



Pushing Women Out

Declining Employment of Women in the Organised Industrial Sector

by

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ONLY recently have unions begun to recognise the increasing job losses in the organised industry. Workforce reduction is a conscious management policy. This has taken many forms such as increasing uncontrolled automation of certain jobs and processes, introduction of Voluntary Retirement Schemes (VRS), subcontracting production to smaller units in the unorganised sector, giving out work on a contract basis and setting up units in interior rural areas with a much cheaper and unorganised workforce. In major industrial cities like Bombay the unionised workforce in organised industry is decreasing year by year, as our survey indicates,¹ and the non-unionised workforce, often closely associated with organised industry, is on the increase. An important basis of this shift is the desire of employers for the least

expensive and most flexible type of labour force. This determines the preference of employers regarding recruitment (or non-recruitment) and retrenchment patterns in industry. The earliest victims of this preference have been women employed in the industrial organised sector.

A superficial view of women's employment in the organised sector gives the impression that, on the contrary, there is an increasing stream of women entering diverse fields of activity and occupying important positions. However, this is true of only a small section in the service sector, encompassing transport, communications and financial services. "The service sector reflects the exact reverse of the manufacturing industry, the largest concentration being in the public sector. It is in this sector that their employment has

grown substantially. If 1974 is taken as the base, the increase in 1984 is of the order of 118.4 points in transport and communications and 167 points in financial services. In spite of this impressive growth, the gross numbers are quite meagre both in absolute terms as well as in relation to manufacturing. The implication may be that such avenues which exist for employment of women are increasingly for the middle classes with some education rather than for un-skilled and semi-skilled labour from the working class."²

Women in Industry

In India, industrialisation began to take root around the 1850s and by 1910, jute, cotton textiles and mining had emerged as the major industries. Women played an important role in these industries right from their inception. By the 1920s, women

constituted about 20 percent of the workforce in cotton textiles, 15 percent in the jute industry and 38 percent in mining. By the 1930s, industry was beginning to gain stability. The world wide depression resulted in a greater competition for jobs. Women workers were the first to be sacrificed. By 1946, women workers were about 12 percent of the textile workforce and by 1975 their number had already declined to 2.5 percent. In jute, they were 2 percent of the workforce and in mining, 5 percent.³ The jute industry, however, saw a sudden and sharp decrease within a short time span. From 1950 to 1956, there was a decrease of 16,000 women workers, the female workforce declining from about 37,000 to 21,000. "Whether the decline is sudden or slow, the long-term effect is the same : closing of better opportunities for women and pushing them into the lowest paying, most insecure, least dignified, jobs. It is a kind of reservation into the lowest section in society."⁴

The decline in the number of women workers took different forms in these industries. In 1937, for instance, in the cotton textile industry, 2,200 women spinners out of a total of 10,000 were retrenched overnight. Since then the decrease has been more gradual in this industry, with a few hundred being laid off every year and a virtual ban on the fresh recruitment of women.⁵ Between 1961 and 1980, gross employment in coal mines increased by 21.3 percent, but the employment of women dropped by 17 percent. Women who constituted about a quarter of coal mine labour around Independence, dropped down to a mere 6.3 percent by 1980. The loss is both absolute and relative.⁶

The work participation rates for women in organised industries have shown a steady decline since 1921. The report of the Committee on the Status of Women (CSW), 1974, 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 34.44 percent to 17.35 percent in the same period. This decline has been more precipitous in recent years.⁷

Women's Employment

The absolute figures for women work-seekers and the number of women who have been offered employment in the 1980s are given in the following table.⁸

The gap between the number of officially recorded women job seekers and the number of women who have been offered employment has risen over the years. Besides, as an indicator of the unemployment situation, especially of women, these figures from employment exchanges are extremely inadequate to say the least because 1) registration is voluntary and depends on women's ability and initiative; 2) women's initiative is systematically undermined in all fields including their seeking work; 3) women's mobility is restricted; 4) often women are so over-worked that they rarely see themselves as unemployed though they have to accept any kind of work to make both ends meet; and 5) employment exchanges are rarely physically accessible, especially for women.

Women working in traditional industries like cotton handloom, woollen cottage and hand-block printing have been severely affected

by modernisation of processes and a crisis in the industry itself.⁹ The cotton handloom industry is said to be the biggest provider of employment next to agriculture. Between the years 1974 and 1981, it is estimated that 28.64 lakh jobs were lost. These have been replaced by 5.58 lakh jobs in the powerloom sector. In five states (Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh) as many as 84,500 women workers were displaced between 1961 and 1971. Similarly, about 200,000 women working in the woollen cottage industry and 250,000 hand-block printers are threatened with loss of income.

This decline in the employment and recruitment of women is not merely in the older industries like textiles, but disturbingly, also in the more modern industries, which only two or three decades ago employed a substantial number of women, such as the electronics, pharmaceutical and food industries.¹⁰

According to the 1981 census, of the 63.6 million women employed (that is, 19.8 percent of total female population and 26 percent of the total workforce), 94 percent are employed in the unorganised sector. Only 6 percent of the female workforce is in the organised sector, where women form 12.2 percent of the total workforce, and 7.5 percent of the membership of the unions submitting returns. There has been a constant decline in the total employment of

Period	Women work-seekers (in '000s)	Women offered employment (in '000s)	Percent of women employed to work-seekers
Dec 1979	1904	57.7	3.00
Dec 1980	2345	65.8	2.80
Oct 1981	2666	50.6	2.80
Oct 1982	3077	48.9	1.55
Dec 1983	3582	65.6	1.83
Dec 1984	4002	56.4	1.40
Dec 1985	4450	55.0	1.23
Dec 1986	5100	57.7	1.13

women since 1921, both in percentage of workers to total female population and in their percentage of the total labour force. Between 1972-73 and 1977-78, women lost 4.8 million jobs, while the employment of men went up by 7.4 million.¹¹

In the pharmaceutical industry, the recruitment of women virtually stopped in the early and mid-1960s. In 1961, the Maternity Benefit Act came into force and around 1967, a Supreme Court judgment struck down the “marriage clause”, which had allowed managements to retrench women when they got married. Rather than give women their rights, management decided not to employ women at all. As a result of this both the number and proportion of women have fallen.

Why Discrimination

Some of the underlying factors behind this discrimination against women in employment are outlined as follows :-

Family wage: The idea of the family wage is based on the notion that a man should earn enough to feed his wife and children, while women should stay at home and do the unwaged work- housework, childcare. Trade unions too have accepted this concept.

This attitude could possibly stem from two sources:

(i) Protest by trade unions against the extreme brutality and exploitation of men, women and children by the millowners. The millowners would have preferred to leave no time or space for the reproduction of the working capacity of their labour force, either from day to day or from generation to generation. By contrast, the union leaders recognised the need of children to be cared for and educated, and acknowledged implicitly that running a household and caring for children was a full-time job for which someone had to be maintained.

(ii) However, the unions assumed that women alone would do this work,

while it would be paid through the man's wage. The unions uncritically accepted the age-old sexual division of labour and based their strategies on this acceptance. This assumption is not only erroneous but also detrimental to the interests of women and of the unions too. For example, when jobs became scarce in the Indian textile industry in the 1930s, the Delhi Agreement was signed in 1935 by unions. The main terms “that out of a family of two wage earners women should be displaced”. The wage increase as a result of the new machines (for the men) was to be only 45 percent, more than a 50 percent loss of income for the family.¹²

The notion of women as “supplementary earners” itself emerged at a certain historical phase when production for the market became separated from domestic work. Because women's primary role was socially defined to be domestic, their income earning was accorded secondary significance. Thus women's income was low and insufficient for the maintenance of the family. This in turn is pointed out as a reason for women not being primarily responsible for the maintenance of the family.¹³

The family wage is an illusion. It is rare for a working man to earn enough to support his wife and children at a decent standard. Women nearly always have to contribute some earnings to the family budget. The family wage for men is more of a goal than a reality. An implication of this goal is that women should remain dependent on men.

Protective legislation : The assumption that women are solely responsible for running the home has been an important support for the introduction of protective legislation. Introduction of protective legislation has often been stated as an important reason for management's preference for male workers and their discrimination against women in recruitment. Right from 1891, the

number of hours worked by women were regulated and a weekly day off insisted on for all workers. Despite the demand of workers, working hours of male workers were not limited. The agitation for shorter working hours continued, culminating in riots in 1905. It was only in 1911 that the Factories Act limited the hours of men to 12 per day; women's hours continued to be 11 per day, and their employment between 7.00 p.m. and 5.30 a.m. was prohibited.¹⁴ It was only in 1922 that the number of hours for men were made equal to those for women. The Factories Act 1948, which is applicable even today, reduced the statutory maximum working week to 48 hours. After more than a decade of national campaign, in 1929, the Bombay government passed an Act providing for eight weeks of paid maternity leave and this was followed by similar Acts in other states.

The Factories Acts of 1934 and 1948 prohibited the employment of women in dangerous or excessively strenuous operations. The Factories Act also lays down separate toilets and washrooms which must be provided for women workers, and that a suitably equipped creche must be provided for the children (under the age of six) of women workers, wherever 50 or more of them are employed in one workplace (this number was reduced to 30 in 1976).

Employers by and large sought to evade the implementation of protective legislation. One common method of evasion was to employ women as temporary or casual workers so that their names did not appear on the attendance register; another was to dismiss women at the first sign of pregnancy. The annual note on the working of the U.P. Maternity Act during 1938 admits that many women workers were discharged immediately after the Act was passed. The Labour Investigation Committee (LIC) found that “the Maternity Benefit Acts were not properly observed or enforced

especially in the smaller concerns...
“¹⁵

In Bombay one major reason for the reduction of women workers in the cotton textile industry was the restriction on night work. From the 1920s onwards a process of rationalisation took place and by 1930 most mills were running night shifts. Knowing that they had no possible alternative source of employment in the organised sector, women opposed the attempts of millowners to retrench them, arguing instead that they should share whatever work was available. Thus there was no catastrophic decline in their numbers but recruitment virtually stopped, so that there was a gradual reduction in the number of women from 32,396 in 1925 to 22,962 in 1947 while the proportion of women in the workforce dropped from a peak of 25.87 percent in 1893 to 11.17 percent in 1947.¹⁶

In 1919, women formed 38.1 percent of the colliery labour force. For every 10 men employed underground, there were seven women doing the same job.¹⁷ In 1929 the Government of India ordered a gradual reduction in the number of women working underground. A total ban was promulgated in 1939. The number of women thus dropped to 11.4 percent. The motive professed for throwing thousands of women out of work was a tender concern for their safety and welfare, as conditions underground were supposed to be unsuitable for the 'weaker sex'. Since women had all along been doing the same jobs as men, the problem was not that the work was too hard for women but that the working conditions for all, men and women, were and continue to be inhuman.

Besides, to throw women out of jobs and into starvation is a strange way of showing concern for their welfare!¹⁸

The hypocrisy and hollowness of this 'humanitarianism' was exposed, when during the Second World War, the ban on women working underground was lifted. The government needed more fuel for an efficiently destructive war machine and women could be used as fodder. In 1946, when women were no longer needed, the ban was reimposed and



the women were again thrown out of work!¹⁹

Women still do very heavy jobs which are termed unskilled, and are poorly paid. Women are observed to carry baskets of ore weighing up to 35 kg. In the stone mines the highest proportion of women (46 percent) are employed on stone crushing machines as unskilled labour. These women carry headloads of material up to the machines, while in the technical processes of running the machines, only men are employed.²⁰

The irony is that, according to the Labour Bureau, in 1977, for example, the cost of providing these so-called welfare amenities for women adds up to only 0.2 to 1.8 percent to the total wage bill.²¹ In Bihar there are only 26 creches for 25,237 factories. "Even Maharashtra, hailed as being the most

progressive as far as women's rights are concerned, has only 57 creches for 99,976 factories.²²

Women's exclusion from most jobs : Related to both the above factors is the idea of industry as the main preserve of men. Within industrial employment as also in other wage-work, there is the segregation of men and women into different types of jobs- for example, the preponderance of women in jobs like packing and assembling while engineering jobs are monopolised by men. This division partially overlaps with another one- the division into low-paid and well-paid jobs. This to some extent precludes any 'competition' between women and men. The notion of industry as the main domain of men seems to have become a structural factor right from its inception and continues to this day. In fact even before industrialisation,

women were consistently allotted a subordinate role within traditional family-based handicrafts. Women were not allowed to belong to ancient craft guilds although they assisted their husbands in their home workshops. This is also true of occupations like pottery, weaving, and so on.²³

In the context of industry, a dual process seems to have occurred. Jobs involving a higher degree of education, training and skill are both more prestigious and hence also better-paid. Women seem to be more or less completely excluded from these because they have less access to education, training and the acquisition of requisite skills. This is happening because of 1) the attitude of the family members, who are usually keen on spending on educating a boy,

often stopping their daughters' education altogether or even sending them out to work so that they can afford to educate the son(s); 2) the attitude of educational and technical institutes, which encourage girls to take embroidery and tailoring but often discourage them from training in technical skills; 3) the policy of employers who insist on male technicians and overtly or otherwise discriminate against women where technical jobs are concerned. On the other hand, jobs which require a great deal of training or experience, for example, cooking, stitching, but where this training is not formal, but learnt as part of a growing up female, are undervalued and underated. Thus, some jobs are termed unskilled for the simple reason that they are traditionally women's jobs.

The consequences of this job segregation is that women are concentrated in the more labour-intensive and lower-paid jobs and industries. And often it was these very jobs which were the first to be mechanised.

Mechanisation/Automation : The report of the Committee on the Status of Women, 1974, stated automation as an important reason for the decrease in women workers in the organised sector.²⁴ In many industries, such as textiles and pharmaceuticals, this was a dual process. Jobs where women were traditionally employed, for example in cotton cleaning, reeling, and winding in cotton textiles, packing and assembly in pharmaceuticals and electronics, were drastically reduced due to automation of labour intensive, repetitive stages of the production process. In cotton textiles, the introduction of new spinning machines and high speed winding machines is given as a reason for women being displaced. In the pharmaceutical industry, the new superfast filling, scaling, labelling, cartoning machines have replaced many women packers. Secondly, the

vast majority of jobs where women were not traditionally employed remained shut for women. Thus a reduction in the number of jobs open to women was 'inevitable'. In fact, in some plants and industries, even in the jobs which remained there was a replacement of women by men, which resulted in an even greater reduction in the number of women employed.

An area of double discrimination which women face in employment pertains to heavy work. On the one hand, according to (International Labour Organisation) recommendations (Maximum Weight Recommendation, 1967, No. 128), states like Maharashtra and Madras have prescribed a maximum weight to be carried by women. In principle, legislation also prohibits the employment of women on load transport during pregnancy and for 10 weeks following confinement.²⁵

On the other hand, women in the informal sector, as well as in their household duties have been traditionally assigned the heaviest of work, for example, carrying of headloads of water for long distances, manually grinding corn, carrying heavy headloads in construction, mining and quarrying. However, when any of these heavy operations are mechanised, they are automatically taken over by men for example, mechanically grinding corn is almost exclusively done by men.

As women packers in Hindustan Lever's Sewree plant said before they were forced to retire: "Before the Rose machines came in the 1950's, we used to do all the work manually. It was very hard and strenuous work. But once the machines were introduced, we were shifted from those departments and younger men were asked to run them. In fact, immediately after that, management stopped recruiting women altogether." (See Box on page 15).

The prediction that increasing use of machines and other sophisticated technology in industries would bring

most manual jobs within the reach of women has not come true. This is certainly not reflected in the actual division of work and its distribution in industry. Even now, occupations are categorised as men's and women's on the basis of conventional norms rather than any assessment of changes made possible by technology. The report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India states that out of about 200 operations in the textile industry, women are employed in no more than four or five.²⁶

Even in the export hosiery industry in Ludhiana, Punjab, out of more than 13 processes and operations, women are restricted to working on only four and these too are operations "which were akin to traditional nature of skill in which no special training was required". Here too, women have been displaced when hand-wheels were replaced by power-winders. In the winding department, "each machine operative has displaced nearly six manual women workers".²⁷

In the years following 1946, the number of women in coal mines declined because of the introduction of new methods of surface screening and coal handling. Men workers were trained to operate the new machinery. Women were thrown out under the plea that they were illiterate and not capable of learning modern techniques. In 1947, women contributed about 21 percent of the colliery labour force; by 1951, the number had come down to 16 percent, by 1961 to 9.3 and by 1970 to 5.5. Employers have various ways of getting rid of women. In fact, Coal India Ltd has a scheme whereby if a woman retires 'voluntarily' she is given a sum of money and a male relative is given employment.²⁸ (See Box on page 16).

In the coir industry in Kerala too, mechanisation has led to large scale unemployment amongst women.²⁹ Loss of women's jobs in the jute

industry too has been attributed to the mechanisation in the industry of women's jobs and the displacement of women workers by men workers.

The story seems familiar: women are said to be unfit for heavy manual work and discriminated against in certain jobs like engineering. Where machines replaced heavy manual work with comparatively lighter supervisory functions, women are then termed "unskilled" and are discriminated against on yet another basis.

This second aspect could possibly be due to some notion of prestige attached to working with the machines probably because it embodies a much greater amount of capital.³⁰ This is another area where capitalist and patriarchal values coalesce to undermine, underevaluate and underrate women's labour and skill.

Women considered as the most expensive and least flexible labour force: Over the years, after a long struggle, workers in the unionised sector have been able to obtain certain crucial facilities and benefits- regulation of working hours, maternity benefits, creches, ban on shift work. These have been crucial for women as their work at the factory or office constitute only half of their total work which also includes housework and childcare. As this is not true of men, men are often more prepared to work long hours overtime, often working double shifts. Though the legal limit for working overtime according to the Factories Act of 1948 is 52 hours for three months, most factories are known to ask workers to work as much as 150 - 200 hours per month. In some factories, especially process plants, workers are known to work four shifts at a stretch. Lack of responsibility at home renders men "more flexible". This is an important reason why women pose greater resistance to compulsory overtime or increasing workloads. (Ironically, often men workers/unionists have the same complaints of women workers

Tactics used by Hindustan Lever

In the 1950s, the Sewree (Bombay) plant of Hindustan Lever (HL), employed 1,200 workers; of these, 500 were women. Gradually the workforce increased to 3,800 in 1988; of these only 200 were women. The proportion of women workers to the total number of workers had fallen drastically. This however was achieved gradually: 1) by stopping the recruitment of women altogether from the year 1952; 2) by recruiting young men, as the factory expanded its production and introduced new products and departments. The only other factory of HL till 1984 was in Garden Reach in West Bengal.

In the earlier days, when women were in large proportion, women actively participated in the union. Julie, a woman unionist, is still very fondly remembered by the women. Gradually their total number as well as their proportion reduced. No new women were recruited for almost four decades while younger men gradually became more and more active in the union. The union emerged as a very strong and a militant one. However, women were already alienated from the leadership.

The militancy of the union was not acceptable to the management and the management sought ways to tackle it. Also, the strategies of the management regarding production, control, role of individual units, was undergoing a change.

The mid-80s saw HL factories coming up in remote, rural areas such as Chhindwada, Yeotmal, Jammu, Mangalore, Khamgaon. New workers were being recruited to these new

from a different point of view- their unwillingness to stay after work and participate in union activities. They completely fail to realise that the very reason why men can participate in union work- their complete lack of

plants. Recruitment of men too had stopped in the Bombay plant.

In 1988, the management imposed a one-year lock-out. They used this time to totally reorganise HL operations in India. One of their preoccupations was a drastic reduction in workforce strength at its Bombay plant. During the lock-out, management personnel sent letters of appeal, warning, hidden threats to workers and informed them about a Voluntary Retirement Scheme. They wanted all but 500 workers out. One of their targets was to get all the women out.

Management people went to individual women's houses and pressurised them in various ways. About 150 women left. Only seven women remained. After the lock-out was lifted, management continued to pressurise the workers in various ways. One such way was to shift workers to other departments and humiliate them. Skilled operators were told to sweep floors, paint chairs, repeat the paint. The women were also shifted to the canteen, while for almost 40 years they had worked as packers. They were openly threatened. "If you don't leave, you'll be made to clean toilets; you'll have to come on night shifts".

When women complained of the behaviour of the supervisors to the personnel manager, they were informed that the gates of the factory were open and the women were free to leave.

When the union complained on behalf of the women, the entire incident was distorted and no action was taken against the supervisor.

responsibility at home- renders women unable to do so.)

However, the situation is almost diametrically opposite in the unorganised sector. Here, legal rights of the workforce are much weaker and

unions virtually absent. Women in the unorganised sector have no benefits at all and often have to work for long hours and even on night shifts. Here their domestic role is completely and deliberately ignored. However, in another sense, the domestic role is reinforced as women are supposed to be only secondary wage earners merely supplementing the male wage and hence can afford to work for less wages. Studies have shown that, on the contrary, women working in the unorganised sector are forced to continue working there despite the appalling conditions, because they have no other choice. Many are often the sole earners in the family and this very dependence on their wages makes them more vulnerable to accept miserably low wages and bad working conditions.

The attitude of a manager in Biochem, earlier a small pharmaceutical plant in Bombay, is quite representative: "We employed women because they seemed to be very docile. They needed the jobs desperately and could not think of risking them by forming a union. The men tried but failed, as we have deliberately recruited women in large numbers." "However," he sadly concluded, "once the women decided to form the union, they were much worse than the men and refused to listen."

Thus emerges a picture where women in the organised sector are, from the employers' point of view, the most expensive and the least flexible of the entire labour force, while women in the unorganised sector are the least expensive and the most flexible.

Thus it may not be true to say that women's employment in industry as a whole is declining. Many of the larger companies, including multinational companies which stopped recruiting women years ago are now subcontracting out parts of their production process to smaller units where women work often in large numbers, sometimes in the majority.

This loss of jobs in organised industry is also true of men but the scale as well as the logic behind the two is different as outlined above. The new jobs in unorganised industry, however, are under employment conditions very different from those of the jobs which were lost, since they are in a sector where the Factories Act and other legislation does not apply and which is largely non-unionised.

This transfer of jobs, especially women's jobs, from the organised to the unorganised sector is taking place. Very different strategies are used by employers to effect this transfer. These industries range from *beedi*-rolling and slate-pencil making to cloth production, pharmaceuticals and engineering.³¹

According to the Committee on the Status of Women, 1974, "the *beedi*

Is this Retirement 'Voluntary'?

Apart from a virtual ban on recruitment of women in the organised sector, employers have been devising other ways of getting women out of jobs. Most companies in their factories and offices in metropolitan cities like Bombay have introduced the Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS). While the motive of employers is to reduce the workforce as a whole, most employers also target their schemes at particular sections. The most common targets are older people and women.

One such scheme was introduced in the year 1976 in Central Coalfields Ltd. (CCL) and Bharat Coking Coal Ltd. (BCCL), two major collieries in Dalli-Rajhara. This scheme was introduced for female workers only. Under this scheme, a woman of any age could retire voluntarily and nominate a male relative in her place. She could not, of course, nominate a woman relative. Women are employed as loaders and quarry workers. The management wanted to get rid of women workers. In 1978, the scheme was extended to male workers between the age of 47 and 57.

The mines have displaced local tribals from their land, but very few of them have been given employment in the mines. The few tribal women who did have jobs in the mines were tricked into marrying outsiders who then took over their jobs under the retirement scheme. These men deceived the women, promising to look after them, but deserted them

immediately after getting the jobs. Some of the marriages were fake affairs. Older women were made into "mothers-in-law", that is, non-tribal men "married" their daughters, and then were nominated by them to take their jobs. Of the money given to the women who retired, a major portion was consumed by officers and intermediaries, so that only a tiny fraction reached the women.

In 1980, the villagers agitated over the land that had been usurped by the mine owners and demanded jobs as compensation. The CCL declared that no jobs were available as they had surplus labour. A petition was filed that since jobs are being bought from tribals by non-tribals, with the connivance of the management, jobs held by tribals should be made hereditary. The Supreme Court stayed the scheme.

The scheme has had the most disastrous effect on women. Other pernicious variations were also in operation. One of these is the scheme whereby a worker who falls seriously ill can nominate someone to take his or her place. The management encouraged women to do this. The medical board is advised to issue a certificate of un-fitness to any woman who declares that she is unfit to work. Most of the women are pressurised to declare themselves unfit by their husbands who "sell" the women's jobs for paltry sums, after rendering the women destitute.

and cigarette industry, where the employment of women exceeds that of men (77.3 percent in Andhra Pradesh, 60.9 percent in Maharashtra), is the worst of the sweated industries.”³² Many studies have shown that often high caste people and men work in the *beedi* factories and the majority of lower caste people, women and children work at home on contract or piece-rate basis at extremely exploitative rates.³³ In places like Nipani in Karnataka, when women *beedi* factory workers began to organise themselves the employers shut down the factories and later began to give work out on a piece-rate basis to home workers.³⁴ In the *beedi* industry of Calcutta, on the other hand, the shift of production from one sector to the other was accompanied by a transfer of employment from relatively well-paid men to poorly-paid women.³⁵ This was the period when the industry was in the “process of transition and employers were increasingly putting out the work to cheap female labour because men workers in the factories had got organised and had obtained officially fixed, fairly reasonable piece-rates for their work. Over the next few years, the industry has increasingly shifted production to home-based women workers whose work can now be regarded as a woman’s occupation which apparently justified the payment of the significantly lower piece-rates”³⁶ A similar process of subcontracting, as in the case of fish processing, cashew and coir industries in Kerala, and a slightly different process of sham self-employment in the slate-pencil industry, has led to the generation of

women’s jobs in the unorganised sector.

In the coir industry in Kerala, in the last three decades, practically since the 1970s, factory owners began to close down organised factories and to use instead products made in small and cottage type units. From 1950 to 1965, the coir workers’ movement was very strong. They forced private managements to concede their demands for minimum

industries, paying workers, 80 percent of whom are women, miserably low wages on a piece-rate basis.³⁸

It is obvious that employers prefer unorganised workers to an organised workforce. Within the unorganised workers, women are the first choice. However, once organised, employers much rather recruit men than women. And the cycle continues.

The result therefore has been a reduction in the total number of jobs in the organised sector and an ever-increasing number of workers in the unorganised sector. This unorganised sector could truly only be called non-unionised, because in the vast majority of cases the capital within this sector is extremely well organised and often has organic and close links with the capital in the organised sector.

On the other hand, the non-unionised nature of this workforce has a number of implications:

i) Workers in this sector work and live in appalling conditions, barely able to live a human existence.

ii) The more widespread and scattered this sector, the more difficult it becomes to get organised or to better one’s conditions.

iii) This sector is created to afford employers more bargaining power not only vis-a-vis the unorganised sector, but also the organised sector, as the employers become less and less dependent on the organised workforce.

iv) This threatens to reverse the earlier process. Earlier workers in newly established plants were struggling to organise themselves and to assert their aspirations which gradually over decades became consolidated into fairly strong unions. Now, even big and hitherto strong



wages, gratuity, dearness allowance and other facilities. By closing down factories the industries were able to deprive the workers, most of whom are women, of all these rights. As a result, the coir industries has one of the lowest wages in the country and starvation deaths were reported among the coir industry worker families.³⁷

Even in the cashew industry in Kerala in the 1960s private owners began to evade labour laws and started closing down factories and shifting production to cotton

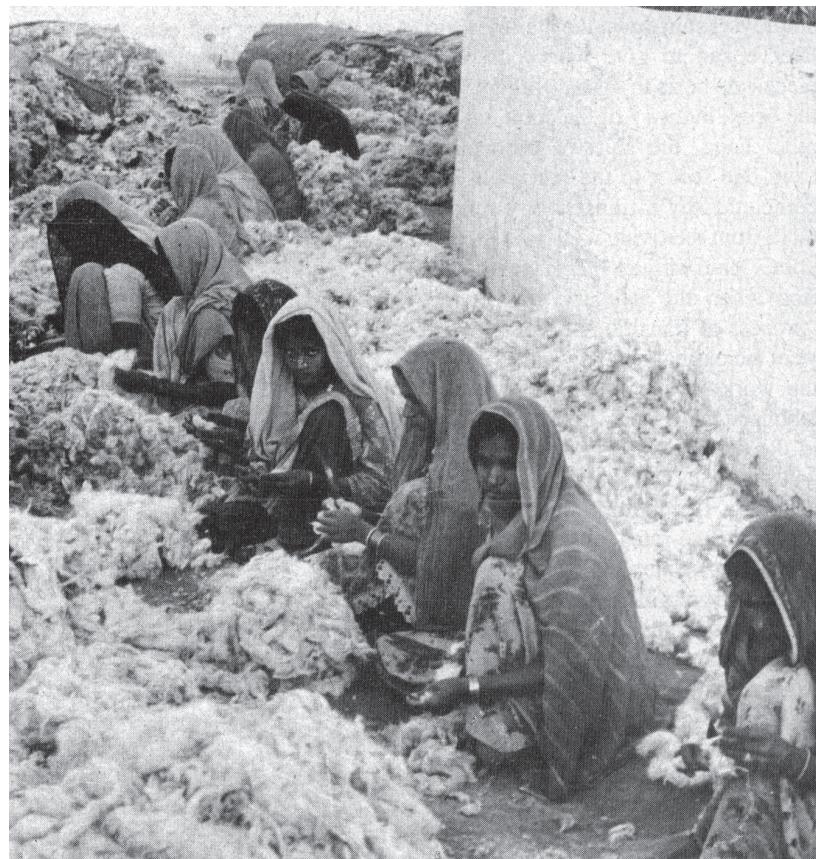
unions have begun to buckle under pressure from employers and many unions have been forced to sign fairly dangerous and humiliating conditions, for example a ceiling on dearness allowance and flexibility clauses.

This trend began fairly early, at least in the late 1960s, early 1970s, possibly even earlier. However, this trend has been largely ignored for a number of reasons:

i) The attitude of unions regarding issues other than their own wages and benefits has been one of indifference. Many unions have consciously avoided dealing with issues like promotions or recruitment in any other way than a purely reactive one, because of fear of competition and disunity within the workers. By and large, these issues have been looked at as 'management areas'. The perspective of the employers/ managements that apart from wages-benefits-retrenchment (unfair dismissal and so on), all other areas are management prerogatives has to varying extents, been uncritically accepted by unions.

ii) While there has been a history of a joint management forum and offensive, the union movement has been fragmented and dispersed, without a coherent statement about new strategies for changing times.

iii) Almost from the beginning of the trade union movement in this country (as in most other countries), men have been in the leadership of the unions and this single fact has had a major impact on the issues taken up (or not taken up) and the manner in which they were taken up by the unions. Until more recently, men workers have not been seriously affected by the job-losses strategy of employers. In fact, in many instances when women lost jobs (either directly through retrenchment or indirectly through non-recruitment), it was men who benefited as more men were recruited in the place of women. Only recently have a) machines been



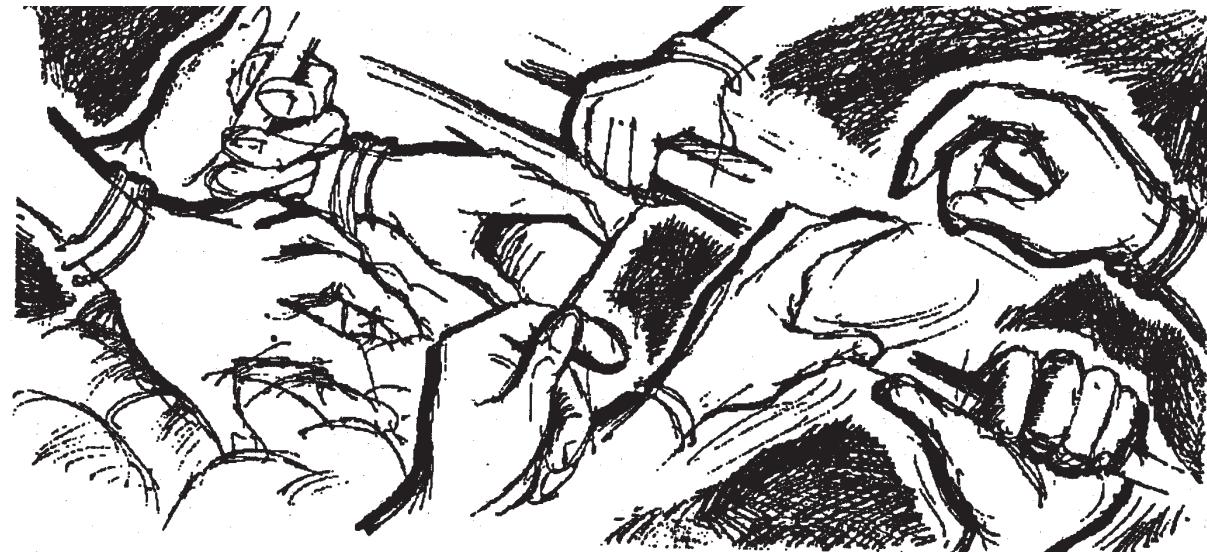
replacing men and to some extent women, b) women and, to a lesser extent, men in the unorganised sector have been replacing both men and women in the organised sector.

This trend is merely an extension of the earlier one which victimised largely women. The employers seem to have felt confident and strengthened in their successful attempt at reducing the number of women workers and more openly repeated it with the entire organised labour force.

iv) It is possible that this inability to challenge management practices also relates to the uncritical acceptance of a particular definition of 'a normal worker' given by employers. For example, most unions only provide representation to 'permanent workers', while often temporary, casual, and contract workers are regarded as 'outsiders' and not allowed to become members

of unions of permanent workers. A few unions include temporary workers as members, but the terms on which they are included are far below those of the permanent workforce. Some unions have agreed to give services like canteen, company transport, sweeping and toilet-cleaning on contract. This uncritical acceptance of the management definition of worker as permanent and male could be one aspect of the problem.

Hence the experience of contract workers vis-a-vis not only the management, but also the permanent workforce has not been quite positive. Women workers too have had similar experiences. Union leaderships do not seem to be sensitive to the various social pressures on women, like the sole responsibility women bear for all the housework, and the lack of mobility imposed on them. The result of this has been that gradually women workers have taken less and less



interest in union matters and as a result the problems they face are not taken up by unions as priority issues.

The story seems to be the same all over, in most sectors of employment. And one response it seems to point out to is the need for strengthening the isolated attempts of various sections of women workers at self-expression and self-organisation. In a union situation it is difficult for individual women to assert themselves even where they are in the majority, which itself is rare. There have been isolated attempts by women workers to come together and relate to each other as women. Men workers have these opportunities nearly every day, and hence may be do not see the value of it for women. But if issues like discrimination against women in recruitment and promotions, the sexual division of labour in jobs, grades and training have to be seriously addressed, women workers need to come together and realise their own value by sharing information and experiences.

If women workers/unionists are part of such organisations, they could feel more confident to raise issues in their own union and struggle for those, as these issues could be discussed and arguments worked out beforehand. Also, technical and legal

information could be pooled together and shared. Besides, there are many issues which affect women, but would be more effective if taken up jointly. For example, in an early discussion on decline in women's employment, some of the points raised by women working in multinational companies in the pharmaceutical industry were as follows:

Women are supposedly discriminated against because of certain benefits they have won in earlier struggles. The employer is supposed to provide a creche if more than 30 women are employed. Most employers do not want this little bit of 'extra' expenditure. So they stop recruiting women. In some places like the Philips Kalwe factory, management dispersed women through transfers so that a maximum of 29 women will be in one place. However, children have not only a mother, but also a father and why should children be the sole responsibility of mothers? We should therefore demand that every workplace which has more than 30 employees should have a creche.

Secondly, men should also help when children are born and the woman does need help with the older children or with housework. Together with the maternity benefits for women, men

should have a right to paternity benefits.

Before putting these demands to the management or the government, they need to be accepted by unions. And even individual women office-bearers or women committee members do not find it easy to do so. If, however, a group, of which these women are a part, argues for these demands, backs them up with the help of solid data, things might be quite different. This was only by way of an example. Women also need solidarity and support in many other areas.

Another example. Women in the large companies have struggled and won important benefits. However, even in cities like Bombay there are thousands of factories where women find it difficult to organise themselves. Women in large companies could share their experiences of struggle—their failures and success. This would be some sort of training experience for younger workers. This suggestion came from women workers in companies such as Johnson & Johnson and Geoffrey Manners in our recent discussions.

Even in large companies, it is possible to attempt some innovative strategies. In the few companies where workers are still being recruited and the recruitment is entirely of male workers, it may be possible to proceed

legally and argue that women are discriminated against.

In some places, for example, in Bombay, there are attempts by women unionists and researcher-activists to begin some sort of women workers' newsletter which would help women to some extent to get over their isolation and relate to each other in a systematic and sustained manner.

The broad purposes of this interaction have been outlined as follows:

- sharing experiences of work in the organised and unorganised sectors;
- conveying news about struggles, events, trends, court judgments and cases;
- discussing how to increase the proportion of women in the organised sector and improve conditions of women in the unorganised sector;
- coordinating attempts to combat social conditions which put working women at a disadvantage;
- discussing various labour and other laws as they affect women workers, for example, Equal Remuneration Act (ERA), the non-inclusion of sexual harassment in labour legislation.

This is one attempt to combat issues facing women workers generally and also specifically in the context of their rapidly diminishing employment possibilities. Many other attempts would gradually emerge or may already be underway. The strength of these would in at least a small way positively assist women workers to struggle collectively for the right to work, for the right to live.

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Notes and References

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