

# Women kiln workers rise for their rights

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**B**athinda: A Phillaur-based NGO, Volunteers for Social Justice (VSJ), organized a first-of-its-kind state-level convention centred around women working in brick kilns in Bathinda on Friday. Nearly 1,500 women brick kiln workers assembled for the convention where they were told about their rights, mainly about registering for Employees Provident Fund (EPF).

They were told to raise voice for minimum facilities of safe drinking water at brick kilns to lead a dignified life and ensure complete phasing out of open defecation as Prime Minister Narendra Modi has suggested.

Earlier, farm labourers had mobilized themselves in the Malwa region to demand plots for landless, compensation for families of workers who committed suicide and compensation for loss of livelihood due to damage to cotton crop on account of whitefly attack.

"Though there is no authentic data about brick kiln labourers in Punjab, as per a conservative estimate there are nearly six lakh of them with half of them are women who are working in an unorganized way. The women are working under the shadow of men as the brick kiln owners make contracts with their male partners or family members and send no record to the EPF commissioner. Even if sometimes they complain about exploitation at the hands of brick kiln owners, no one listens to them," said VSJ general secretary Jai Singh.

"The aim behind holding the convention is to awaken women workers to rise for their rights of dignified life, demand toilets for them at brick kilns and safe drinking water to them and their children," said VSJ activist Ganga Sekhar.

Brick kiln worker Suman Mandal, who hails from Chhattisgarh, said, "We are living miserably for many years at brick kilns as the

owners treat us as bonded labourers. Nobody recognizes the work of women, and we have to go out for open defecation. Many times we have to face awkward situations."

She along with another worker Gayatri Devi, a native of Uttar Pradesh (UP), said for the last nearly three years since they came to Punjab, they have been working like slaves. "It is for the first time that we felt like the citizens of India when we were made to eat and speak properly among hundreds of other workers. We got a new lesson to fight for our rights," she said.

VSJ activist Ganga said, "The day was observed to recognize and celebrate women workers' contribution in the construction industry, and a pledge was taken to work for the realization of their rights at work."