

Women On The Lowest Rung

A Report on the Working Conditions of Telephone Operators in Delhi

FOLLOWING a report in one of the daily newspapers that a woman telephone operator working in Kidwai Bhawan had alleged sexual harassment by her boss who is also a trade union boss, Deepti and Jyotika did a special report for Manushi, not only on the facts of this case, but also on the working conditions of telephone operators and some of the problems they face.

Santosh Singh, a middle-aged woman who has worked in Kidwai Bhawan for six years as a telephone operator, has filed a complaint against Chanan Singh, Senior Supervisor, on charges of molestation. She says : "Mr. Chanan Singh and I both belong to the same union. He has been Circle Secretary for many years. Because I decided to stand as a candidate for the same post, he became jealous. Last December, he manipulated my transfer to his section. Once he became my immediate boss, he had the opportunity to harass me every now and again, on various pre-texts. One day I had to go to hospital but he refused me leave. In all these years of service, my supervisors have appreciated my work, there have been no complaints against me. But he used to abuse me constantly. One day I exchanged duties with another girl, so since I had worked on the day of her duty, I was entitled to get my weekly off day.

Mr. Chanan Singh refused to give me my off day. When I demanded my right, he started shouting at me. Then he started insulting me. In full view of 17 witnesses, he put his arms around me and caught at my breast. I took off my slipper and hit him, to protect myself. The

same day, I was suspended by the Assistant Engineer, on grounds of assaulting a senior member of the staff." Santosh Singh has been on suspension since March 14, and is being paid only a subsistence allowance. She has submitted that the Assistant Engineer does not have the authority to suspend her— only the appointing authority or any authority higher than the appointing authority is competent to suspend an employee.

Further, since Chanan Singh is in a position to tamper with evidence and influence witnesses, he should also be suspended or at least transferred. She has refused to face departmental enquiry



Santosh Singh

until this has been done.

Though she filed a case against Chanan Singh alleging assault, no action has been taken against him; on the other hand, she has been suspended pending an enquiry into the charges against her—

that of assaulting an officer on duty.

His version : "On March 12, she came into my room and shouted insults at me. I kept quiet. On the 14th she came and demanded her weekly off day. I refused, of course. She started shouting. So I thought I should go out of the office myself, until she had cooled down. She blocked the door so I could not go. I moved into the inside room instead, where the typists work. I was inspecting their work, when suddenly she came up from behind and beat me with her slipper. Later, she made up all kinds of charges, saying that I had assaulted her."

What The Officers Say

"An officer", intones N.K. Aggarwal, Assistant Manager, "has to be unbiased. He (sic) must not hold any opinions about the case. He must not take sides." However, the senior officers that we spoke to had all taken a stand in advance. They believe, on the basis of a *prima facie* examination, that the case against Chanan Singh is a "deliberately cooked-up bogus case, engineered to demoralize the officers and undermine their credibility."

We wonder what the purpose of an enquiry is, when the official position is already so explicit? N. K. Aggarwal gives us the reason : "You see, suspension is not really punishment. We have to conduct this enquiry. Only when charges against her have been proved, can we punish her. We may even dismiss her from service..."

Red Tape Intertwined With Telephone Wires

Nearly 90 per cent of the women employed by Delhi Telephones work in one nine-storey-tall building called

Kidwai Bhawan. Since we were interested not only in Ms. Singh's case, but also in finding out about the working conditions of women, we wanted to see their workplace. But we came up against a formidable barrier—one created by officialdom to prevent the public from having access to an ordinary department of the government they have put in power and which is supposed to exist for their benefit.

On May 12, we were directed to the Public Relations Officer of the General Manager to obtain permission for entering the "protected area." From PRO to Assistant GM, from AGM to Deputy GM, from DGM back to AGM, from AGM to GM himself. Four visits to the GM's office and not one glimpse of him. Endless conflicts with nonchalant personal assistants, hours of waiting in adjacent rooms and very polite fencing, finally, with officials themselves. The DGM says: "Actually, it is very difficult to provide you with the kind of information you want. How can we tell you how many operators are men and how many are women? We do not keep such records because you see, in our organization we do not discriminate on the basis of sex."

Finally, the DGM demands a letter from the editor of Manushi certifying our identity. We agree to get it within an hour. He demurs: "Today I will not be able to meet you. Tomorrow? No, no, I am very busy tomorrow also." He remains adamant on the point that he is absolutely unable to spare us five minutes the following day. We march into the GM's office but he is attending a meeting.

Two days later, we meet the GM. He says: "It is not that there is red tape here. I will be very frank—actually, we do not want anyone to write on our organization because already there has been much damage caused by the misreporting of a particular case, just recently. I will give you permission to go inside only if you promise to ask no

questions about the case. You see, it is a completely cooked-up case."

Women Remain On The Lowest Rung.

Delhi Telephones employs about 18,000 persons of which 2,300 or so are women. The majority of women are telephone operators, a few are clerks. Of about 60 Class I officers, only one is a woman. Among the 300 or so Class II officers, again only one is a woman. All the other female employees are in the Class III and IV ranks. Telephone operators fall in the Class III category but within Class III too, there is a hierarchy. At the base are the operators, then come junior and senior supervisors. Above them are Assistant Engineers (Class II) and Divisional Engineers who are Class I officers. At the peak are directors and managers - heights which no female employee in Delhi has ever been allowed to scale. There is only one woman General Manager in the whole of India.

A feminization programme was launched about 20 years ago in the Special Services and Trunks departments. Approximately 90 per cent of all female employees are now concentrated within these two departments. However, while all the operators in these departments are women, 12 out of 20 senior supervisors and six of the 40 junior supervisors are still men.

Promotions take years for a telephone operator. Says Ms. V: "After 20 or 22 years, a telephone operator can hope to be promoted to the post of supervisor. When we are young, we spend years sitting at the board and when we are old women, our job requires us to constantly move from one desk to another, to be always on our feet."

The department also has about 160 women working on daily wages. "Sometimes, girls are kept for five or six years on daily wages," complains one woman, "The poor girl is completely at the mercy of the higher officers. She gets

only Rs 12 a day for doing the same work as a regular telephone operator."

Long Hours, Low Wages

The women work for a seven and a half hour shift during which there are three breaks, totalling an hour in all. Once a week there is a night duty, one day a week is an off day. The supervisors have to put in a whole week of night duty once a month.

At night there is a system of split duties, according to which the women work for three hours and then resume work after a break of five hours. There are over-congested dormitories for the women to lie down. The bed-clothes are always dirty.

The work is very arduous and requires complete concentration. Lines are constantly getting crossed, equipment is often faulty and rarely replaced, the women have to race to keep up with the demands made on them, because one woman has to handle far too many lines. Her hands race, her voice races and yet it is she who gets all the blame for the inefficiency of the telephone system. The stereotype of *the* lazy operator who spends her time knitting and chatting is completely falsified by reality—the women are in fact sorely overworked.

Most exchanges are loaded beyond their capacity. In 1979, 23,000 new lines were installed but only 100 operators were recruited. Though the over-strained women are as helpless as are the telephone users in dealing with the ill-maintained and faulty equipment, it is their voices which are heard on the line, it is they who bear the brunt of public wrath.

The evening shift ends at 8 p.m. at which hour no transport is provided. Women travel all the way to Gurgaon, Sonapat, Palwal, besides far-flung corners of Delhi itself. Officials are nonchalant about the problem: "How can we provide transport to so many different places?" There are supposed to be buses to drop women at central junctions in the city but these buses

never make an appearance.

For their long stretches of duty, these women earn a basic salary of Rs 260 which may amount to about Rs 500 as carry-home salary. Ms. M recounts bitterly: "Some delegates from Germany asked us how much pay we get. I felt so ashamed. I told them a figure three times my actual salary. Do you know what one of them said? He said, That is pretty good for a weekly salary."

The penalty for not reporting for a night shift is two more night shifts, that is, three in all.

They Treat Us As Slaves

Each male supervisor has dealings with a number of female subordinates. The women were bitter and vehement about the way they are harassed: "They treat us as slaves. As for them, they are kings! Even when we want to go to the bathroom, we are kept waiting for a long time, till we can find someone to replace us at the machine." This leads to much discomfort and even disease.

Another operator says: "When we ask for leave, we are denied it. We have to beg to get leave. My son was ill last year but I had to plead before they finally granted me leave." This was a common complaint. "Even to get our off day we have to write an application. The off day is granted in an arbitrary way—ten may apply and only two be granted it. The girls who "please" them, are granted favours, the others are harassed."

The women also allege that the bosses supply girls to higher officials. Many people, including foreign delegates, are brought to see the exchange. Officers come in on the pretext of inspecting boards but actually to see and "select" girls. The girls who do not have permanent posts are more vulnerable.

Health Hazards

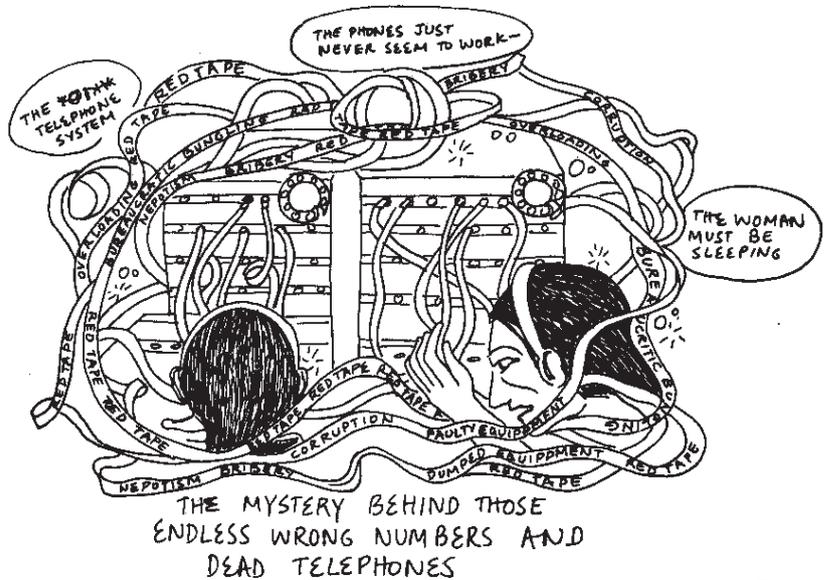
In the rainy season, the wires often give the women electric shocks but no protective arrangement is made by the management against this work hazard. They are also subject to frequent insulting and abusive telephone calls

from unknown men. Nothing has been done to check this menace.

There is a Welfare Section which is supposed to stock medicines and first aid equipment but, as one woman puts it: "They just dab on their red medicine whatever the wound or injury." Ms. R cites the case of a woman who started having labour pains while on night duty: "The officers were not bothered. We had to hire a taxi and take her to hospital. Neither did they grant us leave that day, nor did they pay for the taxi."

One woman who suffered a retina rupture due to over-strain tells her story: "The doctor told me that I must have lifted too heavy a weight or cried too much. Two days before the rupture, I had

my arm." She had to show it to me several times before I could see it and then I realised that I could not see with my left eye at all. It was 12 noon when this happened. My shift ended at 3.30. At 3 p.m. I told the supervisor that I could not see with my left eye. He burst out laughing. I asked him to grant me leave for the next day or adjust it against my next off day but he absolutely refused to do so. He would not even let me go home half an hour early that day. After a lot of pleading I took the next day off and went to the hospital. They said that the delay could result in the loss of the eye as the operation could only be performed before the layer dried up totally. The government hospital could arrange for



—Purnima

cried a lot because I was refused my weekly off day. Only the supervisors have a complaint book. For us there is none. So I did cry a lot. We have to lift very heavy registers and directories every day. Registers keep accumulating and the shelves are too small to hold them so they pile up and to take out one, we have to first remove dozens of others. That day, when I pulled out the register, something happened to me because, when I returned to my table, the girl to whom I was handing the directories, said, "Didi, you are putting the directories on

the operation 'only after four days because very few doctors are available to perform this particular operation. So I went to a private hospital and spent Rs 6,500 on the operation. The doctor gave it to me in writing that I should do only light duty and should not use my eyes after dark. Even now I can't see well after sunset. But these people insist on giving me evening shifts. I have applied for a transfer to another department where the work is lighter, and where I will not have to lift registers and do a lot of reading and writing work as in the records

section. But even though I have given in two applications accompanied by a medical certificate, I have received no reply. The retina ruptured in October, I applied for transfer in February and now it is May. Nobody will listen to you here unless you have influence or power of some kind. Might is right here— even our own union officials only help those who know how to “please” them (bribe or succumb to their advances).”

“Husbands Think We Are Earning Machines”

Many of the women have to hand over their salary to husbands or mothers-in-law. They are then given a small sum for daily expenses. We taped a vociferous discussion on the double burden that they bear. Ms. V burst out: “What do most men consider women? Just earning machines which also satisfy their sex desire. If he goes to a prostitute he will have to pay and also runs the risk of being found out...Husband and wife both return at five in the evening. The husband is feeling tired, he lies down on the bed and will say, ‘Haven’t you made the tea yet?’ He won’t even say please,

he will order you. And as for the woman, as soon as she returns, without even stopping to take off her sari, she will start working. People say women are backward and silly. No, we are not backward—hundreds of responsibilities are on our shoulders. We have too many duties, society is also after us. One woman will criticise another: ‘Don’t you feel ashamed that your husband washes his clothes or makes tea?’ Why don’t they realise that a man also has two hands and feet? Surely he can move them a bit. Women don’t have some great extra metal in them that only they should have to work.”

The Unresponsive Unions

Three trade unions operate in the P & T Department, all claiming to represent the workers’ demands. However, most of their energy is spent battling against each other. The women told us: “The union elections are not free and fair. Suddenly they announce that a meeting will be held today. The union bosses manage to get leave for their own people and get them to come to the meeting. Many of us cannot get leave at such short

notice. And then voting is by show of hands, not by secret ballot. So that acts as a pressure too.”

The women feel that unions are very necessary, they are all members of unions. The unions extract membership fees but do nothing for women.

The women say: “If we please Chanan Singh, he will get our work done, but if he is against someone, he will place obstacles even when she files a leave application. And the union is under his dictatorship.”

Ms. Singh has received an anonymous letter, telling her in no uncertain terms that she has been suspended for revealing the internal goings on of the department and threatening to “finish off” her family and herself if she dares pursue the case, talk about it or show the letter to the police. Today she lives in fear. She does not let the children out of her sight, not even to play in the park. And yet she is determined to see the case through. We were deeply impressed by her strength and courage. She says: “Even if it costs my life, I will not stop fighting for justice...” □