

Moulding Bricks, Sustaining Livelihoods, and Enduring Challenges: Socio-Economic Realities of Women Labourers in Morigaon District, Assam

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ABSTRACT

The brick kiln industry is one of the major labour-intensive informal industries in India and employs a large number of women workers. Women actively participate in various stages of brick production, including soil preparation, moulding, carrying, drying, and stacking of bricks. Despite their significant contribution, women workers often remain underpaid, unrecognized, and deprived of basic labour rights and social security benefits. The present study aims to examine the level of participation of women in the brick kiln industry and analyse their socio-demographic and economic conditions. The study focuses on indicators such as age, education, family size, income, working hours, migration status and expenditure pattern. The study is based on primary data collected through household women labours surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and field observations among women brick kiln workers. Statistical techniques such as percentage analysis, and graphical representation are used for data interpretation. The findings are expected to reveal that women workers contribute substantially to brick production while facing poor socio-economic conditions, wage inequality, inadequate healthcare facilities, and significant occupational health risks. The study recommends the implementation of labour welfare measures, equal wage policies, improved working conditions, access to healthcare services, and social security programmes to enhance the well-being and livelihood of women workers in the brick kiln industry.

Keywords: Women Workforce Participation, Brick Kiln Industry, Socio-Economic Conditions, Occupational Health Hazards, Informal Labour Sector.

Introduction

The brick kiln industry is one of the most labour-intensive and unorganised sectors in India and plays a significant role in supplying construction materials for the country's rapidly expanding urban and rural infrastructure. India is among the world's leading producers of clay bricks, and the industry provides seasonal employment to millions of workers, most of whom belong to economically weaker and socially marginalised communities. The workforce in brick kilns is largely composed of migrant labourers who depend on this sector for their livelihood due to the lack of alternative employment opportunities (Khan & More, 2015; Singh, 2005). Women constitute a substantial proportion of the brick kiln workforce and actively participate in almost every stage of brick production, including clay preparation, moulding, carrying, drying, stacking, and loading of bricks. Despite their significant contribution to the production process, women workers often remain invisible within the labour market and receive limited recognition for their economic role. In many brick kilns, women work alongside male family members and contribute significantly to household income while simultaneously bearing the responsibilities of childcare and domestic work (Singh, 2005; Kayal & Roy Chowdhury, 2024). The socio-economic conditions of women

workers in brick kilns are generally characterised by poverty, low educational attainment, inadequate housing, low wages, insecure employment, and limited access to social security benefits. Most women workers belong to disadvantaged social groups and are compelled to enter the labour market due to economic necessity. The informal nature of employment frequently results in wage discrimination, poor living conditions, indebtedness, and exclusion from government welfare schemes. Consequently, women workers remain one of the most vulnerable segments of the informal workforce in India (Das, 2015; Kharake et al., 2025). To socio-economic deprivation, women working in brick kilns face numerous occupational health hazards. Their work requires prolonged exposure to extreme heat, brick dust, smoke, and physically strenuous activities such as lifting and carrying heavy loads. These conditions increase their vulnerability to respiratory diseases, musculoskeletal disorders, skin infections, eye irritation, fatigue, dehydration, and reproductive health problems. Long working hours, inadequate nutrition, lack of protective equipment, and limited healthcare facilities further aggravate their health conditions (Vaidya et al., 2015; Kazi & Bote, 2019). Although women workers make substantial contributions to the brick kiln industry, their participation and well-being have received comparatively less academic and policy attention. Existing studies indicate that women continue to experience socio-economic exploitation and occupational health risks, highlighting the need for comprehensive research focusing on their work participation, living conditions, and health status. Understanding these dimensions is essential for formulating effective labour welfare policies, ensuring social protection, and improving the quality of life of women workers in the brick kiln industry. Therefore, the present study, entitled “Moulding Bricks, Sustaining Livelihoods, and Enduring Challenges: Socio-Economic Realities of Women Labourers in Morigaon District, Assam” attempts to examine the nature and extent of women's participation in brick production activities and analyse their socio-economic characteristics and occupational health challenges. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and provide policy recommendations for improving the livelihood and health conditions of women brick kiln workers.

Objectives of the Study

- To analyse the socio-demographic and economic characteristics of women brick kiln workers.

Research Questions

- How do the socio-economic conditions of brick industry workers compare to other industrial workers, and what factors influence their economic mobility and social status?

Methodology

The article titled “ Moulding Bricks, Sustaining Livelihoods, and Enduring Challenges: Socio-Economic Realities of Women Labourers in Morigaon District, Assam.” has been based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected through structured interviews and field observations conducted over a period of approximately four months during the 2025–26 field survey. The study covered 30% of the operational brick kilns in Morigaon district which comprises five revenue circles, and 20% of the women workers employed in the selected brick kilns were chosen as the sample respondents. Information was collected on their socio-economic characteristics, employment conditions, income, migration, and living conditions. Secondary data were obtained from books, research journals, newspapers, official records of the Office of the Chief Inspector of Factories, Pollution Control Board, Assam (PCBA), Nagaon, government reports, and relevant websites. The collected data were systematically classified, tabulated, and analysed using percentage analysis. The findings are presented through tables and descriptive interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic conditions of women workers in the brick kiln industry of Morigaon district.

Literature Review

A literature review is an essential part of research that helps define and support the research problem, identify research gaps, and understand existing trends and concepts in a particular field of study. It critically examines previous studies related to the research topic and provides a theoretical foundation for the investigation. Although limited studies are available on brick kiln workers in Assam, an attempt has been made to review the existing literature relevant to the socio-economic conditions, challenges, and prospects of Women brick kiln workers in the Morigaon district of Assam.

Several studies have examined the socio-demographic and economic conditions with different challenges of women employed in the brick kiln industry across different parts of India. Purakayastha, Sengupta, and Bolpur (2022) investigated the participation of women workers in the brick kiln industry of

Diamond Harbour-I Block, West Bengal. The study highlighted that women are extensively engaged in brick moulding, carrying, and stacking, while being exposed to severe environmental hazards such as brick dust, smoke, excessive heat, and poor sanitation. It emphasized that inadequate healthcare facilities, lack of safety measures, and poor working conditions increase the vulnerability of women labourers.

Khan and More (2015) studied the socio-economic status of female brick kiln workers in Karad, Maharashtra. The findings revealed that most women belonged to economically weaker families with low literacy levels and were engaged in brick kiln work due to poverty, indebtedness, and the lack of alternative employment opportunities. The study also reported long working hours, low wages, poor living conditions, and limited access to healthcare and social security benefits.

Singh (2005), in the *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, examined the status of women workers in the brick kiln industry of Haryana. The study found that women played a significant role in brick production but remained economically and socially marginalized. Wage discrimination, absence of maternity benefits, poor healthcare facilities, and limited decision-making power were identified as major issues affecting women workers.

In another study, Singh (2005) published in the *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, further explored the labour conditions of women in Haryana's brick kiln industry. The study highlighted problems such as labour exploitation, seasonal migration, wage inequality, and the absence of basic welfare facilities. It emphasized the need for stronger labour laws, equal wages, and welfare measures to improve the socio-economic conditions of women workers. The above studies provide valuable insights into the socio-economic conditions, occupational hazards, and gender issues of women workers in brick kilns in different states of India. However, no similar comprehensive study has been conducted in the brick kiln industry of Morigaon District, Assam. The socio-economic realities, livelihood patterns, and challenges faced by women labourers in this region have remained largely unexplored. Therefore, the present study attempts to fill this gap by analysing the socio-economic conditions, livelihoods, and challenges of women labourers in the brick kiln industry of Morigaon District, Assam.

Study Area

The present study is confined to Morigaon district of Assam, which extends between 26°09'00" N and 26°30'00" N latitudes and 92°00'00" E and 92°30'00" E longitudes. The district covers a geographical area of approximately 1,551 square kilometres, accounting for about 1.98 percent of the total geographical area of Assam. Morigaon is characterized by alluvial plains interspersed with numerous rivers and wetlands. The district is primarily drained by the Brahmaputra, Kopili, Kolong, Sonai, Killing, and Pokoriya rivers. Administratively, Morigaon district is divided into five revenue circles like Mikirbheta, Laharighat, Bhuragaon, Mayong, and Marigaon, which facilitate local governance and administrative management. Five census towns and one statutory town make up Marigaon. In this district entire urban area is 25.5 sq. km., and rural area is 1525.50 sq. km. 7 Community Development Blocks are located throughout the district. The district has a total of 632 villages. According to 2011 Census data, published by Census of India (2011) that the population of the Morigaon district was 957423 persons of which 71.90% were males and 64.04% were females and total households no. is 184,602. The density of Population was 617 persons per sq km. The decadal growth rate of population is 23.34%. The district has a literacy rate is 68.03% as against 72.19% in the state. (As per statistical hand book, Assam 2023). The sex ratio of the study area is 967 (Females per 1000 males) as against in the Assam (946) as per 2011 census. The brick manufacturing industry is one of the most prominent industrial or manufacturing units in Morigaon district and serves as an important source of seasonal employment and income for the local population. At present, the district has around 120 brick kilns, of which nearly 95 are in operation, highlighting the significant contribution of this industry to the district's economy. Among the five revenue circles, the Morigaon Revenue Circle has the highest concentration of operational brick kilns, making it the major hotspot of brick manufacturing in the district. This concentration is mainly attributed to the availability of suitable clay soil, favourable physical conditions, and better road connectivity, which support the growth and expansion of the brick kiln industry. Owing to its geographical setting and socio-economic characteristics, the district provides an appropriate study area for examining the socio-economic conditions and occupational issues of women engaged in the brick kiln industry

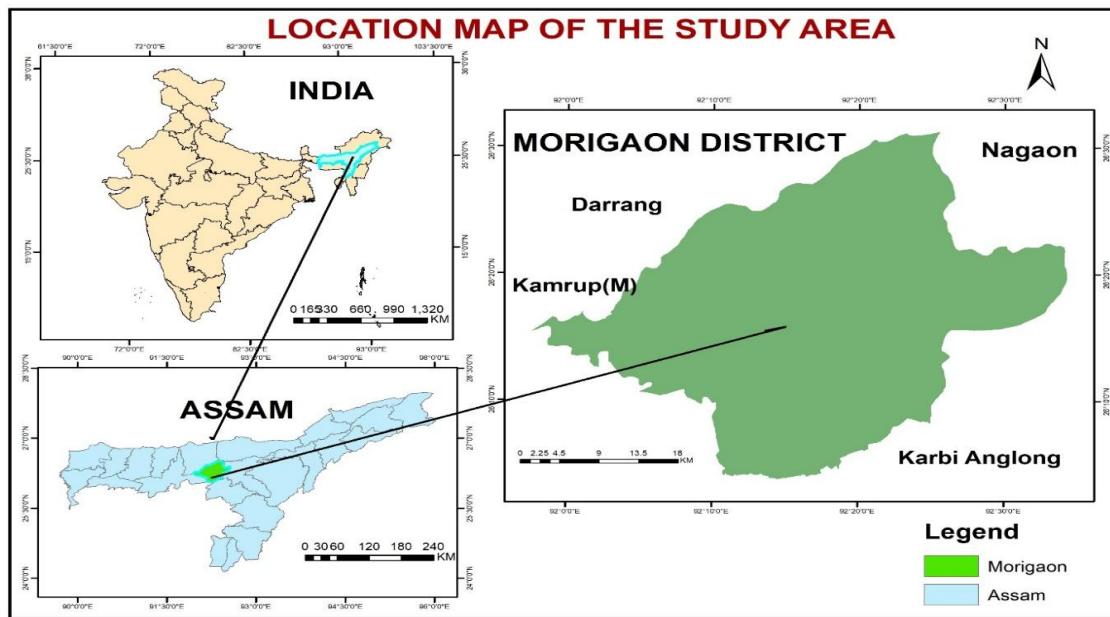


Figure 1: Location Map of Morigaon District

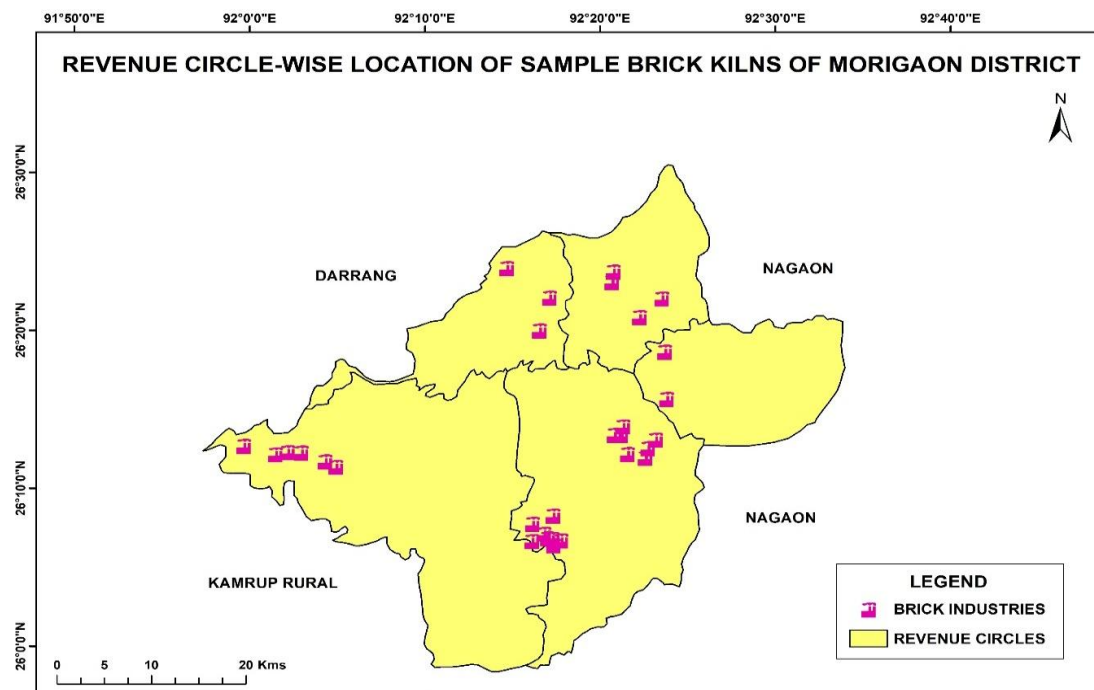


Figure 2: Location map of selected brickkilns in the study area

Analysis and Findings

- **Socio and Demographic Condition of the Female Workers**

The present study examines the socio-economic conditions of female workers employed in 30 selected brick kilns across five revenue circles of Morigaon district, Assam. A total of 250 women workers were interviewed from a population of 1,054 female workers, along with 30 brick kiln owners to obtain

information on the brick kiln industry and the living and working conditions of women workers. To assess their socio-economic status, various indicators such as age, marital status, religion, caste, education, family type, family size, occupation, and other relevant factors were considered. The findings based on these indicators are presented in the following sections.

Table 1: Socio and demographic Condition of the female workers in the sample brick kilns

Socio and demographic Condition of the female workers in the sample brick kiln of Morigaon district			
Serial Number	Characters/Categories	Numbers (Total=250 female)	Percentage of total worker
1	Age- Group (years)		
	18-30	87	34.80%
	31-40	76	30.40%
	41-50	69	27.60%
	Above 50	18	7.20%
2	Marital Status		
	Married	188	75.20%
	Unmarried	42	16.80%
	Widowed	20	8.00%
3	Educational status		
	Illiterate	130	52.00%
	No formal Education but do signature only	78	31.20%
	Primary education	34	13.60%
	Middle	6	2.40%
	High school education	2	0.80%
	Graduation	0	0.00%
	Other	0	0.00%
4	Family Type		
	Nuclear	106	42.40%
	Joint	144	57.60%
5	Size of The family		
	2-3 members	30	12%
	4-5 members	108	43.20%
	6-7 members	112	44.80%
6	Religion		
	Hindu	55	22%
	Muslim	195	78%
	Other	0	0
7	Caste		
	General	105	42%
	OBC	55	22%
	MOBC	87	34.80%
	Don't know/ not identified	3	1.20%
8	No. of children of female workers		
	No child	3	1.20%
	1	8	3.19%
	2	16	6.37%
	3	121	48.21%
	4 and above	61	24.30%
	Unmarried	42	16.73%

Source: primary survey.2025-26

The socio-demographic profile of female brick kiln workers in Morigaon district reflects a workforce characterized by economic vulnerability, low educational attainment, and substantial family responsibilities. In the table:1 , the majority of the workers belong to the economically active age groups,

with 34.80 percent aged 18–30 years, 30.40 percent aged 31–40 years, and 27.60 percent aged 41–50 years, indicating that brick kiln activities largely depend on physically active women. Married women constitute the dominant share of the workforce (75.20 percent), highlighting their crucial role in supporting household livelihoods, while widowed and unmarried women also participate due to economic necessity. Educational attainment is remarkably low, as 52.00 percent of the respondents are illiterate and 31.20 percent possess only basic literacy without formal schooling, limiting their access to alternative employment opportunities. The prevalence of joint families (57.60 percent) and large household sizes, particularly families with 4–7 members (88.00 percent), indicates a high dependency burden that compels women to engage in wage labour. The workforce is predominantly composed of Muslim women (78.00 percent), while caste-wise representation shows the participation of General (42.00 percent), MOBC (34.80 percent), and OBC (22.00 percent) communities. Furthermore, a significant proportion of respondents have three or more children, increasing household expenditure and financial pressure. Overall, the findings suggest that poverty, low literacy, large family size, limited livelihood alternatives, and socio-economic disadvantages are the major factors driving women into brick kiln employment, making it an important source of survival and income generation for marginalized households in the study area.

- **Economic Conditions of the Female Workers**

Table 2: Migration Pattern

Migration Among the female workers in the selected brick kilns in Morigaon, 2025-26		
Migration pattern	No. of Females	Percentage
Intra district	81	32.4
Inter district	98	39.2
Inter state	62	24.8
Local	9	3.6
Total	250	100

Source: Primary survey

The survey, as presented in Table: 2, reveals that out of the 250 sampled female workers employed in the selected brick kilns of Morigaon district, the majority are migrant labourers. Among them, 98 women workers (39.2%) have migrated from other districts of Assam, while 81 workers (32.4%) belong to the same district. Another 62 workers (24.8%) have migrated from neighbouring states such as West Bengal, Bihar, and Jharkhand, indicating the interstate nature of labour migration in the brick kiln industry. In contrast, only 9 women workers (3.6%) commute daily from nearby villages to work in the brick kilns. The predominance of migrant workers suggests that the brick kiln industry in Morigaon district relies heavily on seasonal and migrant labour due to the availability of employment opportunities, comparatively better wages, and the limited livelihood options in the workers' places of origin. The relatively small proportion of local daily commuters further indicates that brick kiln work is largely undertaken by migrant women who temporarily reside near the kilns during the production season.

Table 3: Income Pattern

Annual Income of female workers in the selected brick kilns, 2025-26		
Annual Income	No. of Females	Percentage
Below 15000	41	16.4
16000-20000	101	40.4
21000-25000	89	35.6
26000-30000	19	7.6
Total	250	100

Source: Primary survey

Table 3 presents the annual income distribution of the sampled female brick kiln workers in Morigaon district. The findings indicate that the largest proportion of respondents (40.4%) earn an annual income between ₹16,000 and ₹20,000, followed by 35.6 percent whose annual earnings range from ₹21,000 to ₹25,000. A comparatively smaller proportion of workers (16.4%) earn between ₹26,000 and ₹30,000 annually, while only 7.6 percent receive an annual income of ₹30,000 and above. The income distribution clearly reflects the low earning capacity of female brick kiln workers, with more than three-fourths of the respondents earning less than ₹25,000 per annum. Such low income levels indicate the prevalence of economic insecurity, irregular employment, and dependence on low-paid manual labour.

Table 4: Number of Earning Members of their Families

Earning members in family	Number of female workers	Percentage
1	18	7.2
2	89	35.6
3	83	33.2
4	33	13.2
5 and Above	27	10.8
Total	250	100

Source: Primary survey

Table 4 shows that the majority of the respondents (35.6%) belong to families with two earning members, followed by 33.2 percent with three earning members. Families with four and five or more earning members constitute 13.2 percent and 10.8 percent, respectively, while only 7.2 percent have a single earning member. The findings indicate that multiple earning members are essential to sustain household livelihoods due to low income and economic insecurity among brick kiln worker families..

Table 5: Alternative annual sources of income during the brick kiln off-season

Alternative annual sources of income during the brick kiln off-season		
Sources	No.of females	Percentage
No works	72	28.8
Cultivation	61	24.4
Any Domestic works	37	14.8
Construction work	19	7.6
Any daily wage work	61	24.4

Source: primary survey

Table 5 shows the alternative sources of income of female brick kiln workers during the off-season. A considerable proportion of the respondents (28.8%) remain unemployed during this period. Cultivation and daily wage labour each account for 24.4 percent of the workers, while 14.8 percent are engaged in domestic work and only 7.6 percent participate in construction work. The findings indicate that most women depend on seasonal and low-paid occupations during the brick kiln off-season, reflecting livelihood insecurity and the absence of stable year-round employment opportunities.

Table 6: Reasons for doing work in brick kilns

Reasons for doing work in brick kilns		
Reasons	No. of females	Percentage
Illiteracy	122	48.8
Poverty	41	16.4
For family support	35	14.0
Independency	18	7.2
No other works	15	6.0
Indebtedness	12	4.8
Others	7	2.8
Total	250	100

Source: Primary survey

Table: 6 reveals that the major reasons for female workers engaging in brick kiln labour. Nearly half of the respondents (48.8%) reported illiteracy as the primary reason for working in brick kilns, followed by poverty (16.4%) and the need to support their families (14.0%). A smaller proportion cited the desire for financial independence (7.2%), indebtedness (4.8%), lack of alternative employment opportunities (6.0%), and other reasons (2.8%). The findings indicate that limited education, poverty, and household financial responsibilities are the principal factors driving women into brick kiln employment, highlighting their socio-economic vulnerability and restricted access to better livelihood opportunities.

Major Findings

- All the sampled women workers are primarily engaged in brick moulding and brick-making activities, locally known as "Patheria", which constitute the principal occupation of women in the brick kilns in the study area.
- Most women workers receive advance payments, locally known as "Dadan", from brick kiln owners before the commencement of the working season. This advance payment system often binds workers to a particular kiln throughout the production period.

- The majority of women workers belong to Muslim families, while only a small proportion come from Hindu families.
- Most of the women workers belong to the General category, with comparatively fewer workers from other social categories.
- A significant majority of the women workers are married, indicating that married women constitute the dominant workforce in the brick kilns.
- Field observations reveal that many women workers were married between the ages of 16 and 18 years, reflecting the prevalence of early marriage among the study population.
- An overwhelming majority of the women workers and their children are illiterate, highlighting the poor educational status of brick kiln labour households.
- Most of the women workers are migrant labourers, and their families generally have large household sizes, increasing their economic dependency.
- The monthly and annual family incomes of the women workers are inadequate to sustain a decent standard of living, making it difficult to meet their basic household needs.
- During the off-season, when employment in brick kilns is unavailable, women workers engage in agricultural activities and other wage-based domestic or manual work to supplement their household income.
- Illiteracy, poverty, for family support and the lack of alternative employment opportunities are the major factors compelling women to work in brick kilns under difficult working conditions.

Major Challenges and Recommendations

Women constitute a substantial proportion of the workforce in the brick kiln industry of Morigaon district, Assam, contributing significantly to brick production through activities such as soil preparation and brick moulding. Despite their indispensable role, they continue to experience multiple socio-economic and occupational challenges that adversely affect their well-being and productivity.

- **Low wages and economic insecurity:** One of the foremost challenges is low wages and economic insecurity. Most women are employed as casual or piece-rate labourers, resulting in irregular and inadequate earnings that are insufficient to meet household expenses. The seasonal nature of brick kiln employment further intensifies economic vulnerability, compelling many families to depend on loans and advances from labour contractors.
- **Poor working environment :** Another major challenge is the poor working environment. Women perform physically demanding tasks for long hours under extreme weather conditions and are continuously exposed to dust, smoke, and excessive heat generated by brick kilns. Such working conditions increase the prevalence of respiratory diseases, musculoskeletal disorders, dehydration, skin ailments, and chronic fatigue. The absence of personal protective equipment, first-aid facilities, and regular health services further aggravates occupational health risks.
- **Social security and labour welfare:** The study also reveals the widespread lack of social security and labour welfare measures. Most women workers are engaged in the informal sector without written contracts, depriving them of statutory benefits such as maternity leave, health insurance, accident compensation, pension, and paid leave. Limited awareness of labour rights and inadequate enforcement of labour legislation expose them to exploitation and insecure employment.
- **Low educational attainment and limited skill development:** Low educational attainment and limited skill development further constrain women's socio-economic mobility. A large proportion of women workers are either illiterate or possess only primary education, limiting their awareness of government welfare schemes, labour rights, financial services, and alternative employment opportunities. Consequently, they remain dependent on low-paid manual labour, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

The field survey also reveals and observed that inadequate housing, sanitation, and childcare facilities in brick kiln settlements. Temporary shelters, unsafe drinking water, poor sanitation, and the absence of creche facilities create unhealthy living conditions for women and their children. Mothers are often compelled to bring young children to hazardous workplaces, affecting both child welfare and women's work efficiency. Finally, seasonal migration and limited alternative livelihood opportunities increase the vulnerability of women workers. Many migrate with their families during the brick-making season due to limited employment opportunities in their native villages. Migration disrupts proper and

regular children's education, weakens access to healthcare and social protection, and reinforces dependence on informal labour markets. During the off-season, the absence of sustainable livelihood options forces women to remain trapped in low-income occupations.

Conclusion

The brick kiln industry in Morigaon district has become an important source of livelihood for many economically disadvantaged families, particularly women who have limited access to stable employment opportunities. The findings of this study show that women are actively involved in almost every stage of brick production, from preparing clay and moulding bricks to carrying and stacking them. Although their labour is essential for the functioning of the industry, their contribution often goes unrecognized, and they continue to work under difficult socio-economic conditions. The study reveals that poverty, illiteracy, indebtedness, and the lack of alternative employment during the agricultural off-season are the major factors that compel women to engage in brick kiln work. While this employment provides a vital source of household income, it is often accompanied by low wages, long working hours, unsafe working conditions, inadequate housing, poor sanitation, occupational health problems, and limited access to social security benefits. Women also shoulder the dual responsibility of earning an income while managing household and childcare duties, which further increases their physical and emotional burden. Despite these challenges, women labourers play a significant role in sustaining both their families and the local economy. Their earnings contribute to household consumption, children's education, and overall family survival. Therefore, improving their living and working conditions should be considered an important development priority. Ensuring fair wages, better workplace safety, access to healthcare, maternity benefits, sanitation facilities, skill development programmes, and awareness of labour rights can significantly enhance their quality of life. In conclusion, recognizing the contribution of women brick kiln workers and addressing the challenges they face through effective policy implementation and institutional support will not only improve their socio-economic status but also contribute to inclusive and sustainable rural development in Morigaon district, Assam.

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