

## **Skill development: Focus must be on those engaged in hazardous conditions like women beedi rollers**

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The foremost focus of skill development must be on those engaged in hazardous working conditions like women beedi rollers, who are exposed to health risks, earn low wages and work without social protection. (Representative image)

**By Sachi Satapathy**

Nearly 50 lakh women beedi rollers risk their health and earn less than Rs 50 per day in some of the poorest pockets of India, revealed a study by research-consulting group AF Development Care. The report 'Knowledge Gap in Existing Research on India's Women Beedi Rollers and Alternative Livelihood Options' highlights that the share of women beedi rollers to total household income is abysmally low at 20.4%. With 93% of India's workforce in the unorganised sector and skilled workforce estimated at less than 2%, the report argues for prioritising skilling and multiskilling the working population. The foremost focus of skill development must be on those engaged in hazardous working conditions like women beedi rollers, who are exposed to health risks, earn low wages and work without social protection.

The policy on skill development and entrepreneurship 2015 says that "strengthening and certifying the skills of the unorganised workforce will contribute to overall economic development. Multiskilling in complementary areas will be promoted to enable sustainable livelihood in this sector." But government initiatives on skill development of women beedi rollers have not been very effective. As per government data, only 1,025 of the 2,223 women beedi rollers trained under the initiative shifted to alternative jobs in 2019. At this rate, it will take 2,249 years to complete training of all 50 lakh women beedi rollers. With the capacity of accommodating 31 lakh persons in skill development programmes and the government's target of skilling 50 crore by 2022, 50 lakh women beedi rollers can be easily trained in a short span of time. The government generated

tax revenue of Rs 2,500 crore from the beedi industry in 2017-18, and some of this can be used for capacity building of women beedi rollers to shift them to alternative livelihoods.

The report says about 50% of women beedi rollers are illiterate, 94% are not eligible for social security benefits and 90% do not have written job contracts. Beedi companies prefer home-based production (96% are home-based) to avoid labour laws, and 84% of home-based workers are women and 80% home-based workers live in rural areas. Bibek Debroy has rightly written in his foreword that “even when legislation exists, in an informal economy, it cannot be enforced. For instance, right cannot be enforced (irrespective of whether the sector is technically defined as organised or unorganised) in the absence of contracts. One of the findings in this report reinforces the impression that often, workers do not have enforceable contracts. Second, mere enactment of legislation is no solution.”

The government can target skilling and multiskilling programmes in 20 districts where most women beedi rollers work: Murshidabad, Malda, Birbhum, Purba Medinipur, Uttar Dinajpur, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Bardhaman (West Bengal), Tirunelveli (Tamil Nadu), Karimnagar, Nizamabad, Adilabad, Chittoor (Andhra Pradesh/Telangana), Dakshina Kannada, Tumkur (Karnataka), Sagar (Madhya Pradesh), Allahabad, Azamgarh, Jaunpur (Uttar Pradesh) and Sambalpur (Odisha).

There is a need to develop district-led planning with focus of these 20 districts for 2-3 years. As a majority of the women workforce (49.9%) comprise young adults (15-35 years), the focus should be to first include this young group to help them come out of poverty. Also, the share of Muslim women is higher in beedi rolling, and so while developing vocational-alternative livelihood training, more suitable areas must be worked out keeping socio-cultural context in mind. It has been observed that government-sponsored skilling does not fit the needs of this vulnerable group, nor does it address the broader question of employment and training in the specific context of economically-backward districts. There is also a lack of emphasis on quality in training transaction, curriculum, training infrastructure and a host of other aspects. The government must analyse these gaps while designing training for women beedi rollers. The report says that skill development programmes of the Centre have been spread across 20-odd ministries/departments without robust coordination and monitoring to ensure convergence. Without that, targeting right candidates gets misplaced and quality of training compromised. To avoid such challenges, the government must start a special government beedi rolling training cell within one of its ministries, women and child development ministry or labour ministry, to get time-bound results.

**Source:** <https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/skill-development-focus-must-be-on-those-engaged-in-hazardous-conditions-like-women-beedi-rollers/2052194/>