

## **Socio-economic Determinants & Dynamics of Debt Bondage: A descriptive Analysis of Brick Kiln Workers in Punjab, Pakistan**

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**Abstract.** Debt bondage is the most prevalent form of forced labor worldwide. Brick kiln is a hotspot for this kind of slavery. It usually looks like an employment agreement but violation of human rights, lack of proper nutrition and extreme poverty has been eminent in these scenarios. The current study identifies determinants and dynamics of debt bondage of brick kiln workers in Punjab, Pakistan. This mixed method descriptive study investigates diverse aspects around the problem of debt bondage at brick kilns in the vicinity of Upper & South Punjab, Pakistan. Sample sizes of 150 respondents were interviewed from 35 brick kilns of three districts under simple random sampling. The study mainly focused on health, education & economic issues of bonded labor. It was observed that mostly young people due to poor economic condition are forced to work in these brick kiln. Majority of workers around 84% gets daily wages between PKR. 600-900 per 1000 bricks which is very less according to the labor department that has fixed the minimum wage at PKR.1110 per 1,000 bricks & most terrible thing is that, rather than giving amount, they deduct PKR.100-200 or more against their loan amount. Results concluded that working at brick kilns is very laborious, risky to health conditions and working periods extending more than worldwide distinct limit has harmful effects. Major causes comprised lack of education, conflicts and lack of livelihood options. The debt bondage: lack of social contacts, hampered mobility, limited social status, poor economic status, limited access to health services and bitter socialization and education of children. It is recommended that the national government must take tangible steps in the implementation of 1992 Act, regard in elimination of bonded labor system, in ensuring to stop this inhumane practice.

**Keywords:** Modern Slavery, Bonded Labour, Debt Bondage, Brick Kiln Industry, Literacy, Infrastructure

## 1. Introduction

Debt bondage is a wide spread form of forced labor internationally. This form of slavery is rapidly spreading. As people borrow loan they are unable to repay and are required to pay off the dues, then are unable to control the conditions of their debt and employment (LeBaron, 2014). According to Global slavery index (2013) about 3,186,000 of people in Pakistan are living in Modern slavery. According to Labour and Human Resource Department there are 7,966 functional brick kilns only in Punjab province (Victor and Baig, 2018). The brick kiln sector in Pakistan is best characterized as informal sector. Though it contributes a significant 1.5 percent to GDP of the country but it has not been recognized as an industry. The sector is the second highest consumer of coal and accounts for 41% of total coal consumption (Lin and Raza 2020). Pakistan is ranked as third in producing bricks in all over South Asia, As it is producing 45 billion bricks per year having about 18,000 brick kilns all over the country (Khan et al 2019).

Child and bonded labor is prevalent despite being illegal, while a 2004 survey of brick kilns in Punjab by the Federal Bureau of Statistics found that nearly 90 per cent of brick kiln workers were bonded (Ercelawn and Nauman 2004). A research carried out by PILER in Pakistan as part of a project indicates that up to one million brick kiln workers in Pakistan are bonded, the participants of the workshop were informed (Shah, 2008). According to Global Slavery Index (2013) Debt bondage is mostly prevalent in brick making, agriculture, and carpet weaving industries. Debt bondage occurs when people give themselves into slavery as security against a loan or when they inherit a debt from a relative (LeBaron, 2014). It usually looks like an employment agreement but one where the worker starts with a debt to repay – usually in brutal conditions – only to find that repayment of the loan is impossible. Then, their enslavement becomes permanent.

Researchers have shown that bonded labor is designed to exploit workers (Kara 2014; Tomich, 2017). It has been observed that this cyclic procedure starts with a loan, whether taken or inherited, and cannot be paid immediately (Srivastava, 2005). Then, labors have to repay the debt and the employer frequently adds additional expenses. For example, the labor starts with an original debt of \$500 (Shah et al 2020). While working and unable to leave, this worker needs a shelter, food and water. If the employee gets \$8.5 per day after making 1000 bricks than the proprietor tracks on \$2/day to the loan to shield those expenses (Rubab and Parveen 2020). Consequently, the employee only grows his debt while continuing to labor for his debtor, and repayment is impossible.

Many studies have depicted that the debt in this scenario usually passes from generation to generation (Usman et al 2020; Shah et al 2020; Haider and Patra, 2021). A few researches have displayed that employers force the children of employees to labor in the same situation as their parents in order to help pay off their parents' debt or when parents or family members pass away and employers require another body to fill the lost role – all under the pretense of a debt owed (Usman et al 2020). In the context of debt bondage, however, these transfers become the channel through which participation in interlinked transactions by one generation can set off a sequence of increasing indebtedness which affects the welfare, and the ability to break free from debt bondage for all subsequent generation (Nandwani,2020).

Migrant workers are specifically more prone to this type of slavery (Daly et al 2020). As shown in various studies many labor agencies and employers exploit these workers by holding debt or bond over these people (Shrestha, and Thygerson, 2019). These employers does not provide their employees with a

genuine employment term but illegally exploit the preliminary debt by the addition of housing fees, immigration fees, that are designed to never allow the migrant workers to payback their loan.(Kurian, 2017). At some instances the employers of these organizations impound legal immigration papers, thus enabling these employees to entirely depend on them, or necessitate the momentary work in order to preserve their lawful status. In other occurrences, employers fabricate papers or disregard them altogether, once again making migrant workers susceptible and reliant on. In these situations, workers often fear seeking compensation (Haider and Patra 2021).

The estimates by international organizations show that child labor is thriving in Pakistan. ILO reports that there were around 12 million child laborers in Pakistan in 2012 (Thaheem et al 2020). Similarly, ILO points out that the number of underage employees in 2012 exceeded 10 million (International Labour Organization, 2016) In Pakistan, bonded labor is most visible in the brick kiln and agriculture sectors where whole families, including children are made to work in inhuman conditions. According to Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) revealed that there were three to eight million bonded laborers in Pakistan, most of who were engaged in the agriculture and brick kiln sectors (Victor and Baig 2018).

From past two decades the national government is slowly working to eradicate bonded labor. Instead of having anti-slavery and anti-bondage labor laws there is only slight improvement in eliminating these unlawful activities (Lanjawani et al 2020). In 2013, statistics put Pakistan among the top positions in the “Slavery’s List of Shame”. And of its population of 185.13 million people in 2014, the Global Slavery Index Report estimated that more than one per cent of people in Pakistan are enslaved. Though there are a few studies regarding bonded labor and slavery in the national context, but these have only focused on the quantitative aspect. The present study is aimed to explore the cause & effects of debt bondage & also to identify Education, Health & economic condition of the brick kiln workers of Punjab, Pakistan.

This paper aims to identify Education, Health & Economic indicators that lead towards to the slavery of the brick kiln workers & their status of debt bondage. The study further describes the background, working conditions, basic health status and economic conditions of the bonded brick kiln workers. The study then targets to recommend a set of suggestions for reducing debt bondage & improving their work condition.

## 2. Materials and Methods

A combination of quantitative and qualitative research tools are used in the study to gain meaningful insight into the socio-economic context of debt bondage & brick kilns.

### Study Area:

The study was conducted among the brick kiln workers from 35 brick kilns around the districts of Faisalabad, Toba Tek Singh & Khanewal. All the selected brick kiln units of selected area of the district are registered & under private ownership

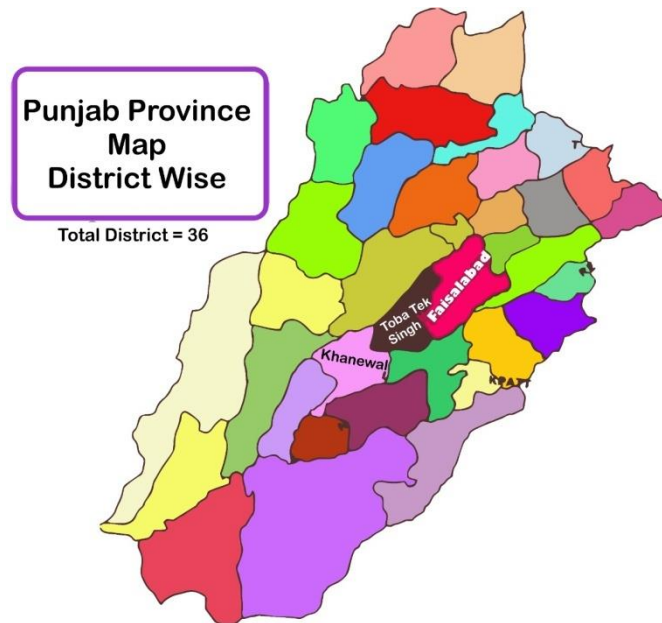


Figure 1: Map of Pakistan Highlighting Study Sites

### Research Methods:

The descriptive study has adopted a holistic approach for understanding the dynamics of debt bondage in the environmental context—workplace, society, and family—rather than focusing solely on child labor. A team of researchers collected primary information through Focus Group Discussions, Key Informant Interviews, and survey of the selected respondents.

### Sampling design:

The data was collected by using a multistage sampling technique, comprising of purposive sampling in first stage, where brick kilns were identified. The purposive sampling was used as the primary sampling techniques, because the objective of the study was to gain in-depth understanding into the dynamics of debt bondage at brick kiln industry. In the second stage respondents were selected within those kilns by using random sampling. By using this technique 35 brick kilns in three districts were identified which were relatively responsive in terms of sharing the information and within those kiln respondents 150 were selected for survey.

For seeking qualitative insight twelve focus groups were conducted with the following categories of respondents; (value in brackets respond to the number of FGDs), Brick Kiln owners/ managers (2) , Male Workers (3), Female Workers (2), Child Workers (2), Members of Association (1) , NGOs representatives working for the Brick Kiln Industry (2)

In addition to focus groups, interviews of the fifteen key informants listed below were conducted for the purpose of cross validating the information collected through other means i.e. FGDs and surveys. Male Brick Kiln Workers (3), Female Brick Kiln workers (1), Child Brick Kiln Workers (2), Member of association (2), Brick Kiln Owners (3), Other Stakeholders Representative (4)

**Data Analysis:**

The quantitative data primarily generated by surveyed & interviewed to the individuals, home to home or work place of the brick kiln workers. The data was cleaned by using lookups, filter, and pivot analysis and cleaned data was analyzed by using IBM SPSS 26 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) and Microsoft Excel by running cross variable analysis, and other data summarization tools.

A descriptive analysis was performed by classifying information collected through FGDs and KIIs into themes, and that information was later used to validate information generated through other means of information collection.

### 3. Results

#### Background Information:

The study provides detailed data regarding the dynamics and diversity of people working in various brick kilns of study sites. The data provided in the study is cumulative of all the targeted districts involved in the research.

Table 1: Gender distribution in brick kilns

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	112	75
Female	38	25
Total	150	100

In the current study it was observed that the male work force dominated the work scenario. As about 75% of males were actively working in the brick kilns as compared to 25% of the female workers (Table 1)

Table 2: Age classification in brick kilns

Age group	Frequency	Percent
10-20	13	8.7
20-30	39	26.0
30-40	60	40.0
40-50	27	18.0
50-60	8	5.3
above 60	3	2.0
Total	150	100.0

The study showed that mostly middle aged work force was more active in the targeted study sites, while the child labor was very minimal. About 40% of the people working were mostly belonged to 30-40 age groups (Table 2).

Table 3: family size of brick kiln workers

Size/ family	Frequency	Percent
1-3	2	1.3
3-5	31	20.7
5-7	65	43.3
7-9	42	28.0
9-11	10	6.7
Total	150	100.0

It was observed that the people working in the brick kilns had large families to support, as about 43% of the people had 5-7 people in the homes to feed (Table 3).

Table 4: Education status among brick kiln workers

Categories	Frequency	Percent
illiterate	120	80.0
primary	23	15.3
Middle	6	4.0
Matriculation	1	.7
Total	150	100.0

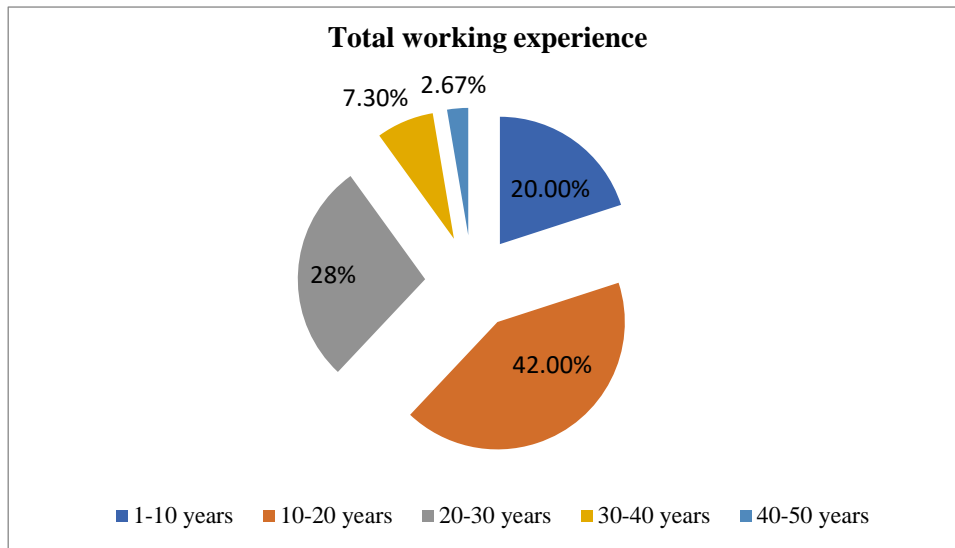
As expected majority of the workers (80%) working in these tough conditions were illiterate (Table 4).

Table 5: Activities during Slack Period

Categories	Frequency	Percent
Stay at home	39	16.7
Labor	80	67.3
Business	1	0.67
Vendor	30	15.3
Total	150	100.0

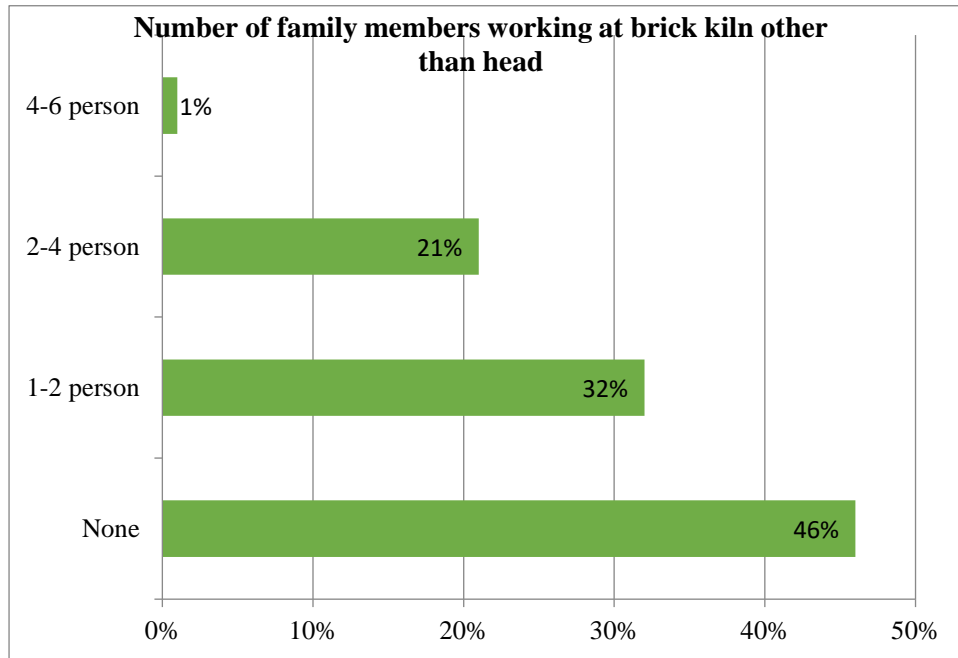
This slack period is very hard for brick kiln workers to spend. It was observed that 16.67% workers have to stay at home while 67.33% do any kind of temporary labor for spending daily life. About 15.33% workers have to do some temporary work as vendor for fresh fruit or vegetables (Table 5)

Fig 2: Working experience of Brick kiln workers



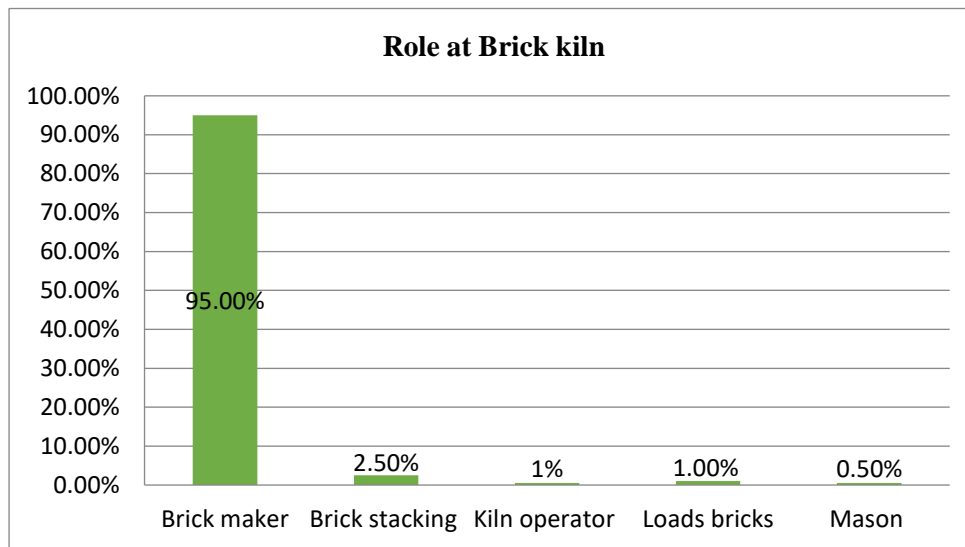
It was observed that mostly the workers (42%) in the kilns were having 10-20 years of experience. There were only 7.3% of people having experience more than 30-40 years. Mostly it was observed that people usually were able to spend about 10-30 years in average. (Fig 2)

Fig 3: Family members working in Brick kilns other than head



The results show that about 32% of the people were also involving their family with themselves in these kilns. But usually the head of family was the ultimate worker in a kiln for supporting his family (Fig 3).

Fig 4: Role of workers at Brick Kilns



**Working Dynamics in Brick Kiln**

It was observed that about 95% of the work forces in the brick kiln are involved in making bricks which is the most laborious work. While rest of the proportion are involved in brick stacking, kiln operator, mason & load bricks workers. (Fig 4)

Fig 5: Working hours at Brick Kilns

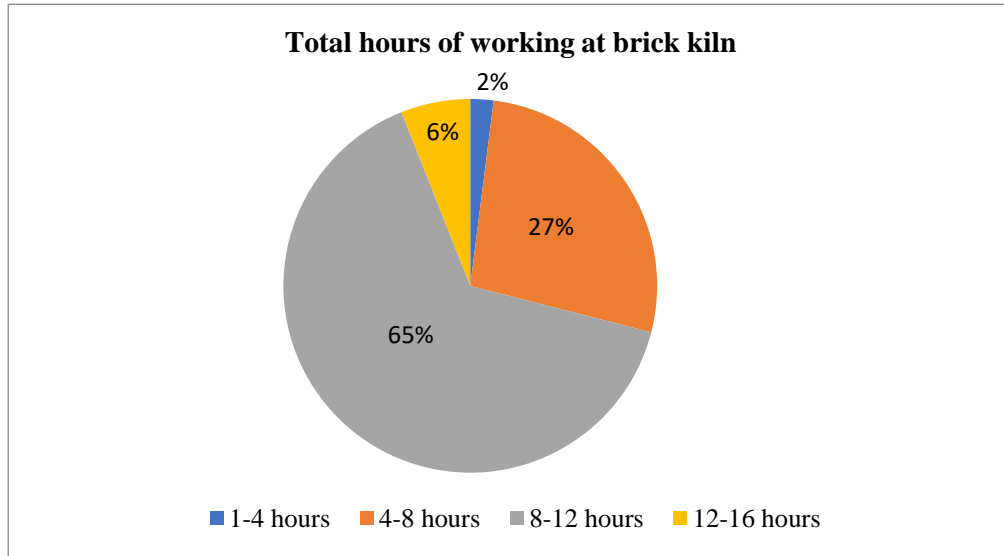
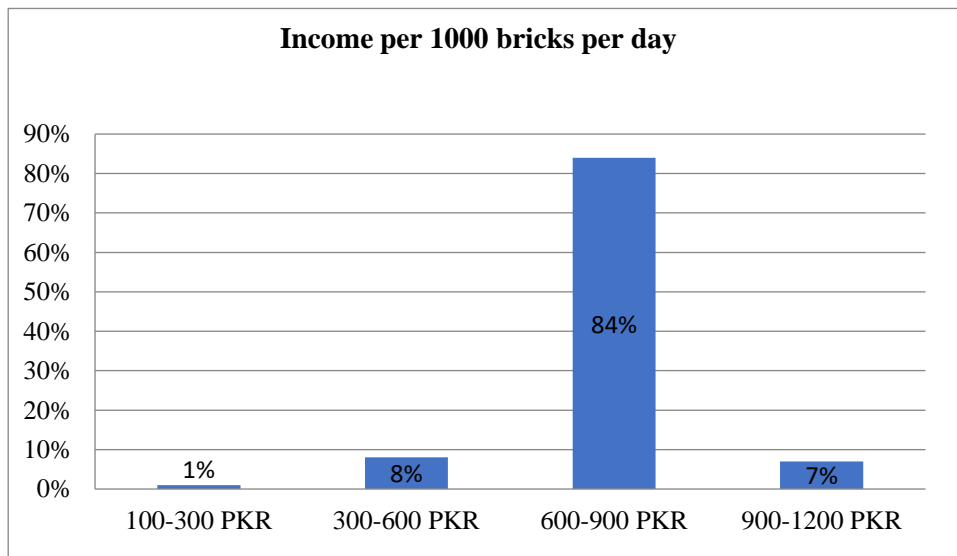


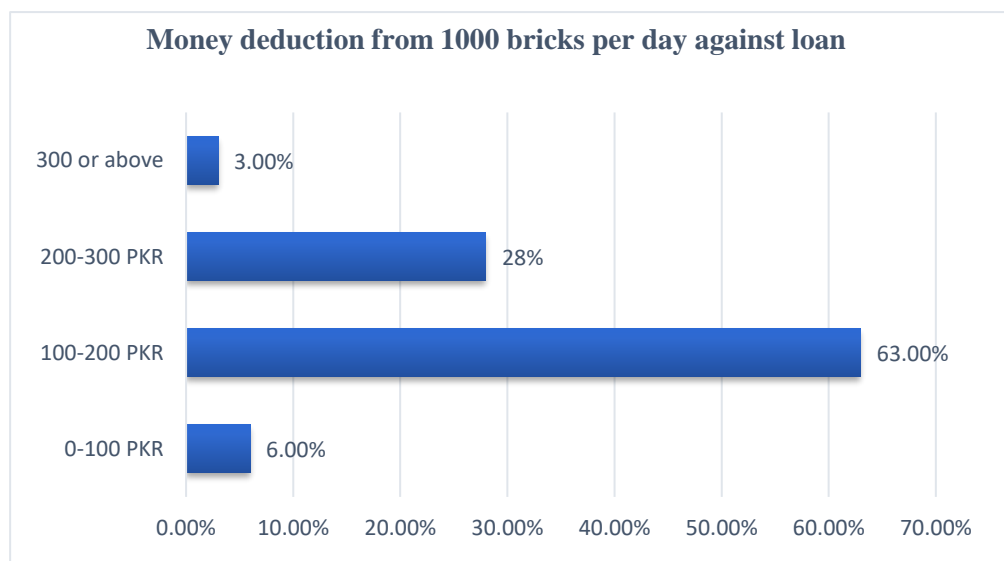
Figure 5 shows that 65% persons are working 8-12 hours a day, 27% are those working 4-8 hours daily, some proportion of 6% working even 12-16 hours a day.

Fig 6: Income per 1000 bricks per day



The results show that brick kiln workers work on extremely bleak monthly income. It was observed that about 84% of the work force in the target area had a daily income of 600-900 PKR. This is even less than 8\$ per day. This is far less than the internationally standardized incomes for workforce. These rates were applied to workers that were making 1000 bricks per day. The people failing to make this amount of bricks were penalized in form of deduction. (Fig 6)

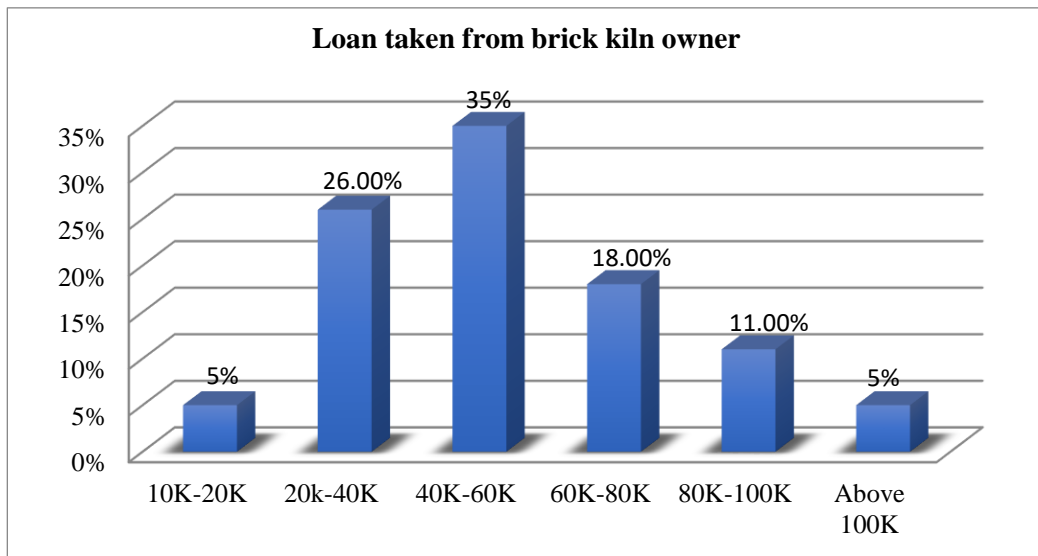
Fig 7: Money deduction from daily income



**Socio-economic Information:**

The results depicted that many respondents (63%) surveyed were being deducted worth 100-200 PKR in the form of debt. The survey showed that the monthly income earned by the brick kiln worker is not sufficient to fulfill the expense of the whole month. As most of the respondents reported monthly expenses to be higher as compared to their salary. (Fig 7)

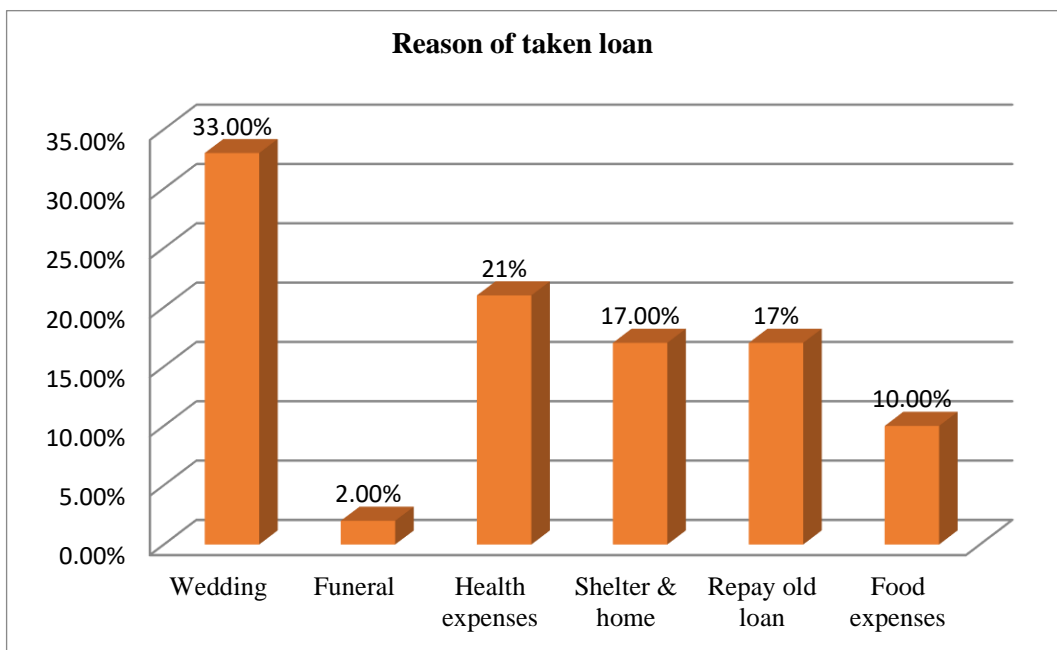
Fig 8: Loan taken from Kiln owners



**Debt Status:**

Our results show that this poverty stricken work force had borrowed large amount of money from the owners. Mostly the labor (35%) had a debt exceeding 60000, while 26% of workers had debt of 20,000-40,000 and 5% are those workers who borrowed money above 100,000 (Fig 8).

Fig 9: Reasons of taking Loan



The results obtained depict few reasons that led this work force to borrow money. It was observed that about 33% workers borrowed money for wedding of their family members. About 17% and 21% workers are those who borrowed money respectively for home or shelter or either building new home, renovate or maintenance their houses and health/medical expenses while apart from these needs about 17% of the workers were obtaining loans to repay their previous loans (Fig 9).

Fig 10: Terms and Conditions for attaining loan

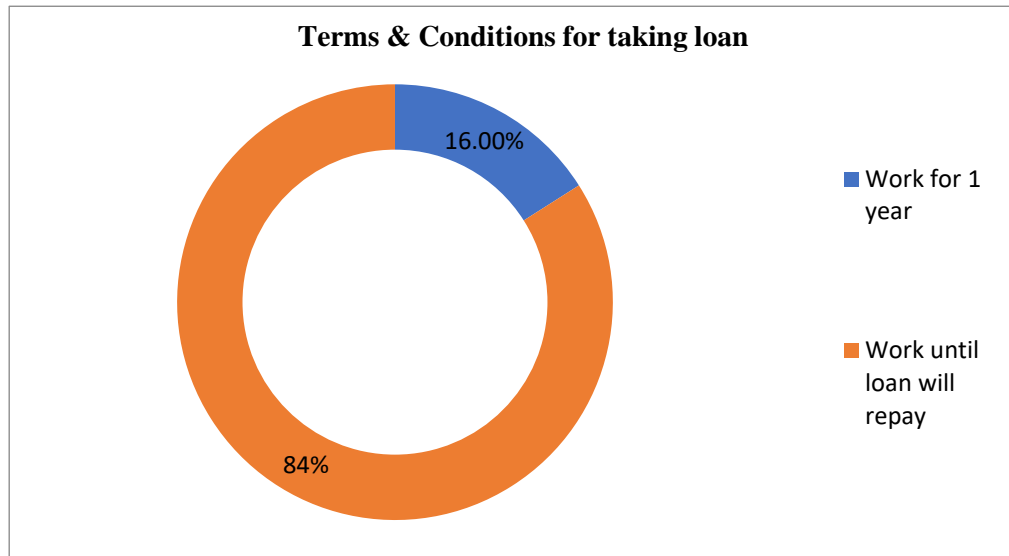


Figure 10 below exhibits term & conditions for repaying loan by the workers. Obtaining loan is very easy but repaying it is much harder for the workers. About 84% workers have to work at the same brick kiln until full repayment of loan and there are 16% workers that have to work at least one year for repayment loan at any cost under the same brick kiln owner.

Fig 11: Period of repaying Loan

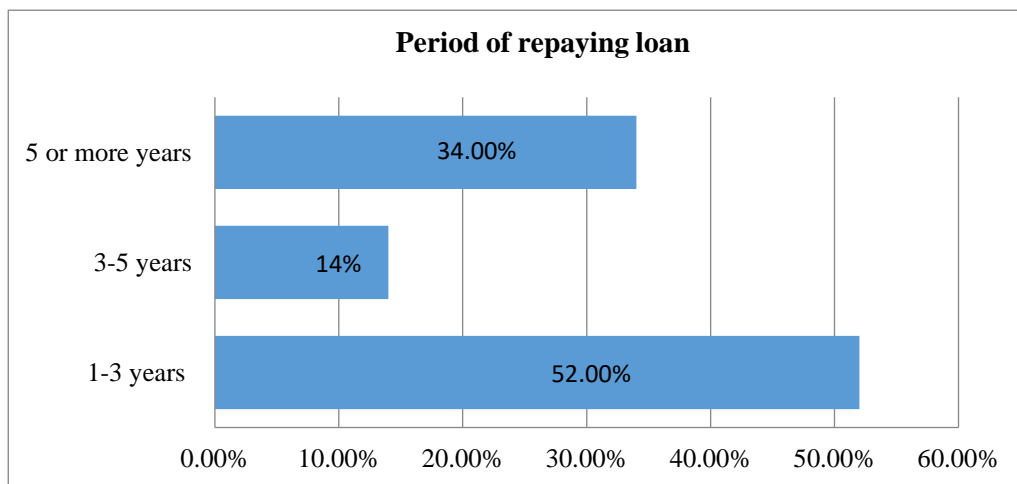
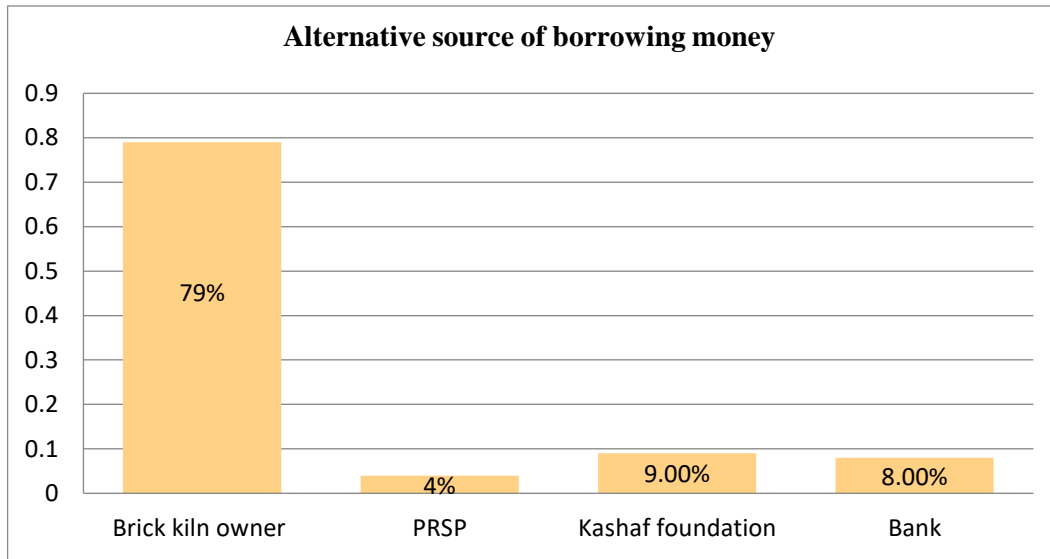


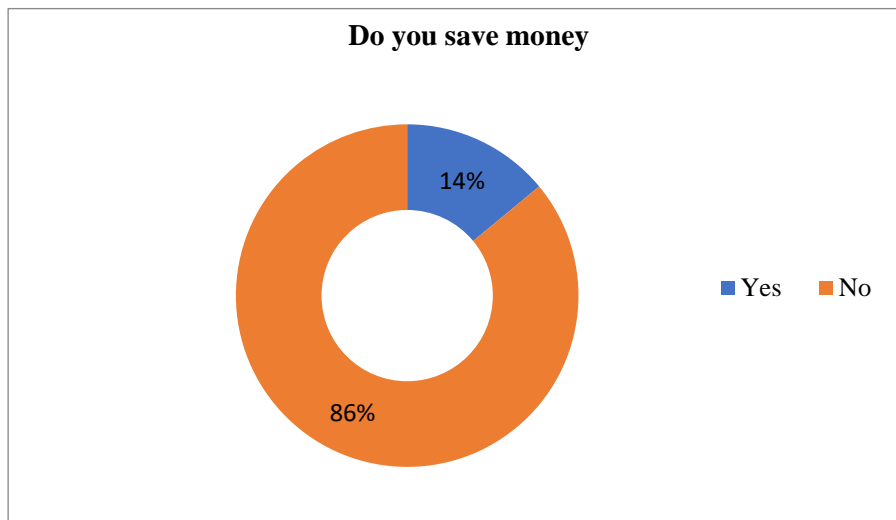
Figure 11 shows that 52% workers repaid their loan amount between 1-3 years where as 34% workers had to bear more than 5 years for repayment of their debt.

Fig 12: Alternative options of getting loan



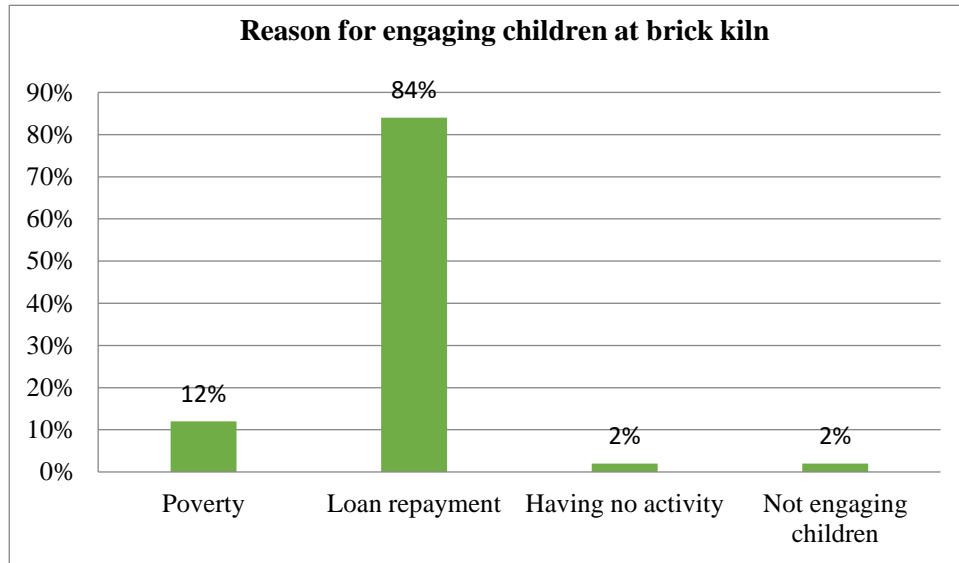
It was observed that there was no alternative source of borrowing money. About 79% workers have no options and therefore have to get loan from kiln owner at any term & condition fixed by the kiln owner (Fig 12). A few proportion of workers had options of getting loan from PRSP, Kashaf foundation & banks respectively.

Fig 13: Money saving habit by brick kiln workers



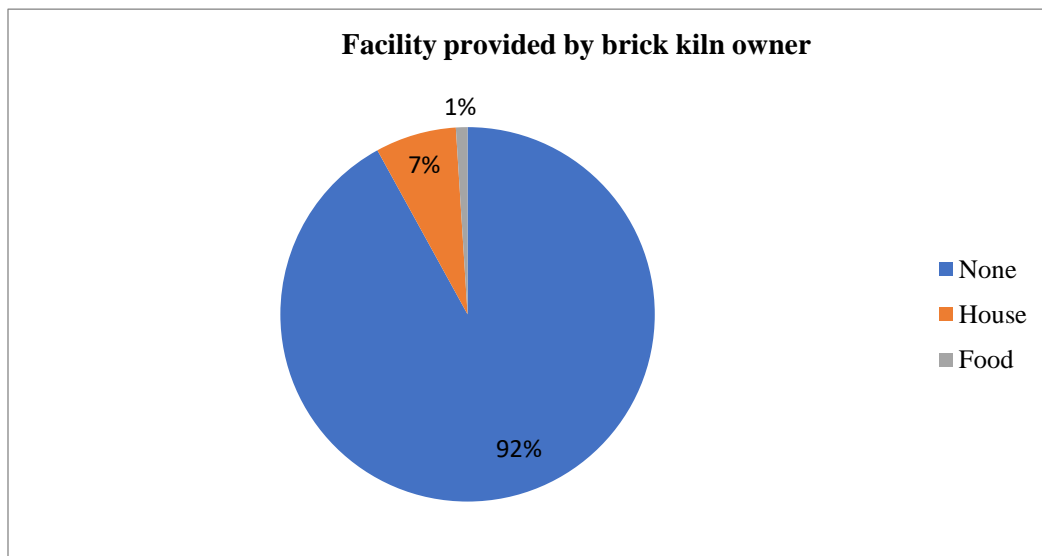
It was seen that 86% workers had no habit of saving money & they had to rely heavily on brick kiln owners (Fig 13).

Fig 14: Reasons of engaging children at brick kiln



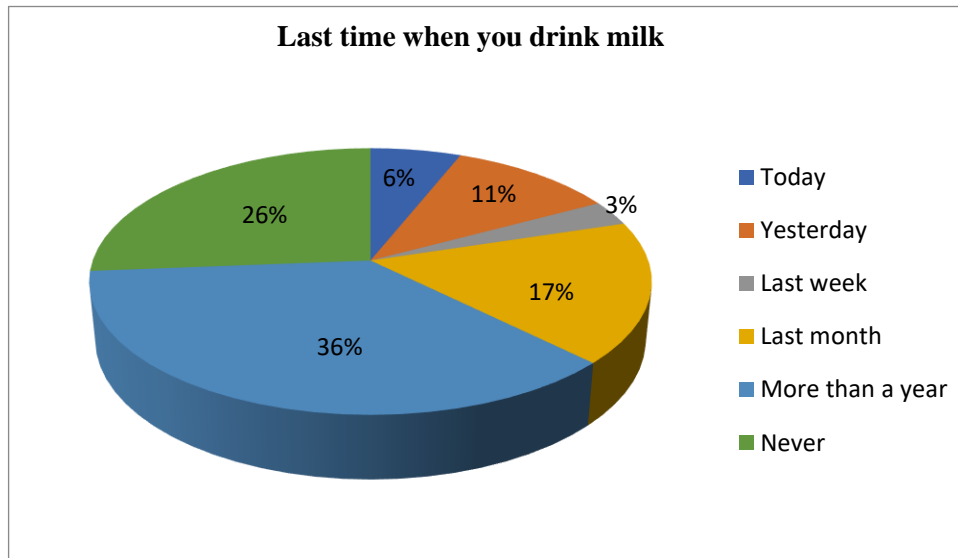
It was depicted that almost 84% parents had to engage their children and other family members into brick kiln work for their loan repayment and 12% of workers involved their family members & children at brick kiln for poverty concerns. A very few (2%) families were not engaging their family members into brick kiln activities (Fig 14)

Fig 15: Facilities provided by brick kiln owners



During the survey, types of brick kiln owners were also determined from the work force. It was observed that about 92% of the brick kiln owners did not give any kind of facilities to their workers (Fig 15). Although all these brick kilns are registered & working under Bonded Labour Act and Factory Act 1934. According to which they are bound to give facilities of housing and food respectively.

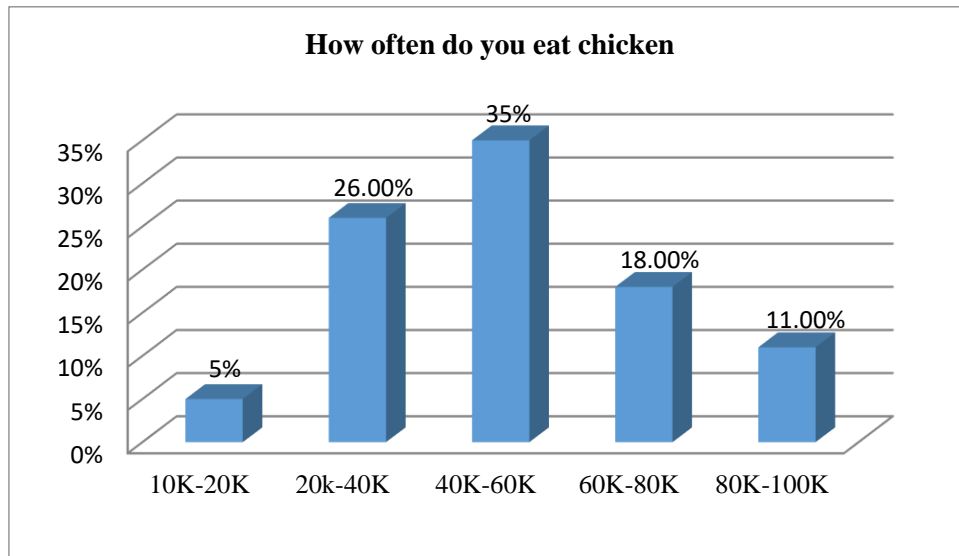
Fig 16: Milk drinking status



**Nutrition Status of the brick kiln workers**

Our results depict an important aspect of brick kiln’s habit of drinking milk. As it is proven by research that milk is necessary one’s bones but in the current study about 36% workers had not drink milk for more than a year. About 26% workers didn’t drink milk in their whole life until now (Fig 16).

Fig 17: Chicken eating status



In our country Pakistan Chicken is easily available & less expensive as compared to beef, mutton & fish but it is evidence from the graph that 52% of the workers eat chicken just once in a month & 13.33% eat chicken over the period of 3 months. 3.33% workers said that they never eat chicken (Fig 17)

#### **4. Discussion**

The current study has clearly shown the socioeconomic dynamics of the debt bonded work force of brick kilns in Punjab Pakistan. It is clearly depicted that the people are working under severe and harsh economic condition while putting their lives in danger. As also depicted by (Sharma et al 2013) in a study conducted in similar conditions. It was observed that most of the work force in these work places were working in order to repay their debt or to obtain new loan. Similar conditions of work and employment obtainment was found in the brick kilns of Sindh and upper Punjab (Usman et al 2020). The study showed that nutritional statuses of these workers were below international standards having very poor diet. Similar situations of brick kiln workers are reported by Das et al (2017) in various parts of the world.

The results suggested domination of male work force in the brick kilns. This information is explained by the fact that in the present culture males are predestined to do major share of the work in order to feed the family (Muhammad et al 2010). But in a few studies it was reported that many kilns were full of family workers. In which each member of the family was involved with the kiln. There are many studies that have depicted the deaths of many workers in brick kilns due to extra work lack of facilities. The daily income of the brick kiln workers were observed to be below the international standards. These results are in accordance with (Thaheem et al 2020) in which similar findings were seen.

The major findings in the current study were about the debt dynamics. The debt bondage in many developing countries is frequently breaking the back of poor people. Which then also become reasons of increasing conflicts and deaths of poor people in such scenarios (Shaikh et al 2020). It was observed that there was an increased burden of family requirements that lead them to ask for loans which then become difficult to pay. Various studies have shown household conditions and family needs are the basic and most vigorous catalyst of taking loans. These loans repayment then makes workers to suffer from life hazardous and difficult conditions.

A study conducted in Sindh showed that there were very little options for the kiln workers in order to ask for loans apart from the kiln owners, which then exploit them in every possible way (Usman et al 2020). Similar results were obtained from the current study which depicted very few to zero options for workers to ask for loans. Further the brick kiln owners through various literatures have been depicted to be of cruel nature, as they do not provide basic necessities to their workers. Similar results were found in the targeted sites as the workers said that the brick kiln owners had the worst behavior and were not providing facilities like housing and better nutrition.

#### **Policy Implication and Recommendations**

Debt Bondage is a complex problem, with many factors playing their part. It has their roots in poverty, discrimination and a weak protection of vulnerable people by law. It also lies in unhelpful societal attitudes that accept exploitative practices, for example child marriage or domestic work. We have to tackle the root causes of slavery in order to minimize the debt bondage for good. A few recommendation would be beneficial in the brick kiln industry & the debt bondage.

- The brick kiln associations should be formed at district level and its capacity should be built to disseminate knowledge about rules and regulation, along with lobbying for the workers' rights, and providing support to the workers.
- All forms of slavery/debt bondage must be criminalized, and authorities aggressively pursue the culprits

- Field Based vocational training to the workers should be provided to build their capacity and reduce their vulnerability as being dependent on single source of income, women and girl child should targeted under this intervention.
- Governments must ensure that individuals and communities are protected from slavery by ensuring the law is implemented, and by practical anti-discrimination and anti-poverty policies
- Livelihood program for brick kiln workers should be started or they should be linked to the existing microfinance institutions/NGOs. A customized project is required which can mobilize workers and create linkages with existing program/projects to fulfill their capital needs
- Illiteracy is one of the contributing factors which promote exploitation, as most of the workers can't keep track of their loans—how much they have paid and how much is left. Adult functional literacy program should be implemented, so that their capacity to keep track of their earning and outstanding loan amount.
- Immigration policies should not make migrants vulnerable to slavery
- The knowledge about Bonded Labour/Child Labour Abolition Framework (the rules, regulations, and right of the workers as granted under various acts, laws) needs to be disseminated among all the stakeholders through targeted advocacy program
- Child protection policies must be implemented & all the children must be protected from child labor and slavery and that they have the right to education and good childhood.

## **5. Conclusion**

According to the information collected through primary & secondary data, it can be concluded that roots of bonded labor lies not in one area rather it is spread across the whole system of brick kiln industry which promote debt bondage.

In our research, study shows that education is the most significant factor in debt bondage & brick kiln industry. In primary data collection phase we have found that 80% or 120 out of 150 sample size of brick kiln workers are illiterate which definitely leads to poverty & so many financial & social problems in their life. Poverty results in lack of savings and wider income expenditure gap. Lack of savings increase vulnerability as a poor household is unable to bear wedding, death or emergency related expenses. So in case where money is required, borrowing remains the only choice. In the absence of any social safety net and peers who can lend money debt bondage comes as a natural choice.

In order to restrict this nuisance of debt bondage, the stakeholders across the whole system of brick kiln industry have to manage holistically. Given in the illustration it can be seen that welfare of the brick kiln workers in nowhere comes in the list of priorities of most of the associations of brick kilns as well as the govt. Debt Bondage is a complex problem, with many factors playing their part. It has their roots in poverty, discrimination and a weak protection of vulnerable people by law. It also lies in unhelpful societal attitudes that accept exploitative practices, for example child marriage or domestic work

**Table 6: Concluding Findings**

Size of a family / per household	5-7 persons
Bricks produced per day	Adults: 1000 per day
Hours / day per week	Adults: 8-12 hours/day / 6 days/week
Wages	Wages per 1000 bricks in a day 700 - 900 Pakistani Rupees (around 7-9 US dollars) per 1000 bricks
In-kind facilities by brick kiln owner	Shelter, electricity, water
Current average debt	Average per family: 50,000 – 100,000 Pakistani Rupees (a little over 500-1000 US dollars)
Reasons for Debt	Most advances are taken to pay for basic necessities, wedding, repayment of debt, shelter/home, health related expense & food expenses in off season of brick kiln
Average family member working at brick kiln	2-3 persons
Most frequent Incident occurs at brick kiln	Bone fracture, burnt & fight
Great wishes of brick kiln workers	51% want to start their own business, 20% want to give their children to higher education, 14% want their own houses
Residence	43% having their own houses whereas 57% living in the nearby villages
Estimation of monthly ration	29 % having monthly ration expenses between 6000-8000, 26% having said monthly expenses 8000-10000

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