maternal health in marginalized communities (Sen & Östlin, 2008).

Discussion

The socioeconomic realities of brick kiln workers in District Chakwal are marked by a persistent struggle for survival amid harsh working conditions and deep-rooted poverty. These laborers often belong to marginalized communities with limited education and skills, restricting their

employment options to physically demanding and low-paying kiln work. The seasonal and informal nature of their employment intensifies economic insecurity, while the absence of labor rights and social protections leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, including wage theft, debt bondage, and unsafe working environments. Poverty forces entire families, including women and children, into the workforce, perpetuating a cycle of deprivation and limited upward mobility. Despite their immense contributions to the local economy, kiln workers face inadequate access to healthcare, education, and basic living facilities, highlighting the structural inequalities that maintain their precarious existence. Addressing these socioeconomic challenges requires comprehensive policy interventions aimed at improving labor conditions, providing social security, and facilitating access to education and health services to break the cycle of poverty and foster sustainable livelihoods.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the brick kiln workers of District Chakwal embody the harsh intersection of labor, poverty, and survival, revealing a socio-economic landscape marked by exploitation, vulnerability, and resilience. Their lives are characterized by grueling work, inadequate wages, and limited access to essential services, which collectively perpetuate a cycle of poverty that is difficult to escape. The lack of formal labor protections and social safety nets further entrenches their marginalization, forcing entire families into precarious working conditions that threaten their health and well-being. Addressing these challenges requires targeted policy interventions that not only improve working conditions and ensure fair wages but also promote access to education, healthcare, and social security. Only through comprehensive and inclusive efforts can the cycle of poverty be broken, enabling brick kiln workers to achieve sustainable livelihoods and improved quality of life.

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