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# EMPOWERING WOMEN WORKERS IN KRETEK AND BEEDI INDUSTRIES: LEGAL REFORMS FOR SAFETY, EQUALITY, AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the socio-economic and health challenges faced by female workers in the Kretek and Beedi industries in Indonesia and India, respectively. These industries, while culturally significant, involve labor-intensive processes that predominantly employ women in rural areas. However, the working conditions are hazardous, exposing workers to respiratory illnesses, musculoskeletal disorders, and chronic diseases, compounded by low wages and insufficient labor protections. This research highlights the disparity in regulatory frameworks between the two industries, with Indonesia's Kretek industry benefiting from better safety standards compared to the informal Beedi sector. Despite the challenges, both industries contribute significantly to the local economy, particularly through the employment of marginalized women. The study proposes policy reforms that aim to improve occupational safety, wage equality, and social security for female workers, ensuring their economic and social empowerment. Recommendations include strengthening labor laws, formalizing employment structures, and offering skill development and healthcare initiatives. By creating a protective legal environment and prioritizing gender equality, this research calls for collaborative efforts from governments, industries, and NGOs to foster a sustainable, inclusive future for these workers. The findings emphasize the urgent need to balance cultural preservation with worker welfare, ensuring long-term stability for both sectors.

**Keywords**: Female Workers; Kretek Industry; Beedi Industry; Labor Rights; Economic Sustainability.

# A. Introduction

The global history of tobacco consumption dates back to approximately 600 BC, originating from the indigenous cultures of the American continent. Native Americans used tobacco in ritualistic and recreational practices, often smoking it through pipes. This tradition piqued the interest of European explorers, most notably during the 1492 Columbus expedition, which marked the beginning of tobacco's journey across continents (Astuti et al., 2020). Over centuries, tobacco use evolved into diverse forms, leading to the development of region-specific products that reflect local cultures and resources.

In Indonesia, one such unique evolution is **Kretek**—a cigarette distinguished by its blend of tobacco, cloves, and a signature sauce mixture. Deep rooted in Indonesian heritage, Kretek transcends its role as a mere tobacco product; it embodies a rich cultural identity. The name "Kretek" itself is onomatopoeic, derived from the crackling sound produced by burning cloves. The origin of Kretek can be traced to Kudus Regency at the end of the 19th century, where, according to popular lore, Haji Djamari discovered the soothing effects of cloves for his chest pain. By blending ground cloves with tobacco and rolling them into cigarettes, Djamari inadvertently

birthed Indonesia's signature smoking product. Kretek has since become a vital pillar of Indonesia's economy, supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and employing millions, particularly in rural areas (Galang & Pratama, 2018).

Similarly, in India, **Beedi** (often referred to as the "poor man's cigarette") occupies a comparable cultural and economic niche. Beedis are thin, hand-rolled cigarettes composed of sundried tobacco flakes wrapped in Tendu leaves (*Diospyros melanoxylon*). This distinct wrapping not only provides a unique flavor but also differentiates Beedis from conventional cigarettes as it's smaller (Around 5 to 6 cm long and less than 0,5 cm thick, making it smaller than conventional cigarette of around 10 cm long and 1 cm thick). Originating as an affordable alternative to massproduced cigarettes, Beedis have grown into a substantial industry that employs approximately 4.4 million workers, the majority of whom are women and marginalized laborers from rural communities (Bhaskar et al., 2016). The beedi industry plays an essential role in India's informal economy, preserving artisanal traditions and sustaining millions of livelihoods (Mallick & Satpathy, 2021).

Despite their significance, both the Kretek and Beedi industries face mounting challenges from international health regulations, rising excise duties, and shifting social perceptions. Kretek, often labeled a cultural artifact, is increasingly scrutinized under global anti-smoking campaigns (Galang et al., 2016), while Beedi continues to carry the stigma of being a "poor man's cigarette," limiting its international recognition (Sarkar, 2024). In 2024, Indonesia raised excise duties on Kretek by over 10%, while India implemented a 16% increase on Beedis—disproportionately impacting SMEs that lack the financial resilience of large tobacco manufacturers.

A critical, yet often overlooked, dimension of these industries is their reliance on **women workers**. In both Indonesia and India, women constitute a significant portion of the workforce engaged in rolling Kreteks and Beedis by hand. This labor-intensive process not only offers economic opportunities to women in low-income households but also exposes them to unsafe working conditions and inadequate health protections. While Kretek manufacturers contend with heavy taxation and stringent regulations, Beedi workers grapple with poor occupational safety and minimal regulatory oversight.

Beyond economic factors, the significance of this research lies in its potential to inform policies that address the dual challenges of economic sustainability and social equity within these traditional industries. While existing studies have largely focused on the health implications of tobacco consumption or the economic impact of these industries, this study shifts the lens to the often-overlooked workforce, particularly women, who are integral to the survival of Kretek and Beedi production. By proposing a protection model that prioritizes workplace safety, skill development, and financial independence for female workers, this research offers actionable insights for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and advocacy groups. Ultimately, this study not only contributes to the academic discourse on labor rights and gender equity but also provides a roadmap for fostering a more inclusive and sustainable future for these culturally significant industries (Mukherjee, 2024). In Kretek factories, the repetitive nature of hand-rolling, coupled with insufficient ergonomic measures, exacerbates the risk of musculoskeletal disorders (Welker, 2024).

A critical aspect of this research is to examine the gendered dimensions of labor rights within these industries and propose strategies that not only enhance occupational safety but also empower women economically and socially. This could include policy recommendations such as improved labor protections, access to healthcare, skill development programs, and financial literacy initiatives tailored for female workers. By investing in the well-being and professional growth of women, both Indonesia and India can cultivate a more equitable and sustainable workforce, reinforcing the economic stability of the Kretek and Beedi sectors. **These research objectives are:** (1) To observe the obstacles in developing a protection model that addresses the economic vulnerabilities faced by female workers in the Kretek and Beedi industries, advocating for

improved labor conditions, equitable wages, and access to social security, while preserving the cultural heritage of these traditional sectors; and (2) To develop a protection model able to enhance the economic and social empowerment of women within the Kretek and Beedi industries by proposing strategies that prioritize workplace safety, skill development, and upward mobility, ensuring their well-being and long-term financial independence.

## B. Method

This study adopts a comparative legal analysis approach by doing a thorough examination of legal frameworks governing the Kretek and Beedi industries. This study adopts a doctrinal research approach, utilizing literature-based analysis to examine the legal, economic, and social dimensions of the Kretek and Beedi industries, with a particular focus on the welfare of female workers. By synthesizing existing data, legal frameworks, and scholarly literature, the research aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by women in these industries and propose actionable policy reforms.

This study conducts a comprehensive review of academic literature, government reports, and industry publications on the Kretek and Beedi industries, focusing on labor conditions, economic vulnerabilities, cultural significance, and legal frameworks affecting female workers. A comparative legal analysis of Indonesia and India examines key regulations, such as Indonesia's Government Regulation No. 109/2012 and India's Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA), 2003, assessing their impact on workplace safety, wages, and social security. Case studies and secondary data from reputable sources like the ILO and WHO provide insights into working conditions, economic contributions, and policy effectiveness, highlighting existing gaps and areas for reform.

#### C. Results and Discussions

# 1. Obstacles in Developing a Protection Model for Female Workers in the Kretek and Beedi Industries

## a. Health Hazards: Addressing Occupational Risks for Female Workers

Female workers in the Beedi and Kretek industries face severe health risks due to prolonged tobacco exposure and poor working conditions. These include respiratory illnesses, skin conditions, and chronic diseases from harmful chemicals. Many work in poorly ventilated spaces without protective gear, heightening their vulnerability (Ravi et al., 2024).

A study by Tyagi et al. (2023) across 14 Indian states highlights alarming health issues among Beedi workers: 52.5% suffer from respiratory problems, 87% from musculoskeletal disorders, 70% from gastrointestinal issues, and 60% from neurological conditions. Female workers, who form the majority, face additional risks like cervical cancer, pregnancy complications, and chromosomal abnormalities. Their children are also more prone to respiratory infections, stunted growth, and other illnesses due to secondhand tobacco exposure (Sabale et al., 2012).

The shift of Beedi production to household-based work, driven by regulations and tax policies, has worsened these health hazards. Now, 99.31% of Beedi workers operate from home, often in cramped, unventilated spaces. Lacking protective equipment and legal protections, they endure low wages and poor working conditions, falling below National Minimum Wage Norms (Singh, 2014). Many cannot afford healthcare, trapping them in cycles of poverty and illness (Rahmatullah et al., 2022).

In contrast, Indonesia's Kretek industry has taken steps to improve worker safety. The government enforces factory standards under Regulation No. 200/PMK.04/2008, requiring manufacturers to operate in regulated spaces of at least 200 square meters. This prevents hazardous substances like nicotine and eugenol from being handled in unsafe home

environments. While small-scale producers face challenges, these regulations promote better health and workplace conditions (Rahmawati et al., 2024).

These initiatives highlight a cooperative legal framework that seeks to balance economic sustainability with occupational health standards while preserving the cultural heritage of Kretek production as Protection of kretek can also be said to be an urgency because no matter how much the world ostracizes kretek such as in America which prohibits kretek from entering as stated in the Family Smoking Prevention And Tobacco Control Act 2009, this product is apparently being eyed by the international world because of its economic potential as done by Phillip Morris International which produces Marlboro kretek mint which was launched in Mexico. This fact is certainly worrying because until now kretek has not received strong protection from the government.

The Beedi industries may be still far in production and revenue rate than Kretek, but one thing to note is that both product start as a "Poor Man's Cigarrette" with the latter managed to gain success first, and it is possible that Beedi might become India's Signature Cigarrette if handled well.

Although both the Beedi and Kretek industries employ large numbers of female workers, the stark differences in their regulatory frameworks and working conditions illustrate the importance of government intervention in safeguarding worker health. While the Kretek industry benefits from structured policies that mitigate some occupational hazards, Beedi workers—particularly women—continue to suffer from exploitative labor practices, inadequate wages, and severe health risks. Addressing these disparities requires a multi-faceted approach, including stronger enforcement of labor laws, improved access to healthcare services, and the implementation of protective measures that prioritize worker well-being over industrial profit. Without such interventions, the cycle of poverty and disease among female workers in the Beedi industry will persist, endangering not only their health but also the well-being of future generations.

## b. Wage Disparities: Ensuring Equitable Wages for Female Workers

Female workers in the Kretek and Beedi industries often earn significantly less than their male counterparts and workers in other sectors, perpetuating economic inequality and financial insecurity. As of 2023, there are approximately 49.82 lakh registered Beedi workers in India, of which 36.25 lakh (72.7%) are women. Despite their overwhelming presence in the workforce, female Beedi workers face persistent wage disparities. In 2010-11, women constituted 82.8% of the total unorganized sector Beedi manufacturing employment, yet their wages remained disproportionately low. Data from 2000 to 2011 reveals a troubling trend: the average per capita wage of a Beedi worker in the organized sector was only 25% of the average wage in the entire manufacturing sector in 2000-01, declining to 20% in 2005-06 and 17% in 2010-11. Genderbased wage gaps are also evident, with male workers earning INR 7,737.7 more annually than female workers in 2000-01. Although this gap narrowed slightly to INR 6,327.8 in 2005-06, it widened again to INR 6,610.7 by 2010-11. Contractual workers, who are predominantly women, are paid the lowest wages, while managerial roles, often occupied by men, command higher salaries (Monika & Datta, 2018).

In contrast, Indonesia's tobacco manufacturing industry has the highest percentage of female workers in the manufacturing sector, with women comprising 66% of the workforce. This is higher than other female-dominated sectors such as garments (63%) and textiles (56%). Additionally, about 69% of tobacco sector workers have only completed junior high school at most, indicating lower educational attainment compared to other industries. Among tobacco households, 78% have female tobacco workers, further emphasizing the industry's dependence on female labor. The average years of schooling for tobacco manufacturing workers is 8.22 years, placing them among the least-educated workforce segments, comparable to the food

processing sector (8.50 years), wood products manufacturing (7.31 years), nonmetallic metal products manufacturing (7.42 years), furniture production (8.77 years), and recycling industries (5.20 years) (Araujo et al., 2018) where Tobacco Excise (CHT) is the largest contributor to Indonesia's excise revenue. In 2023, state revenue from CHT will be IDR 210.29 trillion (Beacukai, 2024).

The gender wage gap in the Indonesian tobacco industry remains a significant concern. Female production workers earn approximately 25% less than their male counterparts. This wage disparity is partly attributed to differences in educational attainment, with female workers averaging 7.7 years of schooling compared to 8.4 years for males (Welker, 2024). Additionally, men are more likely to be employed in higher-paying positions, such as machine operators, while women predominantly occupy lower-paid roles like hand-rolling cigarettes (Baskoro et al., 2024). These structural inequalities highlight the need for policies that promote equal pay and better opportunities for female workers in the industry.

While not without its challenges in work environment, the kretek Industry in Indonesia has implemented measures to improve workplace safety and regulatory oversight. The Indonesian government has taken steps to ensure safer working conditions for Kretek workers, demonstrating a more structured approach to worker welfare. For instance, Article 3, Paragraph 3 of the Regulation of the Minister of Finance No. 200/PMK.04/2008 mandates that cigarette manufacturers operate factories with a minimum area of 200 square meters. While this regulation poses challenges for small-scale home-based industries, it enforces safety standards by ensuring that hazardous substances such as nicotine and eugenol are handled in regulated environments rather than in domestic settings.

The Kudus Regency government has taken proactive steps to support the Kretek industry while maintaining worker protections. Regulation Number 7 of 2011 provides designated factory spaces commonly known as *Lingkungan Industri Kecil-Industri Hasil Tembakau* (LIK-IHT) that was introduced in 2011, that later got changed to *Kawasan Industri Hasil Tembakau* (KIHT) in 2020 for small tobacco producers, where with just 4 million rupiahs each year, they can 'rent' the factory that fulfill the criteria, reducing the risks associated with home-based manufacturing (Antaranews, 2020). Additionally, the regulation mandates tar and nicotine testing services to monitor product safety and limit workers' exposure to excessive toxins, smoking machine and a gas chromatograph for tar analysis, and a wastewater treatment plant (IPAL) (Poernomo et al., 2016). These initiatives highlight a cooperative legal framework that seeks to balance economic sustainability with occupational health standards while preserving the cultural heritage of Kretek production.

Although both the Beedi and Kretek industries employ large numbers of female workers, the stark differences in their regulatory frameworks and working conditions illustrate the importance of government intervention in safeguarding worker health. While the Kretek industry benefits from structured policies that mitigate some occupational hazards, Beedi workers—particularly women—continue to suffer from exploitative labor practices, inadequate wages, and severe health risks. Addressing these disparities requires a multi-faceted approach, including stronger enforcement of labor laws, improved access to healthcare services, and the implementation of protective measures that prioritize worker well-being over industrial profit. Without such interventions, the cycle of poverty and disease among female workers in the Beedi industry will persist, endangering not only their health but also the well-being of future generations.

These wage disparities are exacerbated by the piece-rate payment system, which disadvantages female workers who often have lower productivity due to caregiving responsibilities. Additionally, the lack of transparency in wage structures and payment practices allows employers to exploit workers, particularly women, with impunity. Despite the existence of labor laws aimed at protecting workers, enforcement remains weak, and many female Beedi

workers continue to earn wages far below the legal minimum. This economic vulnerability not only undermines their financial independence but also limits their access to healthcare, education, and other essential services.

# 2. Creating A Model to Enhance Economic and Social Empowerment of Female Workers in the Kretek and Beedi Industries

# a. Balancing the Cultural preservation and Economic Factor for both Sectors

Both Beedi and Kretek hold significant cultural value in their respective countries. Beedi, often called the "poor man's cigarette," is a forest product made from tendu leaves and tobacco flakes. The beedi industry operates largely in the informal sector, characterized by unregistered enterprises and a lack of formal labor protections. (Kumar et al., 2025) Beedi production involves four key steps: rewinding the thread, cutting the leaves, rolling with tobacco, and folding the head. Much of this work is done at home, making it difficult to establish clear employer-employee relationships and allowing manufacturers to bypass labor laws (Mallick & Satpathy, 2021). Beedi manufacturers require multiple government registrations and authorizations to operate.

Kretek, unlike Beedi, originated as a medicinal remedy. This Indonesian cigarette blends dried tobacco with cloves, producing a crackling sound when smoked. Kretek remains a cultural heritage, primarily crafted by hand. It varies between non-filter and filter types, with high-quality kretek using domestic tobacco renowned for its unique taste, influenced by Indonesia's fertile soil and cultivation methods (Hutapea, 2013). Kretek-making is a complex process due to the variety of tobaccos used—some brands mix over 30 types to achieve their signature flavor (Yusrul et al., 2018). Indonesian tobacco classifications are based on region rather than conventional categories due to environmental factors (Ruth & Sianturi, 2014).

Balancing cultural significance with health and safety is crucial, especially for the many female workers in these industries. Regulatory reforms should enforce workplace safety, including protective gear and improved ventilation (Widodo et al., 2024). Health awareness programs, tailored to workers' literacy and social norms, should educate them on occupational hazards, preventive measures, and proper material handling (Sultana, 2023). Governments and NGOs should establish subsidized healthcare initiatives, such as mobile clinics, to provide screenings and treatment for tobacco-related illnesses.

For beedi workers, enforcing labor laws like the Minimum Wages Act 1948 and Provident Funds Act 1925 would improve wages and job security. Formalizing the industry by reducing reliance on contractors would also help protect workers' rights. Additionally, vocational training programs could provide alternative livelihood opportunities, particularly for women (Rameez et al., 2023).

A potential solution for the beedi industry is implementing LIK IHT—a system allowing informal workers to rent regulated workspaces that meet safety standards. This would ensure product quality through on-site testing labs, increasing competitiveness beyond the label of a "poor man's cigarette." Programs should be community-driven to align with cultural and economic realities, fostering sustainable development and worker well-being.

# b. Legal Framework for Empowering Female Workers in the Kretek and Beedi Industries

After the discussion presented above, it can be concluded that Women plays a major role on both Kretek and Beedi Industries. While kretek faced a problem in its industry, Beedi, in it's work implementation faced an even more major problem as most workers are informal, hence, the lack of social security and safety protocol. On the other side, Beedi, if the industry were to be correctly directed, it can be as big as Kretek Industries like in Indonesia, acting as one of the

pillars of the Nastion's economy. That is why the Author would like to propose several Legal Framework for Empowering Female Workers in the Kretek and Beedi Industries by formulationg a Policy Reforms: Strengthening Labor Laws and Enforcement Mechanisms, to address the systemic challenges faced by female workers in the Kretek and Beedi industries, comprehensive policy reforms are essential. Governments must enact and enforce stronger labor laws that prioritize workplace safety, equitable wages, and formal employment by implementing the LIK IHT system. This includes mandating the use of protective equipment (e.g., masks, gloves) and ensuring proper ventilation in production facilities to mitigate health risks associated with tobacco handling. Additionally, equal pay legislation should be strictly enforced to eliminate gender-based wage gaps, with penalties for non-compliance. To formalize employment, SMEs should be incentivized through tax breaks or subsidies to register their workers and comply with labor standards. Governments must also establish robust monitoring mechanisms, such as regular wage audits and workplace inspections, to ensure compliance with these laws. By creating a legal environment that prioritizes worker safety and gender equality, female workers can be better protected and empowered.

To ensure the effectiveness of this legal framework, a multi-stakeholder approach is essential. Governments, industry leaders, NGOs, and worker representatives must collaborate to implement and monitor these initiatives. Regular evaluations should be conducted to assess the impact of policy reforms, training programs, and economic opportunities on female workers' well-being and empowerment. Feedback mechanisms, such as worker-led committees, can help identify challenges and refine strategies to better meet the needs of women in the Kretek and Beedi industries.

## D. Conclusion

The discussion highlights the significant challenges faced by female workers in the Kretek and Beedi industries, particularly in terms of health hazards and wage disparities. Female workers in these industries are exposed to severe occupational risks, including respiratory illnesses, musculoskeletal disorders, and long-term chronic diseases due to poor working conditions and lack of protective measures. The shift to home-based production in the Beedi industry has further exacerbated these risks, leaving workers, especially women, vulnerable to exploitation and without access to social security or fair wages. In contrast, the Kretek industry in Indonesia has made strides in improving workplace safety through regulatory measures, though challenges such as wage disparities and gender inequality persist.

The stark differences in regulatory frameworks between the two industries underscore the importance of government intervention to protect worker health and ensure equitable wages. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach, including stronger enforcement of labor laws, improved access to healthcare, and the implementation of protective measures that prioritize worker well-being. Additionally, initiatives to provide alternative livelihood skills and formalize employment through systems like LIK IHT (*Kawasan Industri Hasil Tembakau*) can help reduce dependence on hazardous work and improve economic stability for female workers.

Ultimately, empowering female workers in the Kretek and Beedi industries demands a collaborative effort involving governments, industry leaders, NGOs, and worker representatives. By balancing cultural preservation with economic and health considerations, and by implementing comprehensive legal and policy reforms, it is possible to create a sustainable model that safeguards the rights and well-being of female workers while fostering economic growth and social empowerment. Without such interventions, the cycle of poverty, exploitation, and poor health among female workers in these industries will persist, endangering not only their futures but also the well-being of future generations.

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