

# **Exploitation of women and children bidi rollers by the industry**

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# Family bidi rolling





# Women bidi rollers

- It is aptly said that the status of women in any society is an indicator of how developed that state is.
- The bidi industry's practices indicate that India still has a long way to go.
- The world of bidi-rolling could well be called the never-ending agony of abuse.
- Bidi-rolling breeds bad health

## Women Bidi rollers

- Women and girls who roll bidis work from dawn to dusk for piecework
- Paid in pennies
- They sit in crouched position all day from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m.
- They continuously breath in tobacco fumes lethal to their health
- Tobacco dust makes them feel dizzy

## Women bidi rollers

- Women suffer from back ache and knee problems
- Many develop chronic bronchitis, asthma and even tuberculosis
- Some complain of a burning sensation in eyes and throat. Many also suffer rheumatic syndromes, allergies, stomach troubles and hemorrhoids.

# Children of the *bidi* Industry

Cheated out of play, education and health – effectively denied a childhood

# Child Labor

- Illegal in India
- Constitution guarantees all children an education until the age of 14
- In face of hunger and poverty, constitutional rights are lost
- The poor of India have no choice but to send their children out to work

## *Bidi* Industry

- Started in 1900
- Flourished until 1980's, when legislation was passed to prevent exploitation of child workers
- *Bidi* business owners decided to move production to workers' homes
  - No laws against children working in home
- Bargaining in home-based work is weak

## ***Bidi* Industry**

- Though export oriented but has low inputs of technology
- Its low requirement of technical skill keeps it in the unorganized sector, though figures of earnings in export market make it difficult to think of it as an unorganized industry

## ***Bidi* Industry Numbers**

- Indian Government estimates 4.45 million women and children
- Labor union and NGO estimates closer to 10 million)
- 75% women 25% are children, majority girls
- Children have no wage structure
- Paid the least although they might be doing the best work

# Mechanics of *Bidi* Production

- *Tendu* leaves collected from forests by men and boys
- Leaves cleaned and cut as per size required by brand of *bidis* to be rolled
- Cut leaves soaked in water for a few hours to make them more malleable.
- The *bidi* is then rolled using tobacco and leaf
- Then the edges of the rolled bidis are turned in and tied with yarn
- Finally, rolled bidis are tied in bundles of 12 or 24 as required by the contractor or *sattedar*

## Mechanics (continued)

- The raw materials are converted into final product and returned to the *sattedar*
- After checking the quality, *sattedar* stacks *bidis* of each worker separately and sends the day's collection to the branch office through a carrier known as *relaiwala*
- The worker in turn collects raw material for next day's production
- Thus, the process goes on

## Mechanics (continued)

- In the branch *bidis* brought by the *relaiwala* are checked for quality
- Each bundle, consisting of 12 or 24 bidis, is thoroughly checked for size and quantity of tobacco filled.
- Defective bidis are removed and discarded
- Then the bidi bundles are counted and stacked in mesh trays
- This is taken as the final production of the *sattedar* for that day

## Lies and Exploitation of the *bidi* Mafia

- The principal employers work through the *sattedars* who then employ workers in a village or cluster of villages
- According to the Indian Government in 1999 about 80% of the bidi workers had ID cards
- Lack of ID cards exposes workers to exploitation
- Children are not given ID cards

## Lies and Exploitation (continued)

- About 10% of *bidis* rolled by workers arbitrarily taken away as 'standard deductions' by the *sattedar* to replace defective *bidis* regardless of number of *bidis* actually rejected
- Thus the workers lose part of their wages
- Some *sattedars* remove or change names of the bidi workers from their registers occasionally depriving workers of their legally stipulated benefits.
- Typically children are not mentioned in the employees' register — are considered 'helping hands' to the woman worker who is registered

## Lies and Exploitation (continued)

- To try and avoid the contractor, some workers have formed cooperatives
- Even in the cooperative when a roller without an ID card dies, the next of kin or dependents are denied any compensation
- Being unorganized, women and children cannot fight for their rights
- Reluctant to openly join movements, fearing reappraisal from the *sattedar* and loss of their jobs
- Employers tend to shift the industry to other states or neighboring countries to avoid higher minimum wages

# Negative Health Effects

- Children suffer from many of the same problems as do women like back ache and knee problems
- Tobacco affects them-they feel dizzy
- Over long term children too are prone to chronic bronchitis, asthma and childhood TB
- They too complain of a burning sensation in eyes and throat.
- They develop, allergies, stomach troubles, constipation.
- Government welfare schemes do not reach them

# No Change in Workers' Status

- Despite the protests and efforts made to improve conditions of *bidi*-rolling children, no qualitative change has been made to their lot
- A lot of lip service has been given, but no viable solution has evolved
- Abusive and exploitative nature of this industry pays no heed to lives of their workers

# What is the Solution?

- No reforms have brought about any improvement
- No protests have delivered any justice
- The solution lies not in passing more legislation, but by listening to the voices of the children
- This might spark off the ingredients of a solution which can then be utilized to design a 'rights-based' strategy wherein health, education, play and recreation get equal priority as rolling *bidis*

# Formative Research

- Similar to concept research by conducting focus group discussions
- Whoever takes up this research must be thoroughly trained in the methodology
- We ask groups of child *bidi* rollers what comes to their mind when they hear 'childhood' and '*bidi* rolling'
- Each of the children's responses will lead to more questions
- This process will continue till someone articulates how *bidi* rolling is one reality and their childhood another and somehow they have to find the best fit

## Formative Research (continued)

- Whatever emerges as a consensus solution it will be validated by going to other similar groups
- Once validated, we have to see how to proceed further
- To ensure no hurdle to what finally gets evolved, adults have to be constantly updated at every step

# Formative Research (continued)

- Evaluation criteria:
    1. Does everyone understand what is being suggested
    2. Is it realistic? Is it believable? Does it have any credibility for everyone involved in the child's life?
    3. Is it practical and practicable?
    4. It has to fit into the lifestyle of people without offending any one culturally
- Until all these criteria are met, research will continue
- Since the children will evolve the solution, identification and commitment to implementing it will be high