Bholagonj’s Stone Quarry Workers - A Life of Constant Struggle, Sylhet, Bangladesh

Overview
This case study focuses on the stone quarry workers of Bholagonj, in Bangladesh’s north-eastern province of Sylhet, and the innumerable problems they face on a daily basis. Like many other poor Bangladeshis, the Bholagonj’s stone quarry workers work in miserable and precarious conditions, and are routinely exploited and harassed by quarry owners, corrupt local authorities and mafia-type local gangs. Despite these hardships, the local community has been largely ignored by the government, and there has been a striking lack of regional government initiatives to help the quarry workers, particularly the most vulnerable groups that need help the most - the women and child workers.

Geographical Profile
Bholagonj is the largest stone quarry in Bangladesh, and is situated in the West Islampur Union\(^1\) of Companiganj Upazila in Sylhet Division\(^2\) 48 km northwest of Sylhet city. The Bholagonj stone quarry is surrounded by Chhatak Upazila in the west, Sylhet Sadar Upazila in the south, Gowainghat Upazila in the east, and the Indian state of Meghalaya in the north. Bholagonj covers an area of about 3 square kilometres, of which the main quarry takes up about 1.5 square kilometres.

Flowing westward from India, Dhalai river enters Bangladesh at Bholagonj, making its way through the unions of Dayar bazaar, Tuker bazaar and Islampur, and joining up with Piyain river near Companiganj. It’s here that Musai waterfall streams down from Khasi and Jaintia mountains, in the Indian state of Meghalaya, across the border. Musai waterfall has its source near the small mountain station of Cherapunji which is nestled away high up in the East Khasi hills, and is known as the wettest place on earth. Dhalai and Piyain River carry with them vast quantities of stone, which clog up around Bholagonj, Jaflong, Ballaghat and Bicknakandi, forming a series of bottlenecks. These bottlenecks are ideal places for gathering stone, and many stone quarries have been set up around this area. Most of the stone labourers of Bholagonj stone quarry reside in the villages of East and West Islampur Unions (see Table 1).

Summary of Issues
- The Bholagonj stone quarry, situated in the Sylhet Division in north-eastern Bangladesh, employs thousands of stone quarry workers, who mine stones either out of the waterways off boats called barkee or by digging wells.
- Stone quarry workers encounter miserable work conditions and live in squalid slum settlements and villages, where there are no waste management systems, hygiene is deplorable, there is limited access to clean drinking water, and there are only a handful of primary schools.
- Of all the workers, the most vulnerable and dispossessed groups are the women and children stone quarry labourers, who face unendurable hardships on a daily basis, and are routinely discriminated against in a male-dominated industry and society, that often treats women and children like second class citizens.
- To date, the government has almost completely failed the local community, and there’s a conspicuous lack of government initiatives, although some NGOs and microcredit lending agencies have been active in the area, with limited success.

\(1\) A union usually consists of a small group of villages.
\(2\) The districts of Bangladesh are divided into sub-districts called upazilas. The upazilas are the lowest level of administrative government in Bangladesh. The top level consists of administrative areas called divisions, each named after its respective capital.
History of the Bholagonj Stone Quarry

The stone quarries located in Sylhet District have been active since the end of the Second World War, in the late 1940s. Back in the early days, most of the stone was collected by using local river-rafts made of three timber planks, known as ‘barkees’. The Bholagonj stone quarry really took off between 1964 and 1969, when the Bholagonj ropeway conveyor - a type of gondola lift that carries goods rather than passengers - was constructed to advance the development of the East-Pakistan Railway. One hundred and twenty towers, four substations and an excavation machine were set-up along the eleven-mile long ropeway, and the whole thing was powered by two diesel-run electric generators on either side.

All this activity triggered a large influx of labourers, to work on the ropeway and in the stone quarries, and a village was established to house and support the local development. The village included a school, a mosque, rest houses, homes and shops. With the help of the ropeway, extracted stones were transported to Chatak for use in the railway.

With the development the local roads and construction of a major highway since 1996, the demand for stones has increased dramatically, and this has seen intensified efforts to harvest the stones in the Dhalai River. A direct consequence of this is that the river’s surface deposits have been virtually depleted, and since 2000 local workers have had to dredge the river banks during the dry season, just to meet their stone-collecting quotas.

Also, the recent installation of crushing machines has sped up stone processing operations, and this has increased overall productivity rates.
Stones are collected from Bholagonj stone quarry using two different methods:

1. Using the local barkee or stone-carrying boats
2. By excavating or digging wells

**Barkee Method of Stone Collection**

To work on a barkee, stone-collectors need certain equipment, including a shallow or sand clearing machine, a set of different-sized rods, and an array of Jhaki (nets with bamboo handles). Before the barkee can become operational, the sand-clearing machine is installed – a simple device consisting of a small fan attached to a short rod. By spinning rapidly, the fan removes the river bed’s sand, and the stones emerge from the mud. Next, the miners use Jhaki to dislodge the stones from the riverbed, and lift them onto the barkee.

After harvesting stones from one spot on the river, the barkees move on, and repeat the process in another suitable spot. Typically, stone-collectors on barkees work in teams, which consist of about fifteen labourers, a group leader and between eight and ten boats. During the stone-harvesting operation, the team splits up, performing various tasks, with some workers controlling the sand-clearing machine and the boat, while others use the Jhaki to dislodge the stones, and lift them onto the boats, another sub-team dives under water, manually lifting the stones onto the barkee, while the last group sit on the boat sorting the stones into different sizes.

Stone-collectors aren’t limited to one task, and they take turns performing each job. After the stones have been harvested, they’re deposited near the riverbank, and stone-merchants buy and transport the stones once the dry season starts, when transportation’s easier. Stone-collectors also sell their stones during the wet season, but usually this is done directly off the barkees to buyers who subsequently transport the stones by boat downriver.

The owners and operators of the stone quarries usually pay a lump sum to the barkee worker team rather than individuals, and usually one team, consisting of about 15 labourers, earns 500-1000 Taka (AUD 8-16) for a day’s work. In reality, however, the work team has far less to split between its workers, as the government charges a daily toll of 25 Taka (AUD 0.40) for each barkee over 25ft. On top of this, the work team is also charged 120 Taka (AUD 1.90) a day to hire the sand-clearing machine plus the expense of gasoline to run it. Cutting even further into their meagre wages, the work team has to pay the boat owner 50 Takas (AUD 0.80) a day to hire their barkees.

The total income is distributed equally among all team members, but if the sand-clearing machine has been paid for outright, its owner is given extra to off-set his expenses. Daily wages differ considerably between dry and rainy seasons, with each stone-collector earning from 150 to 200 (AUD 2.40 - 3.17) Taka during the dry season. The daily wage increases to between 400-450 Taka (AUD 6.34 - 7.14) in the rainy season, as raised water levels and stronger river flows bring larger volumes of stone from the highlands, and stone-collectors have much higher harvest rates. Also, during the rainy season, the roads are usually muddied and unusable, so most of the trade occurs on the river, and workers don’t need to pay for truck hire.

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The other common technique that’s typically used for stone collection is the well-excavation method. Usually four or five investors rent a parcel of land for a season, often paying the rent to illegal occupiers. These investors round up a group of labourers, including one or two more experienced group leaders, and they start to work an area of land known as pathorer kup or stone excavation area, in the local language. The labourers start by removing the upper layer of sand from the stone excavation site, uncovering the stones below, and proceed to extract and lift the stones.

Extracting the stones this way means the well gets progressively deeper and wider, and the well starts to fill up with water once the labourers get to depths of between seven and eight feet. Like the barkee workers, the well-excavators install sand-clearing or shallow machines, the rods with attached fans, to clear out this water.

Workers use crowbars, shovels, strainers and baskets to remove the stones from the well. A group of about five workers, known as Gat Kamla or physical labourers, use crowbars to dislodge the stones from the bottom of the well. A small team of between three to four workers helps each Gat Kamla to lift the stones from the bottom of the well, using a rigged up system of shovels, strainers and baskets. In total, between 15 to 20 labourers are employed at each well, including the Gat Kamla and their support teams, and these groups are supervised by a more experienced leader. The extracted stones are then removed from the surface of the well by tractors driven by another group of stone merchants.

Team leaders rarely engage in real physical labour, and are more concerned with finances and keeping a record of the amount of stone collected.

Generally, these well-excavation sites cover an area of about 2,800 to 3,800 square metres, and the landowners charge the well operators from 100,000 to 150,000 Taka (AUD 1,580 – 2,380) per season for use of the land. Apart from this sizable expense well operators - who the workers usually call “lord” or “boss” - have further expenses, like the cost of renting the sand-clearing or shallow machine and its fuel expenses.

Stones are categorised differently, according to size, and from the smallest size to largest, and cheapest to most expensive, are known as Single, Botu and Bolders (see Table 2). When Bolder stones are sold to buyers, half the profit goes towards paying the work team and the other half goes to the well owners. In the case of the cheaper Single and Botu stones, two-thirds of the profits go to the work team and the remainder goes to the well owners. Team leaders get paid at the same rate as the other labourers, but team leaders typically give them a percent-age of their income at the end of the season.

Unlike the Barkee workers, the well-excavation workers have no curfews or work-time restrictions, and generally work from dawn to dusk from 12 to 14 hours, often working two or three hours of overtime to supplement their small incomes.

About 120 to 130 wells are excavated per season in the area surrounding Bholagonj, with 18 to 20 labour teams working each well, and each labour team consisting of 15 to 20 labourers. In total, there are about forty-two thousand labourers engaged in stone collecting in the region’s wells.

Table 2 Types of stones quarried and average value per foot squared.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the stone</th>
<th>Type of stone</th>
<th>Average value (Taka per sq ft)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Small stone (1 inch or below)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botu</td>
<td>Medium stone (1-5 inches)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolder</td>
<td>Big stone (5 inches or above)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Problems Stone Quarry Workers Face

Stone Collectors Forced to Pay-off Corrupt Authorities and Local Mafia

Officially, the land area where the stone quarry well excavations sites are located is controlled by the Ministry of Mineral Resources, and is designated by the government as khas or ‘special land’. Accordingly, stone quarry operators have to pay the government a tax of 1 Taka for every square foot of land mined. In reality, however, local mafia-type organisations have muscled in on the land, claiming it as their own. These groups use strong-arm tactics to squeeze money out of both the mine operators and the labourers.

As well as paying off local criminal groups, mine operators and labourers are also often forced to grease the palms of local government officials and the border security forces or BDR to ensure that operations continue smoothly. Reports of local government officials hiring strongmen to physically harass stone collectors is they fail to pay ‘protection money’ are not uncommon. Also, the BDR has been known to sink boats loaded with stone, snatching any profits.

Stone Collectors Have No Work Security

As day-labourers, local stone quarry workers have no job security, and can be fired by mine operators at any time without any legal recourse. They rarely enjoy any sort of benefits, like paid sick leave, insurance or pension, but despite this labourer almost never complain as they’re desperate to keep their jobs and earn a small income. Consequently, quarry operators often act with total impunity, unconcerned with the poor, dangerous and harsh work conditions workers face every day.

Quarry Owners Pilfer Workers’ Deposits

Workers deposit their wages with the quarry owners or ‘Lords’ during the quarrying sea-

Different Kinds of People Working in Stone Quarry Related Industry

People are engaged in various areas of the stone-collecting industries, including:
1. Day-labourers collecting stones on Barkee
2. Day-labourers collecting stones at well excavation sites
3. Shallow or Sand-clearing machine owner
4. Well operators leasing land from landowners
5. Small-scale stone traders selling quarried stone to larger-scale traders
6. Large-scale traders buying quarried stone from small-scale traders
7. Labourers operating the crushing equipment
8. Tractor and truck owners
9. Tractor and truck drivers
10. Work team leaders at well sites
11. Boat owners
12. Crushing equipment owners

Table 3  The Relative Pricing of Stone Sold From Labourers to Small Traders and From Small Traders to Large Traders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stone Type</th>
<th>Average value stones are sold by quarry labourers to small traders</th>
<th>Taka</th>
<th>AUD</th>
<th>Average value stones are sold by small traders to larger traders</th>
<th>Taka</th>
<th>AUD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botu</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolder</td>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“As well as paying off local criminal groups, mine operators and labourers are also often forced to grease the palms of local government officials and the border security forces or BDR to ensure that operations continue smoothly.”
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son, and have to wait until the end of the season to receive their earnings. But unsympathetic quarry owners often pocket some of these deposited salaries, and the workers’ meagre earnings end up being even smaller. Again, workers rarely complain, as their families depend on these small salaries for their survival. Stone collectors are usually uneducated, so finding other more skilled work is almost unimaginable.

Poor Sanitary Conditions Widespread in Stone Quarries and Communities

Most, if not all, stone quarries have terrible sanitary conditions, not even meeting the most basic hygiene standards. There is no access to clean drinking water, there are no toilets or even latrine facilities, and both male and female workers defecate and urinate straight into the river or out in the open. They use this same water for drinking, cooking, waste disposal, bathing and washing clothes, not to mention that they spend most of the hours of the working day actually submerged in it. Dust, flies and mosquitoes only add to the harsh and unhealthy conditions.

The slum settlements, where many workers live, aren’t much better. Usually slum dwellers only have access to two or three shallow tubewells or water wells in each colony. Instead of using cleaner aquifer water extracted from these tubewells, most residents bathe and wash their clothes in pools of rain water and sewerage that clogs the alleyways.

Even more concerning is the common use of ‘hanging latrines’, flimsy structures built on stilts over rivers or small streams. Providing very little privacy, the human faeces goes right into the water or into an open sewer - the same water that is used for bathing and even drinking. Slums usually have about five ‘hanging latrines’ that are used by all the slum residents (Water First Website, 2008).

Workers often suffer from water borne diseases like cholera, typhoid fever, hepatitis A and dysentery caused by bacteria and parasites found in human faecal material and rubbish. Stone collectors also contract diarrhoeal diseases by eating food that’s prepared by sick individuals who have not washed their hands, or touching something handled by an infected person and then putting their own hands into their mouths. Workers also suffer from fever and tuberculosis.

These conditions contribute to many deaths and loss of productivity every year, and as a report published in the medical journal The Lancet concluded, poor water sanitation and a lack of safe drinking water take a greater human toll than war, terrorism and weapons of mass destruction combined (Berman, 2005).

If workers do get injured - very common in this dangerous work environment - or become sick, they have no access to medical treatment, and have to travel more than five miles to get to the nearest pharmacy. There are no registered doctors nearby, only a few traditional village doctors or medicine men in a few villages. If workers are seriously sick or badly injured, they have to travel about 12 km to the Companiganj town hospital, and although this is a government hospital, they still have to pay doctors 50 Taka per visit.

Stone Collectors Migrate From Other Districts

Typically, the locals and indigenous population of Sylhet district aren’t employed as stone collectors in the local stone quarries, but often work as stone traders. Most of the stone collectors migrate from other districts, searching for work, and are either permanent migrants or seasonal migrants. Permanent migrants are long-term residences, and have lived and worked in the stone quarries for up to twenty-five years. Seasonal migrants return to their home district after the stone harvesting season has finished, usually staying for either the dry season or the more lucrative rainy season.

Communities that live along river banks often have to leave their homes due to riverbank erosion, and often find themselves moving up or down river to around Bhalagunj, seeking jobs at the stone quarry and living in nearby villages.

Bhalagunj stone quarries also attract criminals from other districts running from the law, and trying to start a fresh. Stone quarry bosses rarely ask job-seekers about their background, and happily employ most comers, as the salaries are so low and the work conditions are harsh.

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3 A tubewell is the term generally used to describe water wells or boreholes in the subcontinent, including Bangladesh.

“Hanging latrines are extremely unhygienic and help spread disease. Another type of latrine frequently seen
Table 4  Breakdown of Permanent and Temporary Migrants from Sample of 100 Randomly Selected Stone Collecting Labourers in Various Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Upazila (district)</th>
<th>Permanent Migrants</th>
<th>% of District Permanent Migrants</th>
<th>Temporary Migrants</th>
<th>% of District Temporary Migrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunamganj</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobiganj</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kishoreganj</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mymensingh</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netrokona</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherpur</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Baria</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comilla</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noakhalai</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rangpur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinajpur</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thakurgaon</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 shows a breakdown of wages for the various stone collecting related jobs.

Of their daily wages, well labourers receive 50-55 Taka for a day’s work to spend on basic necessities, food and shelter, while the rest of their wage is held by the mine operators until the season concludes.

Home Life

Residing in villages adjacent to the stone quarries, all stone collectors work through the busy rainy season, but when the slower dry season comes around, many find themselves jobless. By some accounts over 90% of the stone collectors lose their jobs during the dry season, with the seasonal labourers returning to their home districts to find work, and permanent labourers finding alternative work as agricultural workers.

Stone collectors from the Bholagonj stone quarry live in the adjacent villages of East Islampur and West Islampur Union. The villages include:

- **East Islampur Union**: North Konabari, South Konabari, Kalibari, Notun Baluchar, Lorong, North Rajnagar, Dhalar Par, Mostofa Nagar and Maddha Rajnagar.
- **West Islampur Union**: Bholagonj, Rustampur, Adarsha

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Guchchagram, Dakgharpara, Majhipara, Badikuna, Noagaon, Noyagacherpar, Taimurnagar, Tukergaon and Tukerbarazar.

Types of Residences
Most of these labourers live in tents and huts or jhupri, adjacent to the stone quarries. Usually 15 to 20 labourers share the same tent, squeezed into a small space measuring about 14 feet long and 7 feet wide. The tents are constructed from polythene sheets and bamboo rods, and the labourers sleep on beds of dry straw or kathas that are laid on the dirt ground. The tents and jhupri are paid for by the mine owners, and are only used by single male workers.

Labourers also live in the slum settlements, locally known as ‘colonies’, clustered around the quarry sites. Each colony is owned by a landlord, who build rooms on their land and rents the rooms to labourers and their families. Measuring only 8 by 12 square feet, the rooms are constructed from tin walls and a tin roof.

Tenants pay 300 Taka (AUD 4.70) a month to rent one room, although labourers who build their own rooms only have to pay a monthly rent of 100 Taka (AUD 1.56). During the slower season, many of the labourers return to their home villages, but they rarely give up their rooms as it’s notoriously hard to secure one.

Although the well labourers commonly live in the tents and jhupri that skirt the mine sites, or in slum dwellings, the Barkee workers are often long time residents, and permanently set up houses in the villages of East and West Islampur.

Local Transport Infrastructure
In general, the local roads linking the villages and stone quarry sites are in terrible state of disrepair. There are no sealed roads, and the dirt roads, or kutchas, are full of potholes. For rickshaws, vans and trucks the roads are almost impassable during the dry season, but once the rainy season sets in they become totally unusable. This means that all transport of stones during the wet season is done by boat, and all year round labourers usually get around on foot.

Education
Literacy rates among stone quarry workers are conspicuously low, and this is a direct consequence of the almost non-existent educational system. To supplement their meagre family incomes, stone quarry labourers often force their children to start working at an early age - children accompany their parents to work from about the age of four and actually start working at about nine years old. Consequently, children don’t have time to go to school, as they spend the entire day, from dawn to dusk, toiling away in the quarries.

The local NGO, Award, tried to introduce an informal educational program that could be slotted into the children’s daily schedule of working in the quarries and helping out their families at home, and initially about 25 children joined up. But before long children started to drift away - they simply couldn’t cope with schooling on top of all their other exhausting responsibilities.

There aren’t any schools or colleges inside the slums and colonies, although a few of the villages in East and West Islampur have built primary schools, but not many.

Recently, the community of Mostofa Nagar village in the West Islampur Union has constructed a primary school with profits derived from stone collecting.

Table 6  Literacy Rates of Female and Male labourers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literacy Rates</th>
<th>Male Labourer</th>
<th>Female Labourer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literate</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Education</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Rates are based on a sample group of 100 randomly selected stone collecting labourers (84 male and 16 female respondents)

“Male stone Quarry workers typically live in cramped tents made of sheets of polythene and bamboo on the fringes of the quarry.”

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Stone Quarry Workers’ Domestic Lives

It’s common practice among the stone quarry workers’ community for men between the age of 20 and 25 to marry girls aged between 16 and 20. Usually three generations live under the same roof, with children, parents and grandparents squashed together in flimsy tents, jhupris or tin sheds. Children take care of their parents once they stop working, either due to age, sickness or injury.

Labourers residing in the tents or jhupri that fringe the quarries typically return to their homes to eat their meals. On the other hand, labourers living in the slums and villages bring their meals with them to the quarries. Labourers usually eat breakfast at about 8 in the morning, lunch between 2 and 3 in the afternoon, and dinner at about 8 in the evening. Labourers have a staple diet of Pulses (peas and beans), a traditional Bangladeshi vegetable dish called bharta, and other vegetable dishes, although they also eat fish about once a week, and meat once a month.

Even though the local bazaar or market is about four kilometres away from the Bholagonj stone quarry, and three kilometres away from the slum colonies and villages, many small food shops and guest houses cluster around the quarry. Staples such as rice, curry, tea, cigarettes, biscuits and betel leaf are readily available in these food outlets.

Around the villages and at home, male stone labourers wear traditional Bangladeshi garments, called lungis, which knot around their waist like a sarong. While working in the quarries, however, they usually wear shorts or trousers and t-shirts. Single women typically wear shalwar-kamiz, traditional southern Asian costumes consisting of the shalwar, or loose pajama-like trousers, and the kamiz, a long shirt or tunic. Married women generally wear saris when working in the quarries.

Although about 80% of Bangladesh’s population are Muslim, and there’s a mosque near Bholagonj stone quarry, the stone quarry workers aren’t particularly religious, rarely visiting the mosque.

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Recreational Activities

Despite the fact that a few households in the villages own televisions, most stone quarry labourers possess a radio or cassette player at the very most. Electricity supplies to most villages and slum colonies are sporadic at best, and often are lacking altogether, so residents depend on battery-operated radios and cassettes for entertainment.

Teenage boys play football and a traditional Bangladeshi game known as keram, while younger boys entertain themselves with games like hide-and-seek or gollachut. Usually, girls play popular local games like loodu or gossip with their friends. At night, adult labourers relax with their friends, playing card games, singing songs or playing loodu.

Women and Child Labourers

Women Stone Quarry Workers - Their Lives and the Problems they Face

Of the women living in the slum colonies, villages and in the tent settlements skirting the quarries, about 95% are engaged in the job of ‘stone lifting’. Working as day-labourers, women get paid 120 Taka (AUD 1.90) a day, far less than their male counterparts who earn from 180 to 200 Taka (AUD 2.90-3.20), often for the same job.

But apart from working all day at the quarries, local women are loaded down with many more responsibilities, like taking care of their families and performing all the domestic chores. Waking before sunrise, women prepare breakfast and lunch for their families, and then rush off to the quarry to toil away all day performing back-breaking work. Returning after sunset, women usually have a quick bath, and then prepare dinner for their husbands and children.

After her family’s been fed, she has a quick meal, and then washes the pots and utensils. Finally getting to bed at around 11:30pm, women literally work every waking hour of the day, only getting rest when they collapse onto the straw beds heaped on the dirt ground.

With no latrine facilities in the quarries, women have to deal not only with unhygienic conditions that lead to disease, but harassment from the male workers, on a daily basis. An even greater danger for women, and particularly girls, is during the journey home after work in the evening when they are especially vulnerable. In the past, male workers have attacked and raped girls, but encouragingly, these attacks have decreased significantly over recent years.

Despite the frequent visits from female representatives from the Bangladeshi Family Planning Commission, very few married women agree to take contraceptive pills or participate in family planning programs. Like poor women from other developing countries, these women believe that having lots of children means greater earning potential. Health workers also visit the settlements around the quarry, vaccinating women and children against infectious diseases.

Without any medical facilities, pregnant women have no access to doctors or anaesthetics, and babies are delivered only with the assistance of midwives.

To add to all this misery, women often encounter domestic violence at the hands of their husbands. Poor, uneducated and frustrated with their lot in life, these men take out their anger on the weaker and more vulnerable members of their family and the community - in other words, their wives and children.

Stone Quarry Employs Child Labourers

According to some reports, of the parents employed in the stone quarries up to 95% force their children to work in the quarries as

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4 This popular Bangladeshi game is played between two teams of equal number of players. One team stands at a fixed point on one side of the field. Players of the other team position themselves at strategic points on the field facing the team that has also taken position with one ‘king’ at a fixed point. The players of the king’s team run as fast as they can to cross the field. The players of the other team try to prevent them from reaching the crossing line. If the king’s team members can cross the team without being touched by the opponent they’ll win the game.

“Working as day labourers, women get paid 120 Taka (AUD 1.90) a day, far less than their male counterparts who earn from 180 to 200 Taka (AUD 2.903.20), often for the same job.”

“…parents often discourage their children from going to the few schools in the area and push them to work instead, as they can see the direct benefits of this whereas an education is more of an abstract notion.”
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well. These children usually tag along with their parents from the age of four, but from the age of nine they actually start active work in stone collecting-related activities. Children get paid at the same daily rate as women workers, about 120 Taka, which gives a considerable boost to the family’s total income.

For this reason, parents often discourage their children from going to the few schools in the area, and push them to work instead, as they can see the direct benefits of this whereas an education is more of an abstract notion. Ironically, the one way to break the viscous poverty cycle entrapping the stone quarry workers is, in fact, by educating their children - this is the only way the youngest generation can gain skills and knowledge that can secure them better paid jobs with brighter future prospects.

Government and NGO Initiatives

The Bangladeshi Government has shown almost total indifference to the plight of Bholagonj’s stone quarry workers, especially the vulnerable groups that need help the most - women and children labourers. Although the government has committed to constructing a few more shallow tubewells and health centres, they’re yet to follow through on their promises. Apart from those questionable pledges, no other government programs have ever been initiated, despite the desperate need for health facilities, schools, road and power infrastructure and improved sanitary conditions.

Several NGOs, however, have been active in the villages of East and West Islampur, including the smaller, local NGOs Award and VERD, and the larger NGOs - Grameen Bank, ASA and BRAC⁵. All these NGOs have introduced various micro-credit programs in an attempt to raise these dispossessed groups out of poverty, encouraging the loan recipients to invest in their future, in areas like education and setting up small businesses. Unfortunately, in most cases the micro-credit recipients tend to spend this extra money on day-to-day expenses, like food and cigarettes, and not on their futures. For this reason, these micro-credit programs have had limited success.

As well as the micro-finance programs, Award, as previously mentioned, tried to introduce an educational program for the local youth. After initial successes, the program collapsed completely as students failed to turn up to classes, overwhelmed by all their other responsibilities. Award also tried to encourage stone quarry labourers to supplement their wages and improve their nutritional intake by teaching them how to grow their own vegetables, but the local community showed little interest in this program. They were only interested in working in the quarries, where they could make better wages, some of which was paid in hand.

VERD is currently conducting a regional survey looking into the local community’s access to safe drinking water and the poor hygiene conditions pervading the stone quarry and local communities. A few years back, the international NGO, CARE, initiated a rural management program, but this was aimed at agricultural workers, and not the stone quarry workers.

According to recent reports, Marie Stopes International, is considering setting up health and family planning clinics in the region in the near future. This British-based organisation is famous for its work in family planning, focusing particularly on offering safe abortions, safe deliveries, and the diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, particularly HIV/AIDS prevention.

⁵ Grameen Bank specialises in extending credit, called micro-credit, exclusively to the landless men and women of rural areas of the country. ASA is another NGO that offers micro-finance to landless and poor farmers across Bangladesh. BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) promotes income generation for the poor, mostly landless rural people, through micro-credit and programmes on healthcare, literacy, and education and training.
Environmental Concerns

The owners of the stone quarries show little regard for environmental considerations, and in a desperate attempt to maximise profits they invest little, or nothing, into ensuring safe working conditions or protecting the environment. For this reason, the stone quarries, and the surrounding areas, suffer from acute environmental problems – and these are listed below:

Air Pollution

Air pollution is one of the biggest environmental concerns in the quarry sites, with big trucks and stone crushing machines churning up massive dust clouds and spewing forth heavy clouds of suspended dust particulates of ground-up stone. Running on cheap and dirty diesel and kerosene, the shallow or sand-clearing machines produce black, sooty smoke plumes that fill the air. This pollution causes serious respiratory diseases among the stone quarry workers, particularly affecting the children, who are more susceptible.

Noise Pollution

Every day stone quarry labourers are deafened by thousands of trucks, shallow or sand-clearing machines and stone-crushing machines filling the air with noise and commotion.

Water Pollution

Totally lacking any sort of waste management plan or functional sewerage system, the region’s fifty to sixty thousand stone quarry labourers encounter unspeakable filth, waste and disease every day. Apart from the few hanging latrines, where human waste drops straight into the local streams and waterways or into the dirty cesspools that clog the narrow alleyways, there are no other waste treatment systems. To make matters worse, dirty, burnt oil used in the shallow or sand-clearing machines, trucks and tractors gushes into the waterways causing severe pollution.

Landslides

Intensive excavation practices for the large-scale extraction of stones can cause landslides, resulting in injuries and fatalities over the years.

Stone Quarry Workers Face Drug Addiction

Drug abuse is widespread across Bangladesh, particularly in the poorest areas where many desperately try to escape from the harsh realities of daily life. The slum settlements and villages surrounding the Bholagonj stone quarry are no exception, with high rates of drug addiction sweeping the area. Drugs, such as cough syrup, heroin, cannabis and sedatives are commonly used and are readily available just about everywhere in Bangladesh (Rahman et al., 2004).

Ironically, many labourers often fund their drug addiction with the micro-credits loaned to them from NGOs and micro-financing banks. In these cases, the micro-credit actually has a counter-productive effect, and isn’t invested into the borrower’s future. Drug addiction also encourages lazy behaviour among addicts, who often neglect their families and work responsibilities, channelling all their efforts into scoring their next fix.

Labourers toil away in the well excavation sites. Collecting stones this way is backbreaking work and can be very dangerous with labourers often breaking bones.
A Bleak Future for Bholagonj’s Stone Quarry Workers

New, more technologically advanced mining practices means quarry operators can now extract and process stones at a much faster rate. A higher production rate, combined with decades of stone collecting, has seen the rapid depletion of the region’s stone deposits. In the past, stone quarry labourers only had to remove one layer of sand to expose the stones, but now they have to dig much deeper.

Local miners working on the barkee believe that the only way to increase the volume of stones carried by the rivers flowing from the highlands of Khasi and Jaintia, across the border in neighbouring India, is to intensify the river flow by artificially deepening the Piyain River by about 30 metres and the Dhalai River by 10 metres. This, however, would require a considerable investment from quarry owners and the government.

Faced with dwindling stone deposits and growing mechanisation of the stone quarrying industry, labourers face an uncertain future, with the likelihood of decreased demand for workers.

Border Security’s Impact on Bholagonj Stone Collectors

Barkee workers have strict curfews imposed on them by the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), the military wing responsible for securing the Bangladesh-Indian border, just north of the stone quarry. Consequently, the stone collectors can only work between 8am and 4pm, as the BDR say that working earlier or later might compromise the workers’ safety, since skirmishes between the Indian Border Security Forces (BSF) and the BDR are not unheard-of. In fact, there have been reports of unprovoked attacks and killings of Bangladeshi farmers, fisherman and stone collectors by the BSF in recent years (New Age Website, 2008).

Even more disconcerting, the BDR themselves have been accused of major human rights violations against the local community. In August 2006, BDR troops opened fire on a peaceful demonstration against a proposed mine development, and at least seven people were killed and about 300 were injured (Bangladesh News Website, 2008).

Summary of Problems Facing Stone Quarry Labourers

- The legal and criminal justice system inside the villages, slum colonies and settlements surrounding the quarry are practically non-existent. The responsibility of maintaining law and order is usually undertaken by the village salishi, or arbitration board, an informal community-based mediation system common across southern Asia. Without any need for accountability, the salishi system is often open to corruption, with criminals paying bribes to avoid being charged, sentenced or punished. In this way, criminal gangs can thrive without fear of prosecution.

- Accidents are commonplace in the stone quarries as the work conditions are often precarious. During the excavation operation, labourers deal with dangerous explosives for blasting the holes, and labourers can be hit by falling stones as they’re digging to widen and deepen the wells. Although workers constantly sustain serious injuries, breaking their arms and legs, the quarry sites provide no access to first aid facilities, and injured workers have to make the long journey to the Companiganj town hospital, 12 kilometres away.

- After a day of backbreaking work in the quarries, labourers return to the cramped quarters of their homes, either flimsy tents constructed from sheets of polythene, or tiny tin sheds. Even during the chilly winter evenings and the wet monsoonal period, the labourers still sleep on the ground, with only a jute sack or dried straw beds called kathas, separating them from the damp dirt floor.

Workers sort stones in the quarry

For further information visit the Artisanal and Small-scale Mining in Asia-Pacific Portal on http://www.asmasiapacific.org
• Labourers can rarely access clean drinking water, and a functional waste management system is totally lacking, apart from the unhygienic and ineffectual ‘hanging latrines’.

• Apart from a few primary schools scattered through some villages, there are no other schools or colleges. Parents often discourage their children from going to school, pushing them to work in the quarries from an early age. Education is seen as an unnecessary luxury, especially when children can be working and making a significant contribution to the family’s total income.

• Micro-credit loans extended to labourers by NGOs and micro-financing banks are often misused, with labourers spending the cash on daily necessities and luxuries like food and cigarettes, and even more damaging, on drugs.

• Labourers have no access to any medical or health services and there are no registered doctors in the quarry or in the surrounding slum settlements and villages. The closest hospital is 12 kilometres away in Companiganj town.

• Although khas land, where the quarry sites are located, falls under government jurisdiction, in reality local mafia-type gangs are in control. These gangs often use strong-arm tactics to squeeze ‘protection money’ out of both stone quarry owners and labourers alike. As such, there are no overall management plan strategies, and development occurs in a haphazard manner, leading to further conflict.

• Careless mining practices and poor hygiene systems in the quarries and settlements have resulted in acute environmental problems, including severe air, water and noise pollution. This pollution causes serious diseases among the local community and has an extremely adverse impact on the regional ecosystem.

• To date, the government hasn’t introduced a single welfare initiative to alleviate the plight of the local community, despite the harsh and oppressive conditions they’re faced with every day.

**Case Study - The Story of Chan Bibi, a Female Quarry Worker**

To gain a better insight into the lives of Bholagonj’s stone quarry workers, this case study looks at the life of one woman worker, called Chan Bibi, who was born in 1946 into a lower class peasant family, in the village of Trimahal in the Sylhet District.

Chan Bibi, now 61 years old, resides in the slums of Shujan colony in Bholagonj village of Companiganj Upazila’s East Islampur Union, in the district of Sylhet. While growing up in Trimahal, her father used to cultivate a very small piece of his own agricultural land, as well as working as a Kamla, or day labourer, on someone else’s land. At the age of fifteen, Chan Bibi got married to a day labourer, starting work as a maid in the house of a higher class family. Within a few years, she had given birth to two sons and two daughters. A bigger family meant greater expenses, and Chan Bibi’s family, already impoverished, sunk deeper into poverty.

With few opportunities and little work, many residents of Trimahal, Chan Bibi’s home village, decided to try their luck in Companiganj Upazila’s stone quarry. Struggling to make ends meet, in 1985 Chan Bibi’s family decided to follow suit, selling their house, packing up their belongings and arriving in East Islampur Union at the end of the year.
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Almost immediately, her husband found work at the stone quarry, but at the time the quarry owners didn’t employ women. Instead, many women were employed as maids in the houses of wealthier locals, like quarry owners and managers. In the early 1990s, however, the growing demand for stone meant owners had to expand their workforce, and they started taking on women, and sometimes child, labourers. Taking advantage of this situation, Chan Bibi, like many other women at the time, got a job at the stone quarry.

Like her husband, Chan Bibi worked as a day labourer, spending her days on the river rafts, or barkee. During a typical day she performed many different jobs, from piloting the boat, to straining stones, to clearing sand, to diving into the river and lifting submerged stones onto the boat. For a day of backbreaking work, she’d get paid the pitiful sum of between 30 and 40 Taka – less than one US dollar.

Chan Bibi started work very early in the morning, so her family decided it was easiest if they bought a small piece of land in Shujan colony, on the fringes of the stone quarry, shortening her journey to work. Using their own meagre savings, they constructed a tiny tin shed, paying a monthly rent of 50 Taka (AUD 0.80) for the land.

Tuberculosis is widespread in the stone quarry, as workers breath in dust particulates on a daily basis, weakening their lungs and making them more susceptible to this contagious and potentially fatal disease. Tragically, Chan Bibi was directly affected by this local scourge when her husband contracted tuberculosis in 1995, dying shortly after. After the death of her husband, Chan Bibi, along with her eldest son, became the family’s sole earners. As well as being the principal breadwinner, Chan Bibi had to take care of her children, and was responsible for all the daily domestic tasks, like cooking, cleaning and washing clothes. Her burden was eased slightly in later years, when her youngest son and eldest daughter started working at the quarry, boosting the family’s total income.

In the late 1990s, Chan Bibi managed to marry off her two daughters to two stone quarry labourers from an adjacent village, and her two sons married two local girls. These days, she lives with her two sons and two daughters-in-law, along with her three grandchildren, in the slums of Shujan colony, where they rent three small houses at 300 Taka (AUD 4.80) a month. Her daughters-in-law don’t work, but stay at home helping out with domestic chores and cooking.

Since the early 1990s, Chan Bibi made a living by working on the barkee during the busy rainy season, but after 2000 she started working during the dry season too, at the well-excavation sites. At the wells, she spent the day straining stones and carrying stones on her head, getting paid a daily rate of 150 Taka (AUD 2.40).

On a typical day, Chan Bibi wakes up before sunset and helps her daughter-in-laws prepare breakfast and lunch. After she’s finishes eating breakfast with her family, she packs up lunch for later in the day at the quarry, and makes her way to work at about 8am. Returning home between 7 and 8pm, Chan Bibi takes a quick bath, and helps her daughters-in-law cook dinner. After dinner, they clean the cooking pots and utensils, collapsing on a bed of straw, called a kathas, between 10-11pm, exhausted from a day of non-stop work.

Tuberculosis is widespread in the stone quarry, as workers breath in dust particulates on a daily basis, weakening their lungs and making them more susceptible to this contagious and potentially fatal disease.

After a lifetime of punishing physical labour, and suffering from chronic fevers and rheumatic pain, Chan Bibi can only manage three or four days work a week. When she is at work, she has to deal with the unhygienic conditions, and the total lack of any sort of waste management system. Without any toilet facilities, both male and female labourers urinate and defecate in open spaces or directly into the small streams and waterways, around the quarry and the river systems.

To make matters worse, labourers have no access to clean drinking water, using the dirty, disease-ridden water of Dhalai River as their main source of drinking water, as well for washing clothes, cooking and bathing. For this reason, many labourers suffer from chronic
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water borne diseases like cholera, typhoid fever, hepatitis A, dysentery and diarrhoea.

Disgusted by the filth and disease that surrounds her, and weakened with old age and disease, Chan Bibi has dreamt for many years of quitting her job and leaving the stone quarry. This, however, is almost unimaginable, as her family depends on her as one of the household’s principal income earners, even working part-time.

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Apart from the miserable work conditions and lack of any sort of hygiene standards, Chan Bibi, and other women workers, face wage discrimination, with male workers typically getting paid more money, often for exactly the same work. While a male labourer gets an average daily wage of 180-200 Taka (AUD 2.90-3.20), a female labourer is paid an average daily wage of 120-150 Taka (AUD 1.90-2.40).

Like many other women workers, Chan Bibi accepts this reality without complaint, explaining that men are able to work more and are more productive, and should get paid more. The patriarchal nature of Bangladeshi society is deeply ingrained in most of the population, and from the very earliest age, both women and men rarely question the gender discrimination that permeates almost every aspect of life.

To make matters worse, stone quarry owners use questionable tactics, like holding a large portion of the labourers’ wage, often until the end of the stone-collecting season, to ensure their workers return the next day. Other quarry operators hold back half the worker’s wages until the next day when most of the wage is paid, but in this case, a portion of the pay remains with the owners until the end of the season.

Often, labourers need to take out loans to cover initial expenses when they start employment at the quarry, or their meagre salaries aren’t sufficient, particularly in times of extreme financial hardship, so they take out loans - in this way, labourers become indebted to their ‘lords’ or ‘bosses’, often spending years to paying off their loans, which are deducted from their wages.

In interviews with the author, Chan Bibi described the total lack of health services in the villages and slum settlements surrounding the quarry. Without a single registered doctor, the local community have to go to the Companiganj town for medical attention. She explains that even though it’s a government hospital, they still have to pay 50 Taka (AUD 0.80) to see a doctor, almost half a female worker’s daily wage.

As the roads to the Companiganj hospital are almost unusable, especially during the muddy rainy season, and walking the 12 km from the quarry and settlements to the hospital is extremely difficult for someone who’s sick or injured, villagers and slum dwellers often seek help from the herbal physician or village quack to save time and money. Typically, the local community only uses the Companiganj hospital when a patient is seriously ill or badly injured. Chan Bibi explains that her village only has two traditional doctors, and that they usually suggest the same treatment irrespective of the condition, which is giving generic injections.

Chan Bibi Establishes the Region’s First and Only All-Women Cooperative

Talking about how the NGOs and micro-finance banks, ASA, BRAC, TMSS, and VERD extend micro-credit to area’s long-term residents, she explains that she never accepted any of these loans. But after decades of living in abject poverty and suffering all manner of discrimination, she decided to take things into her own hands in 2006, when she became inspired by the local union chairman, and decided to initiate a cooperative society named “Uttar Pathar Bari Sarbik Gram Somobay Samiti” which set out to improve the local community’s economic situation.

“Significantly, the organisation that Chan Bibi founded is the first and only of its kind in the region - it was set up by a woman, and it is run by and for women stone quarry workers.”
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Since the group was registered by the Bangladeshi government’s Department of Social Welfare, the society has attracted 20 members, who are all female. Members deposit 100 Taka (AUD 1.60) into a shared fund every month. If one of the members encounters serious financial difficulties, they can take out a low interest loan, which is withdrawn from the cooperative’s emergency fund.

Significantly, the organisation that Chan Bibi founded is the first and only of its kind in the region - it was set-up by a woman, and it is run by and for women stone quarry workers. Chan Bibi feels that by setting up this grassroots organisation, female labourers might not have to depend so much on male-dominated NGOs and micro-financing banks who sometimes show misogynistic tendencies, or... local opportunists, who try to cheat women on a daily basis.

Chan Bibi is optimistic about the cooperative’s future, and she believes that as more members join, the cooperative’s savings will grow, and this money can go a long way to alleviating many of the problems facing local women workers.

The cooperative’s goal is also to lighten the local women’s economic burden, perhaps improving their daily lives, giving them confidence and a sense of identity so they can take charge of their own destiny.

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Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) in Asia-Pacific Portal  http://www.asmasiapacific.org

ASM Asia-Pacific Case Study Series

This series of case studies documents concrete examples of equitable, effective, and sustainable local-level partnerships including small-scale miners or their communities as a guide to develop better policy and practice in the Asia-Pacific region.

The project has been led by Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt. The case studies have been edited by Joel Katz and designed by Rachel P Lorenzen.

Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) in Asia-Pacific Portal

The ASM Asia Pacific Portal is the public interface of a loose network of individuals and institutions working on poverty eradication, development and livelihoods in Artisanal and Small-scale Mining (ASM) in the Asia-Pacific region.

The portal’s mandate is to disseminate knowledge about ASM in the Asia-Pacific, to document best practice in community development and environmental management, and to promote fellowship and cooperation among stakeholders interested in poverty eradication and sustainable development.