

Mining and its effects on children, women, Adivasi and Dalits

Reports recently released by Indian NGOs reveal the desperate situation for children and adults living and working in mining areas in India. Among them Dalits, Adivasi and women are the main victims. The report *India's Childhood in the "Pits"* published by HAQ, SAMATA and mines, minerals and People (mmP) shows that districts that are entirely dependent on mining have a lower literacy rate than the national average. The mortality rate of children under five years of age is higher. Child labour is rampant. GRAVIS has released the report *Women Miners in Rajasthan, India*. The report explores the harsh everyday life and work for female quarry workers in Rajasthan.

Child labour

Children being born in the remote mining areas immediately start with a big disadvantage. As no child care facilities are available, and often no schools exist in the neighbourhood, mothers are often left with no choice but to take them along to their work in the quarries. From early on they learn to crush the stone in smaller pieces, or help with loading the stone on trucks. In Rajasthan quarry workers told the research team of HAQ and Samata that



government schools were available, but after years of sending their children to these schools they were still illiterate. Because of the very poor quality and teacher absenteeism, these government schools could not live up to the financial sacrifices families had to make to get their children go to school.

It is impossible to give an accurate figure of exactly how many children are working in the mining sector, because of the remoteness of quarries and mines and the informal character of the sector. The ILO estimates that more than one million children worldwide are involved in mining. However, this might be a huge underestimation. Organizations working in Rajasthan alone, estimate that in that state alone 375,000 children work in the mines and quarries across that state. In the state of Karnataka at least 200,000 children are said to be working. Cheap child labour is welcomed by the contractors. The response from the Indian labour department is complete denial. They argue that child labour in mining and quarrying is illegal and that it is not a problem in this sector. However, a big percentage of the stone quarries is illegal (from 25% in Maharashtra to even 50% in Rajasthan) and are not dealt with in official statistics. Even more children are engaged in tasks to enable their parents to work full time in the quarries - e.g. herding goats and taking care for younger siblings. The poverty and hardship in which the mine workers' families live is well illustrated with their daily diet: *rotis* with chillies and onions. There is no money for rice or vegetables. Hence it is not a surprise that the majority of the children the research team met are chronically malnourished.

As the example of malnourishment shows, the impact of mining on children is not limited to child labour and the violation of their right to education. The report *India's Childhood in the "Pits"* paints a frightening picture of the wide range of violations of children rights in the mining areas. Children are also more prone to illness and are faced with increased morbidity. They are often displaced migrants, living in huts and tents and as a result they are very vulnerable for other forms of exploitation and abuses, including getting involved in illegal activities by the mafia and trafficking.

Dalits and Adivasi

Large-scale mining projects are mainly in Adivasi (tribal) areas and both children and adults are often displaced, their land is being taken away and they are often forced to migrate. In Maharashtra, where mineral mining and stone extraction (for domestic use) is extensive, 54% of the members of unions started by NGO Santulan are from the Vadar community – the caste traditionally working in stone breaking. The rest of the members are from Dalit, Adivasi (tribal) and other Backward Classes background. Also in Rajasthan – a region that supplies sandstone and marble to western companies – most mine workers are from scheduled caste and tribes.

In the cases that displacement for (mineral) mining areas is compensated with cash money, Dalits – often worst affected – do not receive any compensation as they do not own land themselves, but work as landless labourers on other people's land.

The reports do not delve deeper into whether quarry labourers from scheduled caste/tribal background face specific discrimination at the workplace. Discrimination of Dalits in the workplace is often rather subtle; they can get excluded from social services such as health care and training, or will never have the chance to be promoted as they are viewed as unskilled labourers. The India Committee of the Netherlands, as part of the Dalit Network Netherlands and the *International Dalit Solidarity Network*, urges companies that source from India to be aware of possible caste discrimination in their supply chain via the *Dalit Discrimination Check*, and to take action with help of the *Ambedkar Principles*¹.

Women workers

Nearly 86% of the women workers interviewed for the GRAVIS report are from Dalit or tribal communities. They join the labour force in quarries and mines to increase their low family income, to be able to repay debts, or to replace their husbands who are bed-ridden or have passed away. Silicosis – the occupational disease that comes with quarrying stone that contains silica – leaves many women widow at a young age. To be able to survive economically, the widows go to the quarries themselves and run the risk to get the disease that caused the death of their husband. Because of the recurring droughts, agricultural labour is no longer considered an



¹ Both are downloadable at http://www.dalits.nl/dnn_bedrijven_e.html

option for many Rajasthani.

In the quarries women have separate tasks from men: handpicking, loading and crushing the stone. Even though it takes many skills, it is regarded as unskilled labour. Because there is no formal upgrading of skills, and no recognition for these tasks, women cannot escape the title of ‘unskilled worker’. Hence, women are paid far less than men, and only earn 40 rupees a day. This is not even half of the official minimum wage for unskilled labour, which is 100 rupees. With this very meager income the women are unable to get out of the situation of poverty. Added to that is the constant risk for women to be sexually harassed by mine owners and contractors. No wonder that 42% of all the different stakeholders – ranging from mine owners to government servants – interviewed for the report see these predominantly Dalit and tribal women as the most exploited in the mining sector.

Different organizations in India try to improve the lives of women quarry workers, mostly by initiating self help groups and setting up additional income generating activities. In March 2010 Santulan organized a women quarry workers convention in Pune. Female quarry workers demanded among others equal wages and easier access for women to government welfare schemes.

Working Group on Sustainable Natural Stone

The negative impact of mining on vulnerable groups as women, children and Dalits is a shared responsibility of government and companies – including western importers. The Dutch Working Group on Sustainable Natural Stone (WGDN) works together with natural stone importers, sector associations and civil society organisations to improve the working conditions throughout their supply chain. ICN is an active NGO member of this working group. At the end of 2010, the working group will introduce a European label for sustainable stone. Companies that want to use this label underwrite a code of conduct that includes all core labour standards and together with their suppliers start with implementing improvement programmes. Eradication of child labour and non-discrimination of vulnerable groups naturally are included.²

The report *India's Childhood in the "Pits"* can be found here:

<http://www.indianet.nl/pdf/ChildrenAndMiningIndia.pdf>

The report *Women Miners in Rajasthan, India* can be found here:

<http://www.indianet.nl/pdf/WomenMinersInRajasthan.pdf>

² More information about the WGDN can be found on <http://www.duurzamenatuursteen.nl/en/page/home>