

WOMEN who are in employment have very specific problems and over the years, they have struggled for resolution of these problems. Through their unions, women have won some important facilities—stability of service, better pay, shorter working hours, maternity benefits, creche facilities for their children, exemption from shift work and so on. These facilities are crucial as employed women have problems that are different from those of employed men and of nonemployed women. But today these hardwon facilities are being used against women. Paid maternity leave implies a lesser profit margin for the employer, creches an additional expense and so on. The result is that employers have started to employ fewer and fewer women or have even stopped recruiting women altogether.

Entire industries are affected by this decline. In the jute industry, West Bengal, the number of women employed in the sacking and batching departments decreased from 32,890 in 1952 to 9,334 in 1962. The number has further decreased in the decades since 1962. In the textile industry, Bombay, women workers decreased from 25 percent in the nineteen fifties to five percent in the nineteen eighties. Only in unorganised industries such as the construction industry and the *bidi* making industry do lakhs of women workers continue to be employed. This is because in these industries, women do not have even basic facilities like sick leave. Women have to work till the last day of pregnancy and return to work almost immediately after childbirth.

Another important protective legislation is that which bans shift work for most women. This ban has also been used by employers as an excuse not to recruit women. Women work one out of three shifts while men work any of the three shifts. This creates hurdles in the way of women's promotion "due to the necessity of having people in the higher grade who could work shifts." Clearly, women are punished twice over. First, conditions are created that make them feel insecure at night, and then, they are punished for not being allowed to work at night. This is not to say that shift working is good or desirable. The point is to indicate areas of unfair

discrimination against women.

In this article we examine the facilities and benefits that are available to women workers in 20 pharmaceutical and two food companies in Bombay. We also discuss the problems women face, and suggest some demands that the women could persuade their unions to take up.

Working Hours

Except for Parle, Britannia and Hindustan Antibiotics, all the other companies surveyed have a five day week. But the working day varies in length from a minimum of eight hours in Boehringer-KnoII, Pfizer and Roche to nine hours in Johnson and Richardson. We included tea breaks but not lunch breaks in our computation of working hours.

German Remedies too had a nine hour general shift until the settlement made in October 1983 shortened it. But actual working time was not much reduced since there was a 10 minute reduction in the lunch break, and also workers have to get changed and report into the department by 8 a.m. instead of punching in at this time, as they did formerly. At the end of the shift too there is less time for changing than there was formerly. Parle is the only factory where women work on the second shift. Elsewhere, they work on the general and/or on the

first shift.

Women find the longer working hours very tiring. Sometimes, the timings also cause problems. In Sandoz and Glaxo the shift ends so late that women get no time at all to be at home in the evenings. Women working on the first shift in Hindustan Antibiotics have a different problem. The shift starts so early that they have to leave home long before daybreak, which is often quite unsafe for them. Of course, women working on the second shift at Parle reach home only very late at night. After some women were assaulted while returning home at night there was a long struggle as a result of which management agreed to provide women working on the second shift with company transport to take them home. But women still continue to work on this shift.

Given the high productivity levels in these industries, it should be quite possible to reduce hours to a maximum of 40 per week everywhere. This would mean a five day week and an eight hour day. Where women are asked to work on the first shift, the shift should not start earlier than 7 a.m., and they should not work on a second shift at all.

Transport

With the present condition of public transport, time spent in travelling can

A Challenge For Unions

Women's Employment in Pharmaceuticals And Food Industries

Only a tiny percentage of women in India have permanent employment in the organised sector of industry. This article attempts to understand their work situation and to make suggestions as to how it can be improved.—Ed.

greatly increase the fatigue and tension of a working day. Most of the companies surveyed provide free transport of varying degrees of efficiency, the best being Pfizer. Burroughs also provides quite a good transport service, while the majority of companies have free transport connecting the factory with one or two key stations.

Some companies, like Abbott and Roche, have transport assistance or allowance instead of company transport. But this is no solution for those who have acute transport problems. Free transport to and from key points should be provided, and then, perhaps, those who cannot make use of it can have their travel expenses reimbursed.

Maternity Benefits

Except in Britannia and Parle, there are maternity benefit schemes in all the companies surveyed to cover the women not covered by Employees State Insurance Scheme. In most cases, the scheme provides leave according to the Maternity Benefit Act, that is, 12 weeks leave (six before delivery and six after) on full pay including benefits and allowances other than bonus and retirement. But in Boehringer-Knoll, German Remedies and Roche, the period of fully paid leave is only two months, while in Boots the three month leave is only on half basic salary plus dearness allowance. In most companies, the maternity benefit is available for only two deliveries.

Many women find it inconvenient to take half their maternity leave before delivery and half after. A more flexible arrangement would be preferable, such as two to six weeks after, according to convenience and preference.

Very few companies pay any maternity grant as a contribution towards maternity expenses in the case of a normal delivery. Hoechst pays Rs 200 while Hindustan Antibiotics reimburses the whole of and MSD 50 percent of hospital expenses. In E. Merck women, can by contributing a small monthly sum to an insurance scheme, become entitled to reimbursement of upto Rs 550 or Rs 675, depending on their salary.

In these companies, there is no reason why all women should not be

getting at least 12 weeks fully paid leave, with some flexibility of timing, and a maternity grant which is sufficient to cover hospital expenses.

Creches

Surprisingly, there are some companies like E. Merck and IndoPharma which employ well over the statutory minimum of 30 women and yet provide no creche for their children. Most companies, however, provide creches which the women find satisfactory, although there were complaints about location, amount of space, care of the children, quality of food or lack of food in the creches which are provided.

A problem faced by many women is that they are unable to make use of the company creche even if it is good

promotion and discrimination against women in recruitment. Of these two, the first was more commonly felt as a grievance; the second was complained about if the topic came up, but was seldom spontaneously mentioned as a complaint.

We were frequently told that women of 20 to 25 years service who were competent at their job were passed over in favour of very much junior male employees when it came to promotions. Sometimes management justified this by saying it was necessary to have people in the higher grade who could work on any shift. In other cases, certain higher paid jobs are reserved for men. For example, where machine operators are in a higher grade than packers, the job is



because the hours or the journey may be unsuitable for their children. Also, with the prevalent shift system in many schools, it may be necessary even for younger schoolgoing children to attend a creche for part of the time. In such cases, a creche which is close to home or school is most convenient. Therefore, both things are necessary a creche with adequate facilities in the workplace, and a creche allowance or reimbursement of creche expenses for women who find it more convenient to place their children in creches closer to home.

Discrimination In Promotion

By far the most frequent problems were discrimination against women in

reserved for men. In yet other cases, it was not thought necessary to offer any explanation at all.

To eliminate such discrimination it would be necessary to work out a general promotion policy which would abolish the large element of arbitrariness which at present prevails the women who participated in the workshop we held to discuss their problems agreed that there should be department wise promotions on the basis of seniority plus competence. When a post falls vacant, the seniormost person in the next lower grade in that department should be considered for it. If she or he is not trained for it, she or he should be given the

necessary training. Only if it can be shown that she or he is still not competent should the chance pass on to the next most senior person.

It was felt that “competence” is a more objective quality than “merit” since competence can be tested whereas merit lies largely in the eye of the beholder.

It was also proposed that where certain posts have to be filled in other shifts, male employees working in these jobs could be given the appropriate acting allowance, but not the grade, unless they are eligible for it by virtue of seniority.

Discrimination In Recruitment

The data we collected showed that out of the 22 companies surveyed, only in five (Abbott, Boots, Geoffrey Manners, Glaxo and May and Baker) is the proportion of women in the workforce 40 percent or more. In some of the other companies, it is very small. For example, in Roche, women are 9.1 percent, in Hindustan Antibiotics 12.3 percent, and in Britannia 13.7 percent of the workforce. There are also many plants in the pharmaceutical and food industries in which women are not employed at all.

Of the 16 companies for which we have data from a period before 1983, Abbott, Boots and E. Merck were the only three where the actual number of women as well as their proportion in the workforce has increased over a period of time. The recruitment of women has more or less kept pace with the expansion of the workforce in Geoffrey Manners but not in German Remedies, Indo-Pharma, Johnson and Sandoz, where the proportion of women has consequently fallen. Everywhere else both the number and proportion of women has fallen, in some by a drastic amount. For example, in 1962, women were 56.7 percent of the workforce in Roche. In 1933, women were only 9.1 percent of the workforce. There has been a similar decline in Roussel.

Declining employment of women a must be combatted in two ways. Firstly, we should insist that there be no discrimination against women in recruitment. We must make sure that in jobs which women are already doing, their opportunities for employment are equal with those of men. We must also



take a new look at the jobs which are traditionally reserved for men. We must find out whether these jobs are really unsuitable for women. Often, they are not, in which case excluding women from them is just another form of job discrimination against women.

Secondly, we must tackle the reasons managers offer for their preferring to hire men. Managers we spoke to gave four main reasons for their preferring not to hire women.

First, they said : “Women only work for pin money; they are not serious about their jobs.” But we found that in most cases the contribution of women to the family income is vitally necessary in order to maintain an acceptable standard of living. Nor is it true that women flit in and out of employment or are unserious about their jobs. Most of those we met had worked 15 years or more in the industry and had no thought of leaving until retirement.

Second, management said : “When we first employed women, we thought they would be docile and easy to manage, but after the union was formed, they have become as bad as the men.”No comment!

Third, they said: “The new machines have to be used on a shift basis and women can’t work shifts.” Why are women generally barred from night work? The damaging, physical, psychological

and social effects of shift work would exist for men too, although to a lesser degree. The main reason women are exempted from shift work is the risk of sexual attack—a risk they run at any time of day or night but which is greater when they are deprived of the protection of daylight and large crowds. It is also true that upto now, women are shouldering most of the responsibility for running the home, and their working night shifts would therefore cause a much greater disruption of family life.

So, until there is equal safety for women as well as equal participation of men in housework and childcare, it makes no sense to talk of equalising shift work conditions for men and women. By the time this occurs, it may be possible to think of abolishing shift work for men rather than introducing it for women.

In the meantime, if necessary, the general shift can be abolished and women put onto the first shift so long as it begins at 7 a.m. or later and transport is provided. However, if women work on first shift all the time, then men working on the same jobs will have to do an extra share of second and third shift work. At present this seems unavoidable and should perhaps be compensated by generous shift allowances and shorter working hours. But to make this an excuse for not employing women is like punishing them for being at a disadvantage.

Fourthly, managements said: "Women are absent every time someone in the family is ill; they have to be paid maternity benefit and provided with a creche." Yet every employer takes advantage of the work done by women in caring for the sick, delivering and looking after children. When an old worker dies, a young one appears as if by magic to fill the vacancy.

Years of labour have gone into making that young worker what she or he is. Feeding, clothing, care when sick or well, goes into bringing him or her from birth to adulthood. Maternity benefits, creches and sick leave are a way in which employers are made to contribute towards the labour costs of keeping up a supply of workers. Yet since every child has two parents, one of whom is a father, should not employers of men also contribute to these costs?

The following demands can be made:

1. Creche or creche allowance facilities should be extended to male employees with children.

2. Male employees should be entitled to fully paid paternity leave of at least two weeks

3. They should also get a paternity grant to cover hospitalisation expenses of the delivery, unless this is already covered by a maternity grant.

4. Both male and female employees should get at least one week's domestic leave per year to look after sick relatives.

Women And Unions

Some issues affecting women, such as paid maternity leave and workplace creches, have received a fair amount of attention from unions. Others, like discrimination against women in promotion and recruitment, have not, nor are they likely to, unless women themselves press for action on them. But how will women do this? Due to family pressures or lack of time, as well as inconvenient timing of union meetings, many women find it difficult to participate actively in the union. As a result, there are very few women on most union committees. At the same time, women

often feel diffident to bring their problems to a predominantly male committee.

One suggestion emerging from discussions with active women unionists was that the women in each workplace could form a women's committee which would:

1. take the initiative in talking to women employees and finding out problems and ideas for solutions;

2. investigate some of the problems, for example, what are the effects of a particular drug on the women who have to handle it or what are the jobs currently reserved for men which women could be trained to do;

3. formulate demands aimed at improving facilities available to women for combatting discrimination against them,

4. represent the women in the workplace on the union committee.

(This survey was conducted by members of the Union Research Group, Bombay).

In Rural Areas

TWO Pune based women's organisations, Nari Samata Manch and Krantikari Mahila Sangathana organised a week long programme from May 24 to 29, 1984, in Maval taluk, Pune district, to highlight the problems of women. They visited 20 villages of the area. The focal questions were lack of water, land and work, and injustices done to women.

It was found that in Ahirvade, Gevanda, Shilivab, Thakursa, Kambra and Uksan villages, women have to walk one and a half kilometres, carrying water on their heads. The water is muddy and in many places wells have dried up. Kids aged 10 to 12 years come down to the little spring and fill pitchers. Adika Kudle of Chikhaise village said fetching of water goes on from 2 a.m. to 11 p.m. In all the 20 villages visited water tankers are

insufficient in number and come infrequently. The collector has been notified.

There is no kindergarten in any of these villages. Schools are six to seven kilometres away from villages. Usually girls drop out of school between the ages of 12 to 14 years. Women demanded that creche facility be provided at the place of work. Though the employment guarantee scheme provides for such a facility, it has not been implemented in this area.

There is a very disturbing trend of increase in cases of desertion without maintenance. Poor women can hardly afford to go to court. In one of the villages police are not properly investigating the death of a woman, Tai Vanjari, who was physically and mentally tortured by her in-laws before being pushed under a

running train.

The area concerned lies in the neighbourhood of Vadagaon-Kamshet on either side of the Bombay-Pune highway. A number of posters on women were exhibited. The series "I Manjushree", on a woman who was killed by her husband was also exhibited. Street plays were organised and the women responded enthusiastically. This was followed by discussions and lectures based on different aspects of women's problems.

Since our group consisted of women and dalit youngsters, some opponents did try to give it a casteist colour, but social workers and women in these villages have assured us that they will keep in contact with the Manch.

—Neelam Gorhe