

THIS is a report on the living and working conditions of some salesgirls in Madras. We interviewed about 30 women altogether. We found it difficult to conduct this survey because the women were afraid to talk openly to us. They insisted that their names should not be used so we have changed all the names in this report.

Some of the women thought we were officials from the labour office or from the social welfare board, who would help solve their problems. They were disappointed when they found we could not help them in this way.

In the course of the survey, we often felt very depressed by the difficulties of getting the women to tell us about their work, and by the sense of despair with which all of them seem to live. The fact that there are so many women doing sales jobs does not show that this is an attractive job. Rather, it only shows that employers find women a cheap and undemanding labour force to perform this lowpaid and unrewarding work.

Most of the girls we interviewed are in the age group 18-25 and are often the only breadwinners in their families. Most of them are from lower middle class families. Their fathers are either retired clerical employees, or are running small business establishments. Some of their fathers are invalids and thus unable to earn. Most of the girls are unmarried, and started working after passing out of school. Some of them had studied only upto the eighth standard. Among those we interviewed, only one had a BA.

When we asked why they had not studied further, we received the same response from one woman after another : "Of course I wanted to study after SSLC but it was unthinkable in the family circumstances." As a matter of course, girls are made to stop studying so that money can be used for more important things like the education of their brothers or collection of dowry for them and their sisters. Ms Lakshmi is a case in point. She and her younger sister stopped studying after tenth standard. They took up jobs as salesgirls while their younger brothers are continuing higher studies. Their father is an invalid, so Lakshmi and her sister

BHARATI SADASIVAM, SUNILA SINGH

Submissive And Cheap Labour Force

Salesgirls In Madras

support the whole family.

The salesgirls we interviewed were working in three different sectors— in shops, in door to door sales and in touring textile exhibitions. All of them had got their jobs through "recommendations" or after being told by personal contacts that vacancies existed. They are kept in a state of ignorance even about the terms and conditions of work. "I will probably get an increment if I work satisfactorily and please the proprietor" said Ms Anandi when we asked whether she could expect her first increment in a year's time. She could not say how much the increment would be. On the other hand, a girl who had already worked for a year responded by humbly saying : "How can I think of an increase in pay when I have worked for only 12 months ?"

These girls work 10 to 12 hours a day and receive salaries ranging from Rs 100 to Rs 250. Though Rs 210 is the minimum wage fixed under the shop establishments act, several private shops pay only Rs 175 but make the girls sign receipts for Rs 210, as Ms Vasantha, a salesgirl in a deluxe textile showroom, told us.

Not only are increments completely arbitrary and promotion channels non-existent, but experience and qualifications do not help a woman to get a higher salary. Many of the girls we spoke to had been working for less than a year but some had worked in similar shops before, and were experienced at the job. Yet their starting salary in their present job was the same as that of the inexperienced ones. Employers tell all the women they recruit that a higher wage can be given only after a year or more has passed. What this promise too' often

means was evident in the case of Ms Seetha who works in a large showroom. She started work there seven years ago on a salary of Rs 100. She now gets Rs 200 plus Rs 50 as sales commission.

Sales commission is a device used by employers to cover up the abysmally low salaries they pay. Sales girls are given a commission on each piece of old stock goods which they are able to sell. In some shops each girl is paid a commission on; the total sale of old stocks, but in j others each girl receives a commission only on what she personally manages to sell.

Outdoor salesgirls have an ever more difficult time. Endlessly walking up and down the streets and climbing staircase after staircase these girls are expected to cover at least 40 houses for Rs 10 a day. When multinational companies employ the girls to push a particular new brand on the market, the job lasts only a few days. On the other hand, small scale manufacturing units producing articles like: detergent powder, jams and sanitary towels appoint girls on a commission basis. This is a difficult task: since customers prefer to buy the glittering, much advertised products of multinational companies, and the girls get only 10 per cent of whatever they manage to sell.

Salesgirls are also employed by so-called textile exhibitions. These are regularly conducted by people who collect old stocks from manufacturers and wholesale dealers and sell them at dubious reduction sales. The male employees are usually the relatives of the proprietors but the women are recruited on a temporary basis from the locality where the exhibition is held. While the men are paid not less

than Rs 500, women who do the same amount of work are paid not more than Rs 250.

The salesgirls are not provided with the minimum amenities and benefits. Most of them are not aware of the leave rules under the shop establishments act. In the workplace too, they are unable to demand humane working conditions. Many employers insist that the girls keep standing in the two foot space behind the counters all day long. They are not allowed to sit down to rest their aching legs. Most shops do not allow the girls to have lunch inside, while many do not even provide a cup of tea. The small shops do not provide a toilet for the girls so they have to go to municipal corporation public toilets in nearby shopping complexes. These toilets are usually in a filthy condition.

Most of the girls interviewed complained of harassment by employers, who are rude, inconsiderate and concerned only with net sales and profits at the end of the day. Several also spoke of customers who often behave in an insulting manner. "Many of them order us about as if we are their servants" said Ms Parvathi bitterly,

In addition to pleasing customers, the girls have also to be constantly alert against shoplifters. All missing articles have to be paid for by the salesgirls. The long hours of work are a major problem for all the women. For married women, it means an 18 hour work day.

The salesgirls are completely unorganized and do not have the support of any trade union, so they remain a forgotten and isolated section of working people. Some of the girls have made attempts to organize themselves but this resulted in summary dismissal of the leaders. One girl was even handed over to the police and interrogated on the basis of a false complaint by her employer.

When asked if they would like to change their jobs, the universal response was: "We want to leave but who will give us another job?" They dream of marriage as a possible way out of the strenuous and humiliating work they have to do. However even marriage remains a distant dream because of dowry demands or the



A salesgirl in a sbop in Madras

need to remain in the parental family as the bread-winner. "A party who came to see my elder sister asked for Rs 15,000 in cash", said Lakshmi, a salesgirl in a small textile showroom. Asked if she would submit to a marriage under similar conditions, she looked astonished and said: "Having been born as girls, we have to put up with such treatment."

Ms Kutty, who is a graduate, said that she is the sole breadwinner in her family and therefore her marriage will be delayed. "My family will have no income if I get married and leave." Since they have no hold on their salaries and no personal savings, the girls are economically insecure and change jobs frequently in the hope of getting a better deal. It is common for a salesgirl to work for 10 to 15 employers in the course of five years. However, when these changes do not bring

any improvement in prospects, the attitude of despair and self-negation only gets reinforced. They feel that they can get nothing better either by way of education or employment because they are girls, and can aspire to nothing except marriage. While their parents try to educate the boys of the family, these girls wait for a husband to come and rescue them from drudgery.

"I work here only because I am forced to", said Amrita, "After marriage, I will stay at home and relax." When we asked whether she was sure to settle down and feel relaxed after marriage, she was silent for a moment and then said: "Where is freedom or enjoyment in this society? I will have to face my in-laws or the so-called life partner with his set of ideas which I will have to follow. Will I really be free? I don't know." □