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Demand to 25 Per Cent Reservation of jobs

THE National Federation of Indian Women is demanding 25 per cent reservation for women in jobs of the central and state governments, municipalities and other local bodies. Women from the categories for which reservation already exists such as scheduled castes and tribes and other backward communities, should be allotted 25 per cent within the existing quota. We reproduce below their arguments in favour of this very important demand.

Discrimination At All Levels

Women in India suffer discrimination at all levels in the employment market. The work participation rates for females show a steady decline since 1921. The report of the committee on the status of women, 1975, had pointed out that "while the total number of women workers declined from 41.8 million in 1911 to 31.2 million in 1971, their percentage in the total labour force declined from 41.8 million in 1911 to 31.2 million in 1971, their percentage in the total labour force declined from 34.44 per cent in 1911 to 17.35 percent in 1971. This decline has been more precipitous in recent years."

The government now claims that the 1981 census shows a gradual improvement in the organized sector of the economy from 2449.9 thousand in 1977 to 2822 6thousand in 1981. However, this statement is misleading because firstly, it relates only to the organized sector which employs only about six per cent of the total female labourforce. Secondly, men's employment has also increased in greater

numbers from 18183.6 thousand in 1977 to 20094.6 thousand in 1981. Thirdly, the increase in the labour force is not commensurate with the increase in population. Also, the number of unemployed and those seeking employment has increased during the same period.

It is more important to look at women's situation in the vast unorganized sector which absorbs 94 per cent of the female labour force. A ministry of labour report, 1981-82 shows that the number of women registered at employment exchanges as in search of work has increased by 17.5 per cent between October 1980 and October, 1981. Meanwhile there has been a fall of 10.5 per cent in the number of women provided With jobs during this period, as compared to the previous year.

Pushed Out By Mechanization

Women have lost their hold on many agricultural tasks which they used to perform previously, as it is usually the men who learn to operate the new equipment like harvesters, threshers, tractors and tubewells. A labour bureau study of working conditions in mines between December 1976 and April 1977, showed that the percentage of women's employment declined from 17.9 to 12.7, and there has been a further decline to 11 per cent in 1978.

Women's employment in factories is declining sharply. The latest labour statistics issued by government state that women's employment in factories has reduced further from 11 per cent in 1976 to

10 per cent in 1978. This decline has been most drastic in the textile industry where thousands of women have just been thrown out of employment. The reasons given by employers are, firstly, that factory legislation imposes financial burdens on them by making it obligatory to provide maternity benefits and creches wherever women are employed, and secondly, that women are not able to handle improved technology and automation. The first argument is not upheld by facts. To quote recent official figures of maternity benefits actually paid under the maternity benefit act:

	1977	1978
Number of women employed	335,489	298,573
Number of claims	4,342	2,751
Number of claims paid	3,470	2,468
Amount paid in lakhs	10.40	12.63

And now that factories are covered by Employees State Insurance Scheme which includes maternity benefits, employers will not have to pay even these meagre sums.

Secondly, it is true that mechanization in factories has hit women very hard. Women have been retrenched and discriminated against while men have been trained to handle machines. If men can be trained, why cannot women be trained to become skilled workers? It is absolutely untrue to say that women do not have the aptitude to handle technology. Electronics

industries which claim to employ women precisely because of their greater dexterity, have very efficient women workers. Even in these industries, discrimination has now set in. Of 15 units studied, the increase in women workers was 63.69 per cent in 1971 but declined to 51.50 per cent in 1973 and 5.68 per cent in 1974. Since 1976 it has varied between 1 and 5 per cent. In the pharmaceuticals industry, women constituted 8 per cent of the labour force in 1970. This rose to 11.62 in 1974 but declined to 10.17 in 1978 and has shown a marginal but steady decline ever since.

A study report of plantations for April to October 1978, stated that "the number of women workers in tea plantations showed a gradual minor decreasing trend, the trend being slightly more pronounced in plantations in South India." The report also said that women were found to be concentrated in occupations like tea plucking, coffee picking, rubber tapping and weeding. The proportion of women in skilled and supervisory occupations was negligible, and no woman was holding an administrative, executive or managerial post. Similar conditions and trends are to be found in the bidi, matches and construction industries.

Women More Efficient

It is noteworthy that several studies have actually shown women to be more efficient wherever they are employed. A study conducted by the government potato seed farm in Mattewara in Punjab during 1973-74, found that women were over three times more efficient than men were, as seen in the chart below.

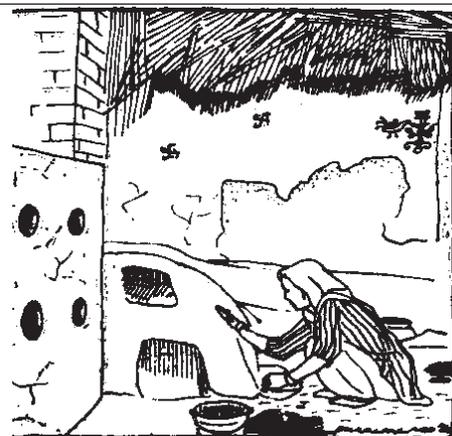
So also, women, whether working at paid or unpaid jobs, often have a much longer working day than do men. A study

conducted by ASTRA revealed that in one Karnataka village, women and children expended nearly 66 per cent of total energy expended in work whereas men expended less than 34 per cent. It is also a well established fact that women do the most backbreaking, time consuming jobs for which they are either not paid or are paid much less than are men doing the same jobs.

Exploitation Unabated

While remunerative employment for women is on the decline, this does not mean that women do less work. There are now new methods of exploitation of women's labour. Under new methods of agriculture and several developmental plans, men are officially employed and women not employed, but all the same, the man is supposed to bring along a team which means that the women have to "assist" men of their families in all the backbreaking jobs in agriculture, poultry, cottage industries, handicrafts, handlooms, without being on the official payroll or receiving any payment. Thus, though they labour hard, their work is outside the category of economic activity.

As the traditional cottage and small scale industries are dying, the government is paying no attention to modernizing or reviving them. Large numbers of women are losing employment in this sector. While these old avenues of employment are closing down, the modern industrial sector openly discriminates in favour of men, as far as training, skilled jobs or any jobs at all are concerned. It is a common experience that when an equally qualified man and woman apply for a job, the man is usually selected. He is presumed to be the "superior" person and hence a better



worker. With growing unemployment, even sectors like nursing and electronics which were traditionally the monopoly of women, are attracting men in larger numbers.

The marginal increase in women's employment in some office jobs, in the police force or in top echelons of the civil service such as the IAS, does not compensate for the overall massive decline in employment.

The existing level of female un-employment is estimated to be 7 to 8 millions. In the next few years about 10 million are expected to enter the labour market. These figures do not take into account the millions of housewives who are desperately in need of paid employment, but are not registered at employment exchanges or in the census, as seeking jobs. The need for training and employment is evident.

The Indian constitution allows for favourable discrimination for women and other weaker sections. Since women are nearly half the population, it is not at all unreasonable to demand 25 per cent reservation of jobs for women in government undertakings. □

Type of equipment	Picking rate per labourer per minute, in metres		Hours taken for same job		Potato yield per Kg'20 metres	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Springtime cultivator	1.6	5.2	192	53	17.1	23.6
Potato digger elevator	1.4	4.0	185	69	18.2	23.9