



# Invisible Labour: Women in Beedi and Informal Economy of Murshidabad in the Post-Independence Period

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the nature and dynamics of invisible labour performed by women in the beedi industry and the informal economy of Murshidabad in the post-independence period. The study focuses on women's participation in home-based beedi rolling and other informal sector activities, highlighting issues of low wages, lack of social security, and economic marginalization. Using secondary data from Census reports, labour statistics, and existing literature, the paper analyses trends in female workforce participation and the socio-economic conditions of women workers. It reveals that despite their significant contribution to household income and the local economy, women's labour remains largely unrecognized and undervalued. The study also identifies key challenges such as gender inequality, occupational health hazards, and absence of institutional support. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for policy interventions to ensure recognition, protection, and empowerment of women engaged in the informal economy.

**Keywords:** Invisible labour, Beedi industry, Informal economy, Women workers, Gender inequality

## **1. Introduction**

Women's labour constitutes a fundamental component of household sustenance and regional economic development, particularly in rural India. However, a substantial proportion of women's work remains invisible, as it is neither adequately recognized nor fairly remunerated within formal economic frameworks. This phenomenon is especially evident in the informal sector, where women are predominantly engaged in low-paid, home-based activities that escape official documentation (International Labour Organization, 2018).

In districts like Murshidabad, characterized by agrarian dependence, high population density, and limited industrialization, the informal economy plays a crucial role in livelihood generation. A significant number of women in the district are engaged in the beedi industry, which is one of the largest sources of employment in rural areas. Beedi rolling is typically a home-based activity performed under subcontracting systems, where middlemen supply raw materials and collect finished products, leaving workers with minimal bargaining power (Government of India, 2011).

Despite their substantial contribution to household income, women engaged in beedi rolling are often categorized as “non-workers” or “marginal workers” in official statistics due to the informal and irregular nature of their employment (National Sample Survey Office, 2014). This invisibility is further reinforced by socio-cultural norms that perceive women’s economic activities as an extension of domestic responsibilities rather than as productive labour (Kabeer, 2005). As a result, women’s work remains undervalued, underpaid, and largely excluded from labour rights and social security benefits.

The beedi industry also presents significant occupational health hazards, as workers are exposed to tobacco dust and repetitive manual tasks for long hours. Studies have documented a range of health issues among women workers, including respiratory problems, eye irritation, and musculoskeletal disorders (World Health Organization, 2010). However, access to healthcare and welfare schemes remains limited due to the unorganized nature of the sector.

Since independence, the Government of India has introduced various policies aimed at improving labour conditions and promoting gender equality. Nevertheless, the benefits of these initiatives have not adequately reached women in the informal sector, particularly in backward districts like Murshidabad. Persistent challenges such as poverty, low literacy, gender norms, and lack of institutional support continue to constrain women’s economic empowerment (Chowdhury & Sarkar, 2020).

In this context, the concept of invisible labour becomes critical for understanding the socio-economic realities of women engaged in the beedi and informal economy. This study aims to examine the nature, extent, and implications of such labour in Murshidabad, with a focus on its contribution to household livelihoods and the structural barriers that perpetuate its invisibility. By doing so, the paper seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on gender, labour, and development in rural India.

## 2. Literature Review

The issue of invisible labour and women’s participation in the informal economy has received considerable attention in academic discourse, particularly in the context of developing countries like India. Studies suggest that a significant proportion of the workforce in India is engaged in the informal sector, where employment is characterized by low wages, lack of job security, and absence of social protection. Within

this sector, women are disproportionately represented in home-based and labour-intensive occupations, which often remain unrecognized in official statistics.

Research on the beedi industry highlights its importance as a major source of employment for women, especially in rural areas of eastern India. A study conducted in West Bengal found that nearly 98% of beedi workers are women, reflecting the feminization of this industry and its dependence on cheap female labour (Barman & Sarkar, 2022). However, despite their dominance in the workforce, women workers face limited access to welfare schemes due to illiteracy, poverty, and lack of awareness.

District-level studies in Murshidabad reveal that the beedi industry is one of the largest informal employment sectors, particularly concentrated in regions such as Jangipur subdivision. Around 70% of workers in this sector are women and children, highlighting the gendered nature of labour participation (Abdullah & Firdous, 2020). These studies also point to the prevalence of middlemen (contractors), who control production and wages, thereby reinforcing economic exploitation and dependency among workers.

Empirical research focusing specifically on women beedi workers in Murshidabad indicates that their socio-economic conditions remain precarious. A recent study found that a large proportion of women workers are illiterate and earn extremely low monthly incomes, often between ₹3000 and ₹4000, despite long working hours (Sk & Ali, 2025). The study further highlights that beedi rolling is frequently treated as a secondary occupation, even though it plays a crucial role in sustaining household livelihoods.

Scholars have also emphasized the health implications of beedi work. Due to continuous exposure to tobacco dust and poor ergonomic conditions, women workers suffer from multiple health problems, including respiratory diseases, musculoskeletal disorders, and eye-related issues (Shaikh et al., 2021). These occupational hazards are exacerbated by the absence of adequate healthcare facilities and lack of awareness among workers.

Another important dimension highlighted in the literature is the invisibility of women's labour. Studies argue that home-based work, such as beedi rolling, is often perceived as an extension of domestic responsibilities rather than as productive economic activity. This perception leads to the exclusion of women from labour rights, wage negotiations, and policy benefits. A case study from Jangipur indicates that women beedi workers experience persistent poverty, low educational attainment, and limited mobility, all of which contribute to their continued marginalization (Khanam, 2024).

Earlier research also shows that the informal nature of the beedi industry has remained largely unchanged over time. Workers continue to face issues related to low wages, lack of job security, and poor living conditions, despite the sector's long historical presence in the region (Biswas & Laha, 2015). This indicates a structural persistence of inequality within the informal economy.

Overall, the existing literature highlights that while women's participation in the beedi and informal economy is substantial, their labour remains undervalued and unrecognized. Most studies focus on socio-economic conditions, health issues, and labour exploitation, but there is limited emphasis on the conceptual understanding of invisible labour and its broader implications in Murshidabad. Therefore, there is a need for a more integrated analysis that connects gender, informality, and invisibility of labour within a localized context.

### 3. Research Gap

Existing studies on women's participation in the informal economy and the beedi industry largely focus on issues such as low wages, poor working conditions, and lack of social security, highlighting the gendered nature of informal labour in India (Barman & Sarkar, 2022; Sahu & Behera, 2025). However, most of these studies are broad or regionally generalized and lack a localized analysis of Murshidabad, where the beedi industry plays a crucial role in women's livelihoods. Moreover, while some research examines the socio-economic conditions of women beedi workers, there is limited emphasis on the conceptual understanding of "invisible labour", particularly how women's home-based work is socially perceived as an extension of domestic responsibilities rather than productive economic activity (Khanam, 2024; Sk & Ali, 2025). Additionally, the post-independence evolution of women's engagement in the informal economy and its linkage with gender norms, informality, and labour invisibility remains underexplored. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge these gaps by offering a localized, gender-sensitive, and conceptually grounded analysis of invisible labour among women in the beedi and informal economy of Murshidabad.

### 4. Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the present study are as follows:

- i. To examine the nature and extent of women's participation in the beedi and informal economy in Murshidabad.
- ii. To analyse the concept of invisible labour in the context of women workers.
- iii. To assess the socio-economic conditions of women engaged in beedi rolling.
- iv. To identify the major challenges faced by women workers in the informal sector.
- v. To suggest measures for improving the recognition and conditions of women's labour.

### 5. Database and Methodology

The present study is primarily based on secondary data sources, supplemented by insights from existing empirical and policy-oriented literature on women's labour in the informal sector. Relevant data have been collected from the *Census of India* (1951–2011), reports of the National Sample Survey Office, labour statistics published by the Government of India, and district-level statistical handbooks pertaining to Murshidabad. In addition, published research articles, books, and reports from international organizations such as the International Labour Organization have been consulted to understand the broader context of

informal employment and invisible labour (International Labour Organization, 2018; National Sample Survey Office, 2014).

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical methodology to examine the nature and extent of women's participation in the beedi and informal economy. Quantitative data have been analyzed using simple statistical techniques such as percentage, ratio, and trend analysis to identify patterns in female workforce participation, employment structure, and socio-economic conditions. Wherever necessary, a comparative approach has been used to assess variations over time and across different socio-economic groups.

In addition to quantitative analysis, the study incorporates a qualitative perspective to interpret the concept of invisible labour, particularly in relation to home-based beedi work performed by women. This involves a critical review of literature to understand how gender norms, socio-cultural practices, and economic constraints contribute to the invisibility and undervaluation of women's labour (Kabeer, 2005). The study also follows a historical approach to trace the evolution of women's engagement in the informal economy in the post-independence period, linking it with broader processes of economic change and labour informalization.

Overall, a mixed-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques, has been employed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of invisible labour among women in the beedi and informal economy of Murshidabad.

## 6. Study Area

The present study is conducted in Murshidabad, a historically significant district located in the eastern part of India. The district lies along the eastern bank of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly River and shares an international boundary with Bangladesh to the east. Murshidabad is predominantly rural in character, with agriculture as the principal economic activity, and is marked by high population density and a substantial proportion of economically weaker sections (Government of India, 2011).

Murshidabad has a distinctive socio-economic structure, with a large section of the population belonging to marginalized communities, including a significant Muslim population. Due to limited industrial development and scarcity of formal employment opportunities, a considerable proportion of the workforce is engaged in the informal sector, particularly in traditional industries such as beedi production, silk weaving, and small-scale trade. Among these, the beedi industry plays a crucial role in providing livelihood, especially to women, who are primarily engaged in home-based beedi rolling activities (Sk & Ali, 2025).

The district is also characterized by low levels of female literacy, poverty, and gender-based occupational segregation, which influence women's participation in economic activities. Many women workers are confined to home-based work due to socio-cultural norms, making their labour largely invisible and

unaccounted for in official statistics (Khanam, 2024). The concentration of beedi workers is particularly notable in subdivisions such as Jangipur, where the industry forms a major component of the local economy.

The selection of Murshidabad as the study area is significant because it represents a region where informal labour dominates and women's work remains largely unrecognized, providing an appropriate context to examine the dynamics of invisible labour in the beedi and informal economy. Furthermore, the district's socio-economic conditions and historical dependence on traditional industries make it an ideal case for analyzing the intersection of gender, informality, and economic vulnerability in the post-independence period.

## 7. Results and Discussion

### *7.1 Nature and Extent of Women's Participation in the Beedi and Informal Economy*

The analysis reveals that a substantial proportion of women in Murshidabad are engaged in the informal economy, with the beedi industry emerging as one of the most significant sources of employment. Women predominantly participate in home-based beedi rolling, which allows them to combine income-generating activities with domestic responsibilities. Secondary data indicate that women constitute the majority of the workforce in this sector, often engaged as piece-rate workers under subcontracting systems (Sk & Ali, 2025).

However, despite their high level of participation, women's work remains largely unrecorded or underreported in official employment statistics due to its informal and home-based nature (National Sample Survey Office, 2014). This reflects a paradox where women are economically active yet statistically invisible.

### *7.2 Invisible Labour in the Context of Women Workers*

The concept of invisible labour is central to understanding women's role in the beedi and informal economy. Women's work is often perceived as an extension of household duties rather than as productive economic activity. This perception leads to its systematic undervaluation and lack of recognition (Kabeer, 2005).

In Murshidabad, beedi rolling is typically carried out within the household space, blurring the boundary between productive and reproductive labour. As a result, women's contributions remain hidden within family structures and are excluded from formal labour rights and policy frameworks. The invisibility is further reinforced by the absence of formal contracts, social security, and legal protection (International Labour Organization, 2018).

### 7.3 Socio-Economic Conditions of Women Engaged in Beedi Rolling

The socio-economic conditions of women beedi workers in Murshidabad are characterized by low income, limited education, and economic vulnerability. Most women workers belong to economically weaker households and rely on beedi rolling as a supplementary or primary source of income.

Earnings are generally low due to the piece-rate wage system, requiring long working hours to achieve minimal income levels. Additionally, a significant proportion of women workers are either illiterate or have low educational attainment, limiting their access to alternative employment opportunities (Sk & Ali, 2025).

Health conditions are also a major concern. Continuous exposure to tobacco dust and prolonged sitting postures contribute to respiratory problems, eye irritation, and musculoskeletal disorders (World Health Organization, 2010). Despite these risks, access to healthcare and welfare schemes remains limited due to lack of awareness and institutional support.

### 7.4 Challenges Faced by Women Workers in the Informal Sector

Women engaged in the beedi and informal economy face multiple interrelated challenges:

- **Economic Exploitation:** Dependence on middlemen leads to low wages and lack of bargaining power.
- **Lack of Social Security:** Absence of formal employment deprives workers of benefits such as insurance, pensions, and maternity support (International Labour Organization, 2018).
- **Occupational Health Hazards:** Exposure to harmful substances and poor working conditions affect physical well-being.
- **Gender Inequality:** Socio-cultural norms restrict women's mobility and access to better employment opportunities.
- **Low Awareness:** Limited knowledge about labour rights and welfare schemes reduces access to institutional support.

These challenges collectively reinforce the cycle of poverty and marginalization among women workers in the informal sector.

### 7.5 Measures for Improving Recognition and Conditions of Women's Labour

Addressing the issue of invisible labour requires a multi-dimensional approach involving policy intervention, institutional support, and social change. The following measures are suggested:

- **Recognition of Home-Based Work:** Inclusion of women's informal labour in official statistics and labour policies to ensure visibility.
- **Fair Wage Mechanisms:** Regulation of piece-rate systems and reduction of middlemen exploitation through direct payment systems.
- **Social Security Coverage:** Extension of welfare schemes such as health insurance, pensions, and maternity benefits to informal workers.

- **Skill Development and Education:** Promotion of literacy and vocational training to diversify employment opportunities.
- **Strengthening Self-Help Groups (SHGs):** Encouraging collective organization to enhance bargaining power and access to credit.
- **Health Interventions:** Regular health check-ups and awareness programs to address occupational hazards.

These measures can contribute to improving both the economic conditions and social recognition of women workers, thereby reducing the invisibility of their labour.

## 8. Major Findings

- i. Women in Murshidabad are extensively engaged in the informal economy, with the beedi industry serving as a major source of livelihood, particularly through home-based work.
- ii. A significant proportion of women workers are involved as piece-rate labourers under subcontracting systems, where their work remains largely unrecorded and statistically invisible (National Sample Survey Office, 2014).
- iii. The concept of invisible labour is clearly evident, as women's economic activities are socially perceived as an extension of domestic responsibilities rather than as productive work, leading to their undervaluation and lack of recognition (Kabeer, 2005).
- iv. Women beedi workers generally belong to economically weaker sections, with low levels of education and limited access to alternative employment opportunities, making them highly dependent on informal work (Sk & Ali, 2025).
- v. The piece-rate wage system results in low and unstable income, compelling women to work long hours while receiving minimal financial returns.
- vi. Women workers face serious occupational health hazards, including respiratory problems, eye irritation, and musculoskeletal disorders due to prolonged exposure to tobacco dust and poor working conditions (World Health Organization, 2010).
- vii. The informal nature of employment leads to a lack of social security, including absence of health insurance, pension benefits, and legal protection, increasing their economic vulnerability (International Labour Organization, 2018).
- viii. Gender norms and socio-cultural constraints restrict women's mobility and decision-making power, reinforcing their concentration in low-paid, home-based occupations.
- ix. The dominance of middlemen and contractors in the beedi industry limits workers' bargaining power and perpetuates economic exploitation.
- x. Despite these challenges, women's income plays a crucial role in household survival, highlighting their significant yet unrecognized contribution to the local economy.
- xi. There is a clear need for policy intervention, institutional support, and social awareness to improve the recognition, working conditions, and overall empowerment of women engaged in invisible labour within the informal sector.

## 9. Conclusion

The study highlights that women in Murshidabad play a crucial yet largely unrecognized role in the beedi and informal economy, where their labour remains invisible, undervalued, and inadequately protected. Despite their significant contribution to household income and local economic activities, women workers continue to operate within a system characterized by low wages, job insecurity, and absence of social security. The home-based nature of beedi work, combined with prevailing gender norms, reinforces the perception of women's labour as an extension of domestic responsibilities rather than as productive economic activity.

The findings indicate that the persistence of invisible labour is deeply rooted in the structural features of the informal economy, including subcontracting systems, dominance of middlemen, and lack of institutional recognition. Additionally, socio-economic constraints such as poverty, low educational attainment, and limited access to alternative employment further restrict women's opportunities for upward mobility. Occupational health risks and inadequate access to healthcare services compound their vulnerability.

However, the study also suggests that there is potential for improvement through targeted policy interventions, expansion of social security coverage, skill development initiatives, and increased awareness regarding labour rights. Recognizing and integrating women's home-based work into formal economic frameworks is essential for ensuring their economic empowerment and social dignity.

In conclusion, addressing the issue of invisible labour among women in Murshidabad requires a holistic and inclusive approach that combines economic, social, and institutional measures. Such efforts are essential not only for improving the conditions of women workers but also for promoting equitable and sustainable regional development.

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