

CONSERVATIVE opinion considers women's abilities inferior to men's, women's work of less worth than men's, and women's income merely supplementary to men's. In all aspects of life, particularly the economic, women are the main sufferers of discrimination and injustice, and it is their condition about which least is known. This investigation was undertaken to help us understand the problems of women industrial workers.

## **Decline Of Women's Employment**

After the foundation of the International Labour Organisation in 1948, the first Factories Act was passed in India in 1922. In the following quarter century, several other pieces of legislation were passed, but with very little reference to women.

The Industrial Disputes Act, 1948, made three references to women. No woman would be allowed to work where cotton openers were at work, that is, in the blowroom of textile mills; no woman would be allowed to clean, lubricate or adjust heavy machinery while it is in motion; no woman would be allowed to handle excessive weights. These statutes reflected the patriarchal prejudice that women are inevitably physically weaker than men. The effect of these statutes was to start the decline in women's employment in organised industries.

The Mines Act of 1962 introduced further restrictions. The state government was to fix the maximum load a woman may lift, carry or move. It could also restrict or prohibit women's employment in any other operation which exposed them to a serious risk of bodily injury or disease. Underground work was prohibited. Women were prohibited from working in the night shift, between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m., although women workers are known to want to do night duty, because the wages are higher.

Several Acts were passed to ensure maternity benefits, provision of creches for working mothers, and separate latrines for women at all industrial premises employing over 30 women. According to some management

# **Continual Displacement**

## **Women Workers in the Cotton Textile Industry in Calcutta**

*This article has been condensed and summarised from a report of an investigation into the history and present conditions of women workers of the cotton textiles industry in West Bengal, done by Women's Research Centre, Calcutta, and sponsored by Development Research Communication and Services Centre*

personnel we interviewed, the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, had had a detrimental effect on women's employment. Also included in the Act is the statute that "No discrimination may be made in recruitment on the basis of sex," This, however, remains totally ineffective.

Women are the first victims of automation. It is stated in government reports that the introduction of higher technology automatic machines has reduced women's employment. However, we found in our study that women are perfectly capable of learning technical skills, as was accepted by some



management staff whom we interviewed. Yet, on the pretext that women are incapable of handling machines, women's employment has been stopped. Worst of all, machines which only women used to operate have come to be operated by temporary male workers who are trained and end up replacing the women altogether.

It is significant that most mills do not employ women as temporary workers. As per the agreement between management and the local trade unions, 240 days of continuous service entitle a temporary worker to get a certain security of service and to get a permanent post in future when it is available. No woman worker has been given such an opportunity.

### Methodology Used

This study was completed in four months in 1983. Five mills were studied, including three private mills, one National Textile Corporation mill, and one state run mill. Three fairly large meetings were held with women workers, and detailed case studies of 12 women were undertaken. The selection of interviewees was somewhat haphazard. We tried to select a cross section of workers, but this was not always effective.

The management and the trade union leaders of each mill were interviewed and asked to fill up separate questionnaires. We collected some data by visits to the mills to see the production process.

### No New Recruits

After 1965, no woman has been appointed directly by any of the mills studied. Whatever recruitment of women has taken place since then has been indirect, that is, when a worker dies his wife or daughter may be recruited in his place. The decision not to recruit women coincided with the equalising by law of



wages for men and women.

In Kesoram, which is the largest cotton mill in eastern India, women used to predominate in the reeling and winding departments. At one time there were 500 women on the roll. The high speed reeling section used to be referred to as *Magi Kal* since only women were employed in it. Another section called *Gadha Kal*, also employed only women. This section has now been closed.

The women have actively participated in all struggles and have provided leadership in agitations concerning their sections. For instance, previously, women were made to work with a young boy. They organised against this practice and were successful in having it removed. But in 1961, new recruitment of women was stopped in this mill.

Women have worked in Bangalaxmi, a nationalised mill, ever since it was founded in 1906. At present, there is no

new recruitment of women, in accordance with government policy. In Bowreah cotton mills, established in 1854, there are no permanent women employees, only a few sweepers.

In Dunbar, early records are not available, but a clerk, who has worked there since 1942, recalled that when he joined there were about 350 women employed in the reeling, winding, doubling and cotton waste departments. The CITU union here said that no recruitment of women had taken place since 1961.

According to inspectorate of factories data, the total number of male workers employed in cotton spinning and weaving in 45 mills in 1981 was 45,721 and the total number of female workers 1,208. Female employment is 2.63 percent of the total. Out of the 45 mills, only 19 employed women in 1981.

### Working Conditions

In Kesoram, the total monthly salary

## Employment In Factory Production

Name	No. of male workers	No of female workers
Bangalaxmi	482	63
Dunbar	3438	167
Kalyani	1466(approx)	127(approx)
Kesoram	8185(approx)	60

is Rs 593.74. There is no training facility for women. The working hours are from 5 a.m. to 9 a.m. and 1.30p.m. to 5.30 p.m. every day. The four and a half hours between the two shifts are for rest. When on duty, the workers are not allowed to talk to each other at all.

Frequently, women are shifted from familiar machinery to machines that they are not accustomed to use. When their productivity suffers, they are replaced by male temporary workers.

The only toilet facility available to women is a walled off area without any door and a total lack of privacy. Consequently, it is not surprising that men unfamiliar with the arrangement go there even while women are using it. No cloakroom or retiring room facility is available to women. The canteen is not utilised by them since the food is bad and an incident of food poisoning has created a scare. Since all the women are past the childbearing age and no new women are being recruited, the creche facility has been withdrawn.

At Bangalaxmi, the high skilled workers get a monthly salary of Rs 1,000 and unskilled labourers get Rs 628.85, with other skill levels falling in between. The working hours here are 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. A training scheme provides training for three or six months with a daily allowance of Rs 5.

Toilet facilities are very poor. There is no door to the toilet and no water in it. There is no cloakroom for women. Canteen food, though cheap, is substandard, and also inaccessible to women due to overcrowding by male workers. So the women have no place to sit and eat. Women workers are not allotted quarters. Quarters are given only in the names of men workers.

At Dunbar, the salary is Rs 675 with a minimum of production of 70 kilos. There are no promotions or training facilities. Women are provided with a separate toilet but no retiring room. The women use a small room next to the main canteen. There is a creche.

At Kalyani, the monthly wage is Rs 629.11. Wages in the winding and bundling departments depend on the amount of work done. Rs 2.86 is paid for 40 bundles made in four hours. Women have a separate toilet and retiring room.

Women go to the canteen and also use the library and club room. They participate actively in the annual sports events.

None of the mills give women overtime or allow them to work in the night shift.

The most important health hazards prevailing in all the mills are those of TB and asthma. At least 10 percent of all workers in Kalyani mills have died of TB. The long hours of standing result in gynaecological disorders and gastric ulcers which are common among women workers.



### **Mostly Sole Earners**

At Kesoram, most women are the breadwinners for their families. Their entire income is spent on the family. They spend nothing exclusively on themselves. Most of them have to take loans to meet extra expenses. They usually borrow from Bihari moneylenders at the rate of 10 percent interest a month. They are not able to save any money. Most of them have no property. A few have some property in their villages, owned jointly with other relatives. The majority of workers in this mill are from Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh and the others are migrants from other states. There is only one Bengali woman.

At Bangalaxmi too, women are the main breadwinners and are responsible for all family expenses. It is not possible for them to spend much on themselves. Most have no debts, but are not able to save anything although they would like

to. None have any property. Most of the women are refugees from East Bengal. Some are from Madhya Pradesh.

Since there is no recruitment in these mills most of the women are elderly. A number of them are widows. Many of them do not have to do housework since their daughters-in-law or daughters have taken over the responsibility. All of them are very worried about their future after retirement. If their sons fail to get employment, they will be in trouble. Those who have company quarters will have to vacate them immediately after retirement and will then face an accommodation problem. Thus, after years of work, they will be unprovided for in their old age.

At Kalyani, the situation is slightly different. The mill was established in 1960 and most workers are East Bengali refugees. The women were recruited between 1962 and 1965. Most of them are young women from the lower middle class, and have earning husbands. Their living standard is higher than that of workers in the other mills. They are able to buy a couple of saris for themselves now and then. Some can afford domestic help and spend Rs 100 a month on it. Income and expenditure are evenly balanced so most of them have no debts though there is no scope for saving. Some of them have a share in family property.

All the women in this mill are Bengali and came here as refugees after partition. As they have to leave home very early in the morning, housework is done by domestic help or by other women of the family. Since the company does not provide quarters, the women have to spend a lot of time commuting to and fro. The lack of a creche is inconvenient for those with young children.

### **Members, Not Decision Makers**

All the women workers at Kesoram are union members, but none in an executive capacity. Automation has affected the overall job situation but women have been more affected with total stoppage of recruitment. Consequent to the decline of the number of women workers in the mills, the number of women members of the union



has also fallen. Hardly any of them attend meetings. One reason for the poor attendance is the inconvenient timing of meetings which clash with the domestic routine. Even those who want to attend meetings stay away, because they are in such a small minority amongst the women.

The women have always cooperated with the union. Kesoram has a long history of struggle and women have participated in all the strikes called by the union, even at the cost of great personal hardship. For instance, Shanti Devi, an old worker, told us that during the five month strike in 1981 over the issue of reinstatement of a worker disabled at work, she had to borrow Rs 2,200 from a moneylender. During the lockout in 1982 over 'the bonus issue, Shanti had to sell her ornaments.

There is now a sense of disillusionment with the union among the women. This is because the union has not taken action on any of the women's problems in spite of repeated representation by the women. These problems are shifting of women to unfamiliar machines and consequent replacement by male temporary workers, since women are not employed as temporary workers; the lack of a separate toilet, arbitrary serving of discharge notices to women who are nearing retirement, without prior intimation. The union leadership's apathy has made the women lose faith in the union. They have stopped attending meetings since they feel that the union is predominantly a male concern.

At Bangalaxmi, most of the women are union members and one holds an executive post. They are actively involved in the union though most of them do not take part in processions. Practically all of them try to attend meetings if they can adjust their housework timings. Those living beyond the mill area find it difficult to attend meetings. Though they have specific problems, the women have not placed them before the union nor have they discussed them among themselves. The union has not struggled around any specific women's issues.

At Dunbar, all the women are union members and pay their subscriptions

regularly. Till 1971 women were active participants but after the emergency there has been a decline in their activity. None of them join processions and few now attend meetings regularly. Some think that since they are illiterate, it is unnecessary for them to attend meetings.

Since 1961, women in this mill have been agitating for recruitment of more women. Their present demand is that only women be recruited to fill vacancies arising on the retirement of women workers.

Women have demanded the union's intervention on another issue. The management frequently threatens women without provocation, and serves them showcause notices and chargesheets while men are spared such harassment. The union has not acted on this issue so far.



Women have always cooperated with the union, participating in all strikes and holding firmly to union decisions. During the political turmoil of 1972-75, many men had gone into hiding. The women very courageously managed the home front and the work front. Some of them were even tortured. Now the women are confused and do not know which union to approach since the multiplicity of unions has destroyed worker's unity.

At Kalyani, most of the women are union members and four are in the executive committee. Most of the women are active participants. They take part in processions and attend meetings fairly

regularly. The women face the problem of lack of accommodation and lack of a creche which should be provided according to the law. The women have placed these demands before the union but no action has been taken so far.

Even though the union does not pay much particular attention to women's issues it enjoys much influence over them. We had direct experience of the union's holdover workers when we went to meet the women. We had earlier made an appointment, but arrived to find that not a single woman had waited to meet us. We discovered later that because we had not got the union's permission first, the women had not been allowed to meet us.

### Management Attitudes

The management in their replies to the questionnaire openly stated that they

discourage recruitment of women. For instance, Mr S.K. Birla of Kesoram said: "Management does not encourage employment of women. There have been no new women recruits for the last 15-20 years because women are a liability." He added that it would be better for women if they got lower wages officially, because having to pay them the same as men has definitely discouraged management from employing women. Three of the mills said that women were not recruited at managerial or supervisory levels. The fourth did not answer the question.

Interestingly, despite this

discriminatory attitude and practice, all the managements said that women are efficient and the absenteeism figures quoted by them seem to be evidence of this fact. At Kalyani, management said the rate of absenteeism among women workers is on an average 14 percent and among men it is 17 percent. At Dunbar, it varies between 12 to 25 percent for men and between 12 and 20 percent for women.

### **Union Apathy**

In general, the unions seem to be indifferent to specifically women's issues. There is no effective representation of women in the union executive. Regarding the nonrecruitment of women temporary workers, the union is absolutely silent. The union also does not protest about the fact that women's employment is becoming nonexistent. On the contrary, in fact, the union tries to secure more male employment.

When questioned with regard to



women's demand for separate rest-room and canteen, because they face the problem of overcrowding by men, Bangalaxmi trade union leaders said that since women work side by side with men, there is no need for a separate canteen or restroom. They also said that they do not have an antiwomen attitude but "the management always favours, male

recruitment. When a worker dies, they prefer to employ a male member of his family and not a woman."

Dunbar union's comment was: "It is true that women have several legitimate demands but it is not always feasible to take them up with management."

### **Thirty Years**

Two bits of information, one from a case study, the other from a management questionnaire, make interesting reading, when juxtaposed. "Even after 30 years of service Ganga (Dunbar mill) still has no quarters and she can scarcely manage the month with her gross, income of Rs 675... Her husband was a worker of this mill but died 32 years ago, leaving two sons and a daughter."

"Mr S.K. Birla, management president, received Rs 1,23,662 in 1982 and an increment of Rs 763 per month in 1983, bringing his total salary for that year to Rs 1,32,817. He has had 30 years' experience at Kesoram.

---

## **Conference on Women's Studies**

THE second national conference on women's studies was held at Trivandrum from April 9 to 12, 1984. It was attended by about 500 participants including a hand-ful of men. A majority of the parti-cipants were from the four big cities and the others were from smaller towns.

The conference conducted three simultaneously running workshops under the common theme of Gender Justice. The workshops were on women and law, women and work, and women and political participa-tion. I attended the workshop on women and political participa-tion. There was general dissatis-faction with the quality of the papers presented at the workshop which I attended. Many felt that there were too

many papers, not all of them good, and that due attention could not be given to papers that deserved it. For this reason, some basic questions such as what exactly is meant by political participation, when can a person be taken to have participated politically, and so on, remained unanswered. However, participants from the other two workshops seemed to be generally happy with the papers presented and the way the discussions were conducted.

Activists from various regions had been invited to the conference. This was in response to the de-mand made at the first conference for some interaction between theory and practice. However, the activists who attended the

conference said that they felt totally alienated by the highly academic tone of the papers and the discussions. The situation was aggravated by the fact that many activists were fluent only in their own languages and could not express themselves in English, the language used by thfr researchers.

At an informal meeting of activists, arranged one evening by themselves, it was possible for a bilingual person to act as trans-lator. The feeling developed that some arrangement for translation, could have been made in the formal sessions as well.

These and other criticisms were voiced at the general body meeting, held on the evening of April 12. Replying to

the activists, the secretary of the association, Vina Mazumdar, said that many activists-were also researchers and presented papers, therefore the two categories did overlap. She assured the house that arrangements for translation would be made at the next conference.

There was also much criticism of the association having accepted funds from foreign funding agencies. Ford Foundation had contributed \$25,000, Swedish International Development Agency 40,000 kroner, Freedom from

Hunger campaign of FAO and Norwegian Agency for International Development had provided a grant of \$350 to invite delegates from abroad. Rs 50,000 had been given by UGC, ICSSR, the ministry of social welfare, the national committee for implementing legal aid schemes, and the All India Association for Christian High Education. In reply to this criticism, Vina Mazumdar said that there was nothing wrong in taking money from such sources if one was confident of retaining one's independence. She also said that

the association needs as many allies as it can get.

A large number of resolutions were passed by the generalbody. One called for a 50 percent reduction in female illiteracy by the end of the seventh five year plan, and its eradication by the end of the century. Another called for joint ownership by husband and wife of all property acquired after marriage, and for land given under land distribution programmes to be registered jointly in the names of husband and wife.

—Prabha Rani

ALKA, CHETNA

## She Survived—With Dignity

“ON March 8, 1983, past mid-night, someone pulled the sheet with which I was covered. Before I could cry out, someone gagged me and pointed a big knife at my neck. There were three of them. One after another, all three of them forced themselves on me. They raped me.

I did not know any of them. I cannot even recollect the faces of two of them. The third face was familiar. I had seen that boy, Munir, a couple of days before, dancing around a nonBtop cycling show organised in *jhoadpatti* by the owner of an illicit liquor shop. I was too dazed to register new faces in the darkness. By the time they left, I was unconscious, bleeding.

When I regained consciousness, there was no one near me. Somehow, I summoned up the courage and went to the police station in my bloodsoaked clothes. The police recorded my statement and got me admitted to Bhagwati Hospital. In the hospital I was examined. Because of excessive damage and profuse bleeding, I had to have three stitches.

The police visited the slum. An old

woman living in the neighbour hood gave evidence that she had seen Munir and two others moving around at night. By sunrise Munir was arrested and his accomplices were also nabbed. The police asked me if I could identify the criminals from an identification parade. I think I can identify at least one of them. But my fear is that once they come out on bail they will kill me.”

Parvati Raju Nair, aged 25, related this episode. She is still living in fear. The question of being accepted by her family or society does not bother her because she is already a “discard.” She was discarded by her husband because she could not bear a child. She did not protest when her husband brought another woman into the house. Finding it increasingly difficult to put up with frequent beatings, Parvati left her husband and came to stay with her mother in the unauthorised slum at Dahisar, Bombay.

For the last three years, she has been earning her living by collecting paper, glass and plastic waste. Her mother had left for her hometown a day before

Parvati was raped. In all probability, the rapists knew that Parvati was alone in the hut so they planned the crime accordingly.

Parvati did not have to face ostracisfltn in the slum. Ironically, the reason is that the slum women have to live with molestation and rape. Rarely is a caie reported. Parvati's is one of those rare cases.

The rapists were arrested but were released on bail. As soon as they were released, they began to pressurise Parvati to shut her mouth. Parvati is firm but she is also afraid. Parvati has to face the court—an institution the functioning of which she does not understand at all.

Meanwhile, in the month of April, Parvati discovered that her menstrual cycle was disturbed. Parvati was pregnant. The slum women had different opinions about whether or not she should keep the child. Some opined : “What is the point in having a child, when the father is not known ?” Others said : “So what? The child is Parvati's. Parvati was keen on a child. She cannot now be branded an infertile woman. Once, she even said : “Now that a child is coming, it will be easy for us to prove in court that I had been raped.” Parvati does not yet understand how the court functions.

Parvati has given birth to a baby girl. Parvati is a molher now. A proud mother.

March 8 comes round again. A year ago, on this day, she was raped. Parvati does not know the signi-ficance of March 8, yet it was she who bravely walked into the police station and reported the crime. □