

EVEN today, women are considered the cheapest and most usable commodities available on the labour market. It is true that after the nationalization of coal mines, women are paid equal wages with men. However this, among other things, has also led to a tremendous decline in women's employment in coal mines, and has exposed them to new forms of sexual exploitation. Women in all the mines, nationalized as well as privately owned, have to face the problem of sexual harassment.

There is a close link between the mines and the fields. The mines are based on the destruction of local tribal agriculture. Since adivasi women are more involved in agricultural work than are men, the growth of the mines has a more devastating effect on women. There are very few schemes to rehabilitate the displaced, and the few jobs which are occasionally won after long struggles, go only to men. Women's employment in coal mines has been drastically cut down by law. The concept of rehabilitation in this region centres around men, though women work just as much and even more than do men.

### Employment Patterns

The majority of women in this region are employed either in the fields or in the coal, manganese, stone, fireclay, copper and other mines. In the mines, as men workers cut the minerals, women carry them away in headloads, and load them into trucks. They also carry headloads of soil and break stones by hand. Other kinds of work women do include cutting wood from the forests and carrying it to sell in the market, collecting *tendu* leaves and supplying them in bundles to contractors, making *bidis*, doing sowing, weeding, harvesting and all other agricultural operations except for ploughing, doing the major part of house building, selling vegetables, and going to work in brick kilns. Women also play a major role in making beer and *hadia* from *mahua*. In some areas, men go to sell it in the market; in others, this work too is done by women. In other words, women perform all tasks, big and small, except for a few traditionally tabooed tasks.

Wherever land is taken over on a large

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# Between Mines and Fields

## Tribal Women in Bihar

scale by mine owners or by nationalized mines, widespread unemployment is created amongst women, especially amongst tribal women, to a greater extent than amongst men. Private companies have not implemented any rehabilitation schemes nor has the government done anything substantial in this direction. Wherever negotiations are now underway for rehabilitation, whether by giving employment to the displaced or by setting them on land elsewhere, or by paying them compensation, women are never even mentioned. Even if it is a woman's land which is being snatched away, if she does not have a male heir, she cannot be given employment in coal mines because further recruitment of women in coal mines, even for overground work, has been stopped. Though a woman toils in the fields just as much as does a man, an even though she is rendered equally destitute when the land is taken over by the mines, she is given neither employment nor compensation. If the government does ever give plots of land, it is given, according to uncodified Hindu law, only to men. When displacement takes place in tribal areas, men usually migrate in search of employment to Calcutta, Jamshedpur, Patna, while women try to survive on forest produce or move in large numbers into work on roads and dam construction sites.

In Ranchi and Santhal Pargana districts, teams of tribal women set out in search of work. Each team usually has only

one man attached to it. His job is to look after cooking and to mind the stuff. These teams usually engage in loading work at the mines.

The pattern is slightly different among harijans and backward castes. Among them men usually migrate to cities while women stay home with the children, singlehandedly managing agricultural work for nine months in the year. Men come home during the monsoon to do the ploughing.

### Women Done out of Jobs

The laws made for "protection" of women in the industrial sector have turned out to be most detrimental to their interests. There is one set of laws which prohibit women from doing certain kinds of work, and another set which make it compulsory for employers to provide special facilities to women workers. For instance, women are forbidden to work underground in mines, or to work in the evening and night shifts even overground. Also, there is provision of equal pay for equal work, maternity leave, rest shelters, creches and so on.

The prohibition of certain kinds of work for women has acted as an obstacle to the employment of women. Since these laws are implemented in the nationalized mines, the management there has not only stopped recruiting women but has also begun to retrench women with a vengeance. The provision of special facilities also serves as an excuse for profiteering mine owners to stop

employing women. It is usually found that in those privately owned mines where the management manages to ignore these laws, women are employed in larger numbers than are men, because they are paid lower wages, and are thus used to enhance the owners' profits.

Women in coal mines face the particular problem of invisible retrenchment. Middle class non tribals have become interested in coal mining jobs after higher wages and job security have been introduced. The administration, in collusion with some trade unions, has launched a voluntary retirement

scheme whereby systematic retrenchment of women workers is under-way. (See *Manushi* No. 14) Under scheme, first floated in 1976, during the emergency, any woman of any age below 57 can voluntarily retire and nominate her son, husband, brother-in-law, son-in-law or any other male relative to take over job. This man will get the advantages of her seniority. The scheme has resulted in large-scale buying of jobs from women by middle class non tribal men, for a couple of thousand rupees. Very little of this money actually, reaches the woman, because administrative officers, union leaders, contractors, and often even the woman's

usually collect their own wages, because they have a tradition of working separately from men, in women's work teams, and they also have fewer social restrictions on their mobility. In privately owned mines, there are no rest shelters for women and children, and even in nationalized mines, the shelters are not worth calling by that name. Neither are there any bathroom or toilets for women in the mines. Women are given the same shoes as are given to men. These are very hard, large sized, and uncomfortable. Rural women are not used to wearing shoes, so they need to be given better fitting, softer shoes.

There is no provision for childcare. Infants have to be left in the care of children or have to be left sleeping on a stone slab. A woman is dependent on the *manushi's* whim for permission to suckle her infant. In coal mines, the *manushi* usually has to be bribed a couple of rupees per week, before he will grant permission.

Maternity leave, where given, is for a maximum of 45 days—three weeks before and three weeks after delivery. If a woman falls sick and takes a month off before delivery, then she can take only two weeks after delivery. Women usually keep working up to ten days before delivery, and often right up to the moment labour pains begin. Maternity leave rules are implemented only in the coal mines since these are nationalized, but not in any of the privately owned mines. Even in the coal mines, wherever labourers are not organized, women do often work up to the day of delivery. The number of dispensaries in the collieries is most inadequate, and the few which exist do not have women doctors or nurses. There is no provision for monthly check up of pregnant women. Often, a woman's husband does not wish her to take leave because he is greedy for her earnings. When a woman is widowed, single, or has an unemployed husband, and is thus the sole earner in the family, she finds it difficult to take maternity leave, because she cannot afford to lose a day's earnings. If a woman develops complications in childbirth, and is unable to report back to work on time, her pay is first docked and then stopped altogether.



### Working Conditions

It is common in the industrial sector for a woman's husband, son or father to claim her wage straight from the employer. He may then spend it on liquor or gambling. In this way, the woman, though toiling from morning to night, is deprived of economic independence. Even in nationalized mines, the practice of handing a woman's wage to her husband is prevalent. I have long opposed this practice and have insisted that a woman's wage must be given into her hands, but sometimes women themselves, perhaps for fear of violence, authorize their husbands to collect their wages. Adivasi women

## Family And Social Life

The daily routine of an adivasi woman in this area is something like this. She gets up in the morning, sweeps and cleans the house, lights the *chulha* then goes to fetch water from a distant stream, pond or deep well. Sometimes she has to spend an hour filtering water through a leaf cup before she can collect a pitcher full. All this time the man has not done any work except to wash his face. After feeding the man, the children and the old people, she eats, washes the dishes, and then tends the cow or goat, if the family has one. Then she goes out with the man to look for work or to cut wood in the forest. Both of them cut the wood and then the woman takes it on her head to sell it in the market. She comes home at night and cooks again. To go to bed after men do and to rise earlier than they is part of women's daily routine.

To sell vegetables, women walk anything from two to 10 miles to the nearest market or township. Women who collect *mahua* or fire-wood for sale are usually victims of exploitation by forest guards and *mahua* tree owners. Rich and powerful villagers stake a claim to the *mahua* trees growing in the forests around their villages. Sometimes they buy up these trees at government auctions, thus snatching away the age old collective right of the villagers over forest produce. So when the women collect three baskets of *mahua* they have to hand over two baskets to the owner. The women barter *mahua* for oil, salt and other such essential commodities. They also cook *mahua* for home consumption, distil liquor from it, and sell oil made from its seeds.

Adivasi women from Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana area are taken by contractors to work in brick kilns around Patna. There they work 12 hours a day for extremely low wages. Women of this area are found working in very distant places, even in the Assam tea gardens.

Women in this region are on the one hand victims of sexual exploitation by middle class intruders. On the other hand, they are also victims of older superstitions and customs. A childless woman or a widow or one who was once a widow is in danger of being declared a witch by other

villagers. She may suddenly be blamed for a mishap in the village, and physical as well as financial punishment may be meted out to her. Sometimes she is beaten to death.

Another evil practice spreading in the industrial areas, particularly in the mines, is that of men staking women as pawns during their gambling bouts. One such incident took place in a gambling bout between the workers of Jharkhand colliery and those of Laiyon colliery. The Laiyon colliery workers won a woman worker from the Jharkhand colliery and carried her off. We had to go and rescue her. In another case, a man from Kedla colliery gambled away his wife. When she refused to go



with the winner, her husband cut off her nose.

Polygamy is practised in this area. Though a tribal woman has the right to leave one man and go with another, she cannot have more than one husband at a time, but a man can have as many wives as he wants.

## Suggestions For Change

I have outlined above only some of the most glaring problems faced by tribal women in this region. I would suggest the following measures for partial solution of some of these problems.

1. So far, provision of maternity benefits, creches, insurance, has been in the hands of the managements who, being unwilling to spend money on these facilities, evade the law by retrenching women workers. It would be best, therefore, for the government to take responsibility for providing these benefits. A social security department could be created to provide facilities to workmen workers in industries, plantations and agriculture the country over. The government should cover a certain percentage of total expenditure from all employers irrespective of whether or not they employ women. This will ensure that employers have an interest in employing

women.

2. Men should also be given leave at the time of their wives' deliveries. This will be useful in two ways. First, maternity leave will no longer be seen as a special privilege granted to women which discourages employers from employing women. Second, men can help look after their wives and children.

3. Women in Mexico have got rid of the ban on women's employment in the night shift. Their argument is that it is not healthy for any human being, man or woman, to work on a night shift. By making out that it is unhealthy only for women, employers in capitalist countries have

merely found an excuse to refuse women employment. I feel that women should be allowed to work in at least the second, if not the third shift. By working in the evening shift women from extremely poor families can get some relief from economic distress.

4. It is true that it is better for women not to work under ground, since such work exposes them to greater sexual harassment, and may also be unhealthy for them physiologically. However to guard against retrenchment, the government should declare that a certain minimum percentage of women workers must be recruited, and the total number of women workers should not fall below a certain percentage. Also, the percentage of women workers doing surface work in the first shift should be higher, to compensate for the absence of women from the other shifts and from underground work.

5. The voluntary retirement scheme has been stayed by a supreme court order, in a case filed by workers and activists. However, some trade unions who have vested interests in the scheme are still supporting it indirectly by demanding that jobs be inheritable within families. Also, women are being currently retrenched in an invisible manner. The government should ensure that whenever a woman retires, another woman is recruited in her place.

6. The machinery for the implementation of the Equal Remuneration Act is most ineffective, chiefly because the implementation officers themselves operate by double standards. The procedure for settling cases is extremely long, costly and cumbersome. One has to go through stages of conciliation to tribunal to high court to supreme court, which neither women nor men workers can afford. It is necessary to change labour law procedure and to provide for summary trial and immediate settlement of each individual complaint.

7. If both husband and wife are working in a mine, a quarter is allotted to the man and not to the woman. The woman should be treated as an individual unit, and should be given another quarter in her own name.

8. Women officers should be available

at each mine to deal with women workers' complaints. Though there is a general law that each person shall be given his or her own wage, yet this law is flouted with impunity where women are concerned. So there should be a special penalty for employers who hand over a woman's wages to her male relatives.

9. To relieve women mine workers from some of the burden of housework, the government and management should arrange for cheap canteens and readymade food packets at worksites.

10. Adult literacy programmes must be organized in mines and factories so that women workers are enabled to read and see how much money is due them, to count their wages, and to sign receipts. The problem of sexual harassment can be dealt with only by organizing women to resist it. This process can be helped by government and management providing literature in simple language, and holding programmes from time to time, to inform women of their legal rights against exploitation.

11. The greatest emphasis must be placed on providing technical training to women wherever new technology is being introduced. Women must be trained to work as electricians, fitters, drivers, operators. Women, particularly women mine workers and tribal women, are perfectly capable of doing these jobs.

12. It is most important to ensure that wherever women already have employment, their percentage does not decline. Reservation of jobs for women will help give them security.

There should be a government ban on men or machines taking over surface jobs that women are doing in the mines, such as truck loading, cleaning, headloading, cutting coal and other minerals and so on. The management, especially in coal mines,

is currently intent on replacing women with machines.

Special measures are needed for the protection of migrant tribals, particularly women. I suggest the following protective measures.

1. The government should appoint women's squads to be present at major railway stations and establish contact with migrant women work gangs. If possible work should be provided to these migrants in their own areas. Failing that, the details of their destination, should be noted down, and the relevant state government notified, so that steps can be taken to safeguard the women from exploitation.

2. A wide chain of food for work projects should be set up in rural areas so that people do not have to leave their villages. When a few such projects were set up in 1978-79, the labourers, particularly the women, got some relief from the village landlords or rich peasants who formerly used to make them work all day for a kilo of grain or 250 grams of *sattoo*. At the food for work projects, women used to get four kilos of grain, or even if contractors and middlemen stole a lot, at least three or three and a half kilos, which was much more than they ever got from landlords.

3. It is most important that labourers have a foothold in their own villages so that they are not forced to migrate, and so that they can develop some collective bargaining power. When the government distributes land to the landless, women should be given separate plots in their own names. Whenever land is taken over by mines, compensation must be given equally and separately to both men and women of the displaced families. Control over the land will serve as a base for them to fight their exploiters.

*(translated from Hindi)*

