

## **Economic Exploitation of Female Bonded Labourers: A Qualitative Study of a Road Construction Site Workers in the Southern Punjab**

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### **Abstract**

Bonded labour, in the form of debt bondage, is prevalent across various occupations, including road building sites. Women in this context are more vulnerable, as they are employed solely due to the financial obligations incurred by the male leader of their household. This research focuses on the phenomenon of female bonded labour from an anthropological perspective. The aim of this study is to investigate the factors and consequences of bonded labour on the social lives, working conditions, health, and gender dynamics of women. Qualitative research was conducted using a case study research design. In addition, unstructured interviews with females and their families were conducted. It was concluded that women worked in road building sites because they were stuck in the circle of debt from predecessors. They observed their parents work in this field as youngsters since they were perpetual migrants and never considered their children's education, and now they're old and their children are in the same predicament. Since they never left, this career caused poverty, low salaries, poor health, and gender issues. Poverty and inability to socialize children made huge families miserable. Workplace health facilities were inadequate on maternity, and delivery days. Self-medication and indigenous healing were used. They struggled with gender discrimination at work.

**Keywords:** Economic Exploitation, Bonded Labour, Gender Inequalities, Road Construction Site Workers

## 1. Introduction

Bonded labour is the main form of forced labour which is increasing day by day. Debt bondage enslaves a person by using their labor to repay a loan. Bonded laborers can face physical and sexual abuse. They are monitored (sometimes by armed guards) and their stories resemble medievalism slavery as they live a cruel cycle in bondage (Malik, 2016). According to International Labour Organization (ILO), Walk Free, and International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2022), compared to 2016 global estimates, forced labor prevalence increased by 2.7 million between 2016 and 2021, from 3.4 to 3.5 per thousand persons worldwide. The rise in forced labor was solely due to private sector labor, including commercial sexual exploitation and other industries, such as brick kilns and construction industry. Bonded labor is an ancient form of exploitative labour in which individuals are trapped in a perpetual cycle of labour to repay a debt. However, this continues to occur frequently in the present day. In regions such as South Asia, numerous impoverished and marginalised communities are forced to endure hard working conditions due to their lack of land ownership, extreme poverty, and caste-based prejudice (Kara, 2012; Samonova, 2019). Various forms of bonded labour occur throughout multiple industries, including brick kilns, agriculture, fireworks production, the sex trade, and even road building (Samonova, 2023).

The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1992 prohibits debt bondage under Pakistani law. Pakistan also ratified ILO Convention 29 on bonded labor (CLR, 2019). Despite such laws, bound laborers' circumstances remain the same (Malik, 2016; CLR, 2019). The *Peshgi*<sup>1</sup> system, prevalent in Pakistan, is a sort of debt bondage that is widely practiced. Struggling laborer, rather of receiving direct compensation for their services, opt to receive an advance payment from their employer, which can be in the form of currency or commodities (Malik, 2016). This advance is accompanied by a contractual obligation to continue working for the employer until the debt is fully repaid. Individuals may get this loan for many purposes, ranging from urgent financial or survival needs to perceiving it as a means to obtain employment security and prevent unemployment. Unfortunately, a comprehensive survey to ascertain the exact number of individuals subjected to bonded labour in Pakistan has not been conducted. Identifying these labourers might be challenging due to the secret nature of their circumstances (Government of Punjab, n.d). Estimates indicate that there could be a

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<sup>1</sup> Form of a debt bondage in Pakistan

substantial number of individuals, ranging from 2.3 to 4 million, engaged in bonded labour in Pakistan (Anwar, 2021; Hegewisch & Dayo, 2023).

Women are more susceptible to being subjected to bonded labor. They are forced to work in an atmosphere that is not suitable for them and they are not paid for their labour. Although, Article 37(e) of the Constitution (1973) mandates that the State protect children and women from being employed in unsuitable occupations based on their age or sex. Most women are enslaved to work because a male relative took advance (Khan, 2019). In South Punjab, Pakistan, where infrastructure development is changing the landscape, the problem of women being forced to work as slaves at road building sites becomes a main issue. The fact that women in the construction industry are forced to work under a bond shows how widespread gender inequality is in the area. Even though there has been progress in some areas, socioeconomic inequality still affects women more than it does men, and their roles are often limited by traditional ideals. In this study, the authors try to give a more complete picture of the social problems that female workers face in South Punjab Road building projects.

This research explores the complicated problems that women who work under bondage have to deal with. It shows how their limited freedom is affected by a road building task. The study tries to find out all the different aspects of this issue through an anthropological perspective by looking at the cultural and legal complexities, as well as the socioeconomic factors that keep female bonded labour going. The primary aim of the study is to investigate the factors and consequences of bonded labour on the social lives, working conditions, health, and gender dynamics of women. An important part of the study looks at how bonded labour affects the physical, emotional, and mental health of women who work on road building sites. By looking into these women's real-life experiences, the researchers aim to make their voices heard and bring attention to the urgent need for policy changes, legal protections, and societal changes that can free and empower women who work in conditions of exploitation.

## **2. Review of the Literature**

Bonded labour in the form of modern slavery is prevalent all over the world. ILO has aimed to end modern slavery by 2023; however, the situation is same especially in Pakistan (Hegewisch & Dayo, 2023). According to the ILO, Walk Free, and IOM (2022), modern slavery, including forced labour and marriage, affects roughly 49.6 million people worldwide (a rise of more than 23% from 2016), more than 3.3 million of whom are children under 18. Ending slavery by 2030 is difficult and requires smart policies. International legal mechanisms like UN and ILO treaties emphasize that these offences require more than

criminal law enforcement. Current programming offers a basis, but efforts must accelerate to protect victims. The Global Estimates inform policy, prevention, victim protection, and legal gaps by revealing modern slavery's scale. There are a number of legislation, such as the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992, and constitutional provisions that influence the legal viewpoints on bonded labor in Pakistan. The elimination of bound labour, such as punishment for enforcement of bonded labor (i.e. imprisonment for two to five years) (Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992) is the goal of these legislative frameworks, which place an emphasis on fundamental rights and ban the practice of bonded labor. Despite the implementation of these regulations, difficulties continue to arise in terms of enforcement and awareness, which calls for continuous efforts to overcome the legal issues that are associated with bonded labor in Pakistan (Khan, 2019).

Women and children are more vulnerable in Pakistan. Women are trapped in a chain labour due to their male household heads (Khan, 2019). Millions of women are stuck in financial bondage, often laboring for decades. These females work full-time. They must work there since their father or spouse took a lifelong high-interest loan. After working full-time in brick kilns, they experience heatstroke, hand burns, prejudice, and slavery. They also do housework and care for their family (SPARC, 2001). In Pakistan slavery has numerous situations, such as human trafficking. Human trafficking included selling and smuggling women and children for prostitution, forced work, and youngsters to Asian mafias. Women are sold in Pakistan and exported to Burma, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and India. Some reports put the number as 1.2 million (Khan, 2019).

Rural women cannot create legal papers like national identity cards that may be counted in official records. That makes women vulnerable to bonded labour, trafficking and violence (Bales, 2014). Without rights, Pakistani women have always been easy prey. Men can always dominate women through sexual assault. Rural women are vulnerable because male employers can physically assault them. Abuse of women at work is prevalent, especially in financial bondages when victims cannot flee. The agreements against slavery are violated since they are compelled to work as prostitutes after the works (Khan, 2019).

According to ILO, Walk Free, and IOM (2022), considering the construction sector forced labour is more than broader labour in worldwide. Furthermore, 20% of those subjected to forced labor exploitation are trapped in conditions of debt bondage, whereas, construction industry remained at second place, i.e., 27.4% (Figure 01). There is no subsequent data

available on female bonded labour at road building sites in Pakistan (Government of Punjab, n.d).

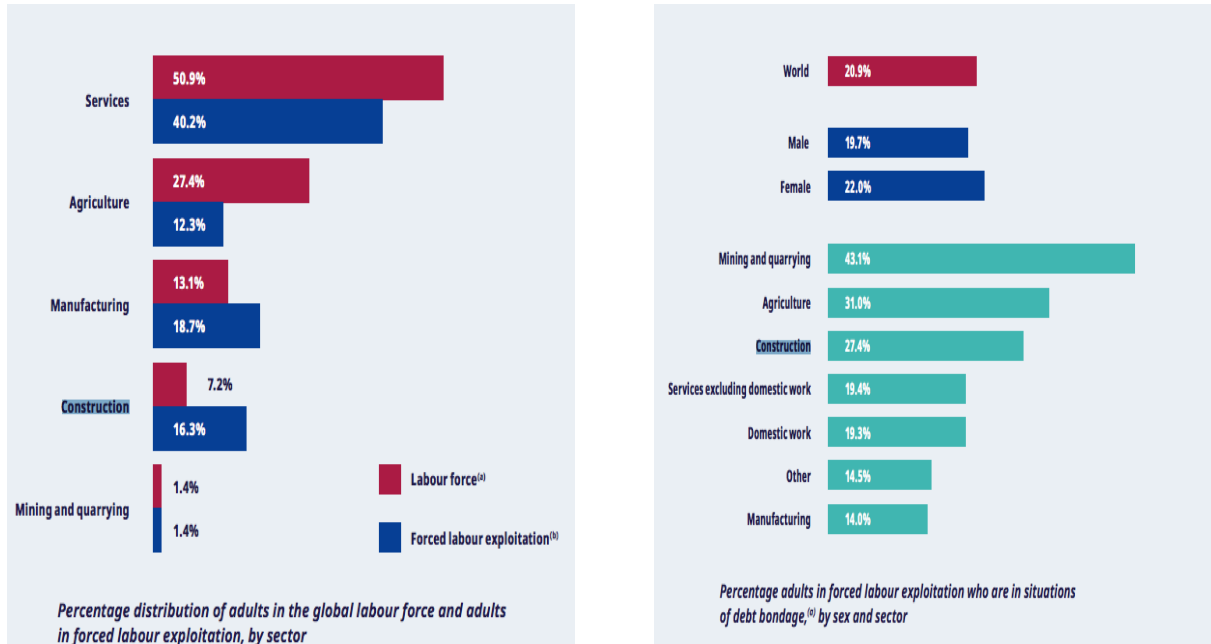


Figure 1: Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage (ILO et al., 2022)

Human rights state that no one should be forced to work or controlled by another (Bhushan, 2022). Pakistan has not seen any visible changes in the conditions of slaves. Slavery has been considered in both precolonial and colonial periods. In essence, the relationship between owners and slaves or bonded labour remained unaltered. The sole change was the design and execution of new legislation regarding forced labour and slavery. Policy changes have increased the risk of slavery and may have led to the enforcement of new laws in contemporary slavery. Since 1948, Pakistan has implemented the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). It is often neglected despite the numerous laws and declarations in Pakistan (Sultan 2021). Even though Article 37(e) of the Pakistani constitution protects women's freedom to labor in a safe workplace (National Assembly, 1973), Brick kilns and road construction sites still employ women through bonded labour (Sultan, 2021).

### 3. Materials and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach, specifically using a case study research design, to investigate the intricate experiences of women involved in forced labor as a result of debt bondage in the locale of road construction site from Ahmedpur East to Uch Sharif during 2022-2023. Unstructured interviews were carried out with female participants and their

families living in *Jhuggis*<sup>2</sup> along the road, which are mostly inhabited by residents who migrated from the *Rohi* desert<sup>3</sup> or other villages of South Punjab during the construction of the road. The targeted population consisted of women who were forced to labor as a result of being trapped in financial bondage, which was imposed upon them by their male relatives (father, son, or spouse). Using purposive sampling, a sample of 11 females was chosen. All of the females belonged to the *Oad*<sup>4</sup>. Additional valuable information was obtained from a key informant, who was engineer at the site, and also co-researchers of the study. With the help of a key informant, consent was obtained from *Mait* or *Godda*<sup>5</sup>. The study utilized thematic analysis as its analytical framework, enabling a thorough examination of the narratives and themes that arose from the qualitative data.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The huge Cholistan Desert, commonly known as *Rohi* is near Bahawalpur in southern Punjab. It has camels, cows, semi-pukka communities, and the dry Hakra River bed, isolated from development. Beyond **Derawar** Fort<sup>6</sup>, metaled roads and civilization are absent. After the **Hakra**<sup>7</sup> River dried up, the region became semi-nomadic due to droughts. *Rohi* is underdeveloped and scorched by shepherding and nomads' water-remiscing songs. It is the most neglecting region with respect to development (Hussain et al., 2022). Therefore, people from *Rohi* often come to the nearby areas in order to earn, and sometimes they borrow money from creditors in exchange for their services. As a result, they had to travel with them in order to work (debt bondage) and stay nomadic. The case studies of the current research also consisted of the same people who were nomadic and mostly belonged to the desert area.

The study revealed the life experiences of female bonded labour through thematic analysis in which main themes were identified; social lives, working conditions, health issues, and gender dynamics. Table 01 describes the Themes, their sub-themes and the frequencies.

**Table 1: Thematic analysis coding template**

Themes	Sub-themes	Theme description	Number	of
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<sup>2</sup> Temporary tents or houses made from iron sheets or long fabric.

<sup>3</sup> Known as Cholistan desert located in South Punjab, Pakistan

<sup>4</sup> Also known as *Orh*, a drifting tribe of labourers, origin from Rajasthan

<sup>5</sup> Creditor, the one who provided loan and is in-charge of the improvised *Jhuggis*

<sup>6</sup> Fortress in Ahmedpur East Tehsil, District Bahawalpur

<sup>7</sup> It is called Ghaggar river in India and Hakra in Pakistan, it had strong fluvial presence during Indus Valley civilization but now dried up

			<b>respondents mentioning this theme one or more times (%)</b>	
Social lives	Forced by family	Spouse, father, brother or son forced her to work at road site	11 (100)	
	Social isolation	They are isolated from other community and not allowed to contact other people	9 (82)	
	Earning	She was able to meet the basic needs or not	Yes	3 (27)
			No	8 (73)
	Attitude	Sympathetic and rude attitude of people towards them	8 (73)	
Socialization of Children	Unable to send children to school and could not give proper time to the children for daily tasks	6 (55)		
Working Conditions	Long duration	More than 8 Working hours and sometimes they work extra time	9 (82)	
	Leave	Working without any leave	8 (73)	
	Job security	No job security	7 (64)	
Health issues	Health security	Contractor shall not be responsible for any type of injury	7 (64)	
	Health problems	They had to face health problems (body aches, fever, etc.) due to such hard road building work	11 (100)	
	Health facilities	No health facilities, rather they had to rely on self-medication and indigenous healing practices	9 (82)	
	Reproductive health problems	Problems with respect to menstruation, pregnancy (prenatal, antenatal, and post-natal care), and child birth etc.	7 (64)	
	Drug addiction	Females are addicted to drugs (Smoking, Nicotine- <i>Gutka</i> )	5 (45)	
Gender Dynamics	Patriarchal society	Women has to obey every decision of male	11 (100)	
	Domestic chores	Women are also responsible to complete household task alone	11 (100)	
	Domestic violence	Husbands can abuse verbally as well as physically	6 (55)	
	Sexual harassment	Harassment by creditor, contractor, or others	2 (18)	

#### 4.1 Social Lives

There were five sub-themes within this main theme, which addressed how participants saw their personal social life.

- i. Forced by families: According to all of the women, they were forced into working at these locations. It was mentioned by Khan (2019) that women are unable to escape the cycle of chain labor because their male family leaders are working. Similarly, seven out of eleven women who were married and lived in the area where the research was conducted stated that they were compelled to work by their husbands and their in-laws. Other three claimed that their brother forced them.

*“I have been forced to work after marriage because my husband has been in debt and I have to work in order to pay off the debt that he has accumulated.”*

- ii. Social isolation: Females were not allowed to contact other members of society or where they were working because of the rules set by *Mait*. They were bound to not share their living experiences with people around the road site.

*“Ay jherha Mait hay ay sakon gaal keni karan denda.....adhy tuada sood wadha desan” (The creditor doesn’t allow us to talk with anyone.... He says your interest will be double)*

- iii. Earning: Even after working long hours, eight of women have stated that “we are unable to satisfy our basic needs that we have”. According to Sultan (2021), bonded laborers in Pakistan are caught in a cycle of debt that cannot be extricated. Despite the fact that they have been working nonstop, they are unable to break free of the trap because they are even having trouble meeting their basic needs.

- iv. Attitude: There is no predetermined schedule or time of year for these women to work. They also work throughout the summer months at a temperature of 48 degrees Celsius. As a result, others who are in their immediate area tend to observe them with a sympathetic attitude, and occasionally, they engage in behavior that is vile against them. As Bales (2012) stated that deeply rooted practices, economic disparities, and a lack of understanding can all play a role in shaping the attitudes of society toward bonded labor.

- v. Socialization of children: Women who have become mothers assert that their children have adverse effects on their socialization. These individuals, who are considered *Oad*, are unable to provide sufficient time for the socialization of their children.

*“Children engage in disputes with one another, and I am unable to allocate sufficient time for their bathing and hygiene.”*

They are unable to send their children to school due to the fact that all family members are involved in bonded labor.



*“Similar to others, we believed that our children should receive education in a school. However, we are a family that frequently moves from one place to another. We did not have a permanent abode. That was the cause; we were unable to enroll our children in regular educational institutions.”*

#### **4.2 Working Conditions:**

The working circumstances of the participants were analyzed and categorized into three distinct sub-themes.

- i. Long duration: There duration of working hours were not specified. Sometimes, females were forced to work only in the morning, sometimes till the evening, and sometimes there were whole days and nights without break. According to CLR (2019), the observance of acceptable working hours is an essential component of working conditions that are both safe and compassionate. In 1919, the International Labor Organization (ILO) held its very first convention, which was about working hours. The convention stipulated that worker may only put in a maximum of forty-eight hours each week. There are dangers to health and safety in the workplace that are built into a work excessive of permitted working hours. These risks are in addition to concerns about exploitation and the impact on family life. In addition, earnings are highly connected to working hours, which means that employees may look for opportunities to work longer hours in order to enhance their income.

The Shops and Establishments Ordinance (1969) of Pakistan law grants workers the right to extra remuneration for overtime performed beyond their agreed hours. Every employee has the right to overtime compensation in the workplace, calculated per hour. On the other hand, the situation was different in the region that was being studied, where women were required to labor at the road building site for more than forty-eight hours. They were compelled to work in addition to doing duties around the *Jhuggi*.

*“Taking care of the children and performing other jobs around the house, such as doing the laundry and cooking, I also have to finish all of the given tasks in the road.”*

- ii. Leave: According to Pakistan legislation, all workplaces with 10 or more workers must provide a weekly holiday or provide a compensating holiday as soon as practicable under the Punjab Factories Act (1934) (limited to manufacturing

enterprises). However, there is no law with respect to bonded labour particularly. Where in the study area females were not allowed any type of leave or holiday. One of the respondents said that,

*“We don’t celebrate events as we are slaves.” “Kerhiya Eidan tay kehriya khushia... roti ta kafan labda keni (What is Eid or what are happy events?, We hardly find bread and coffin cloth)”*

- iii. Job security: There was not any job security for the females, and not even for the males. They had to work for a lifetime.

*“If I had the option to escape and work somewhere else, I would never be here. We are bound to work life-time with the creditor.”*

### 4.3 Health Issues

Respondents described health issues during the labour under following sub- themes.

- i. Health security: The situation at the construction site for the road was quite miserable. Despite the fact that two of the females had sustained injuries, they continued to put in a lot of effort. It has been verified by females who are located there that they do not have any assurances about their health security.

Pakistani Occupational Safety and Health Laws include: Dock Labourers Act 1934, Factories Act 1934, Mines Act 1923, and Workmen’s Compensation Act 1923. The Factories Act, 1934, the principal OSH statute, applies to industrial companies with 10 or more people. In addition, Mine Act 1923 addresses mining. OSH excludes or limits coverage in other industries, such as bonded labour (CLR, 2019; Sultan, 2021).

- ii. Health Problems: There were a great deal of health issues that were affecting women in the region. After full-time bonded labour, they get heatstroke, hand burns, discrimination, and enslavement (SPARC, 2001). There were a great number of acne and burns on the skin. In other cases, women continue to work even while they are experiencing fever.

*“The labor could not be excused by a fever or any other illness under any circumstances.”*

- iii. Health Facilities: There were no any health facility for the females. Nine females claimed that they had to rely on self-medication and they were also practicing spiritual healing (such as *Taweez Ganda*, or *Salwat*) or home remedies to take care of health.

- iv. Reproductive Health Problems: Six females who were married complained that there is no facility for our reproductive health. According to Malik (2016) the creditors do not allow females for even maternity leave. One respondent told that

*“Even when we were in the midst of our pregnancy, we did not have access to any medical facilities for checkups. During the time when we were in the process of giving birth, the birth took place either in our huts or tents or in the open outside area. When the baby was delivered, our elderly ladies were there to see it. Even in the latter days of our pregnancy, we were supposed to be working.”*

Even a young lady who was just 17 years old said that she was not permitted to take a break during her menstrual cycle. Due to the fact that she was not permitted to change her cloth (which was being used as a sanitary pad), even her clothes were dirty.

- v. Drug addiction: When it came to smoking and nicotine use, there were also females present at the road building site (45%).

*“When it comes to using Gutka as a medication, there is no one who can stop us... Even so, it alleviates our feelings of depression.”*

#### 4.4 Gender Dynamics

There were four sub-themes within Gender dynamics theme, which addressed how participants saw discrimination.

- i. Patriarchal Society: As a result of the debt that was taken from their male members, women in nomadic societies are powerless and are forced to perform in bonded labor. It was required of them to comply with the choices made by their male head, and despite the fact that they worked on the road construction site in the same capacity as males, they were not paid. In his article from 2012, Bales claimed that women who are engaged in bonded labor in rural areas are not permitted to make CNIC even. In addition, Sultan (2021) asserted that women are more wretched than men since they are helpless and are an entity that is easily targeted.

*“Marad ta sr da taj hondy aurat kety”*

*“Husband is everything to a woman; I have to obey him and cannot leave him.”*

- ii. Domestic Chores: Equitable wages must be provided to men and women for labor of equal value, and there must be no discrimination on the basis of sex, as stipulated by

the Equal remuneration Convention, which was signed in 1951 (CLR, 2019). It is important to note that women are not compensated equally in this field. Instead, they were required to perform a variety of tasks simultaneously, including but not limited to cooking, socializing children, children's duties, and laundry.

- iii. Domestic Violence: There were 55% of women who said that their spouses had also subjected them to domestic abuse.

*"You have to work at the road in the morning, and in the evening, your husband beats you for even the smallest mistake."*

- iv. Sexual Harassment: Pakistani women have been vulnerable to discrimination due to their lack of rights. Sexual abuse can lead to male dominance over women in society. Abuse of women in the workplace is prevalent, particularly in debt bondage situations when victims have no escape route (Sultan, 20221). It was the most sensitive inquiry of all time and mentioned with the consent of both women without mentioning their names. There were two women who reported being subjected to sexual harassment. It was possible for them to be subjected to sexual harassment because there was no security to protect them over there. One of them disclosed that she had been subjected to sexual abuse by the contractor four years ago, while the other one refused to disclose the identity of the person who had exploited her. However, in order to lessen the amount of debt, her husband offered to pay for her to spend the night with the individual.

## 5. Conclusion

Due to the fact that women were unable to escape the cycle of debt incurred by their predecessors, women are still trapped in this field. As children, they watched their parents work in this industry since they were often moving about and never gave any thought to the education of their children. Now, their children are in the same situation as their parents were when they were younger. This bonded labour led to concerns of poverty, social exclusion, low income, health issues, sexual harassment and gender inequality. After conducting an in-depth interview, it was discovered that some women valued their jobs and mostly not, they were not satisfied with basic necessities met. Poverty and inability to socialize children made huge families miserable. When it came to maternity and delivery days, the health facilities in the workplace were not suitable. Both self-medication and traditional indigenous healing methods were utilized. They were mostly subjected to discrimination on account of their gender.

A comprehensive solution is needed to address female bonded labor on road construction sites. Imposing stricter fines is crucial to improving legislation. Educational and awareness campaigns should enlighten communities and companies about rights and consequences. A fund-based mobile school can be built that can be helpful to educate children of such women. Skill-building are essential to empower affected populations. Support and rehabilitation require collaboration with NGOs for females in order to provide health facilities. Government engagement, surveillance systems, and ethical work practices are essential. These recommendations will be helpful to abolish female bonded labor in road building, promote human rights, and enable long-term change.

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