

Women Home Workers in the Garment Industry

A study was undertaken in 1982-83 to understand the situation of women workers in the Garment Industry. It covered women workers employed in the factories as well as those working in their homes on piece rates. Here we will describe the conditions of home workers.

Garment Export Industry is characterized by a fast growth rate and this has led to some companies and contractors making very high profits. However, the situation of women workers has deteriorated, especially those who have been working on piece rates. The demand for garments is not steady, it exhibits seasonal as well as cyclical variations. Seasonal, because mainly cotton garments are exported which have a demand only during certain months of the year and cyclical, based on the conditions of the international market. If exporters established infrastructure compatible with the boom periods they would stand to lose due to unutilised labour and machinery. The way out has been extensive sub-contracting during the boom periods.

While the factories employ both men and women it is only women who do home based work. There are no official statistics available regarding their number. Their work is invisible. Unofficial estimates vary between 25,000 and 100,000.

We met 48 such workers and discussed their situation with them. Most of them lived in crowded resettlement colonies or in localities lacking even the basic amenities such as toilets and clean drinking water. These colonies are spread all over Delhi, but are usually close to Industrial Estates, such as Govindpuri near Okhla and Naraina village near Mayapuri.

Home workers were of all ages; children, young unmarried women and elderly/old women. The average age was 17 years but 13 percent of the women were below 18 years. It was not unusual to find young girls of 8-9 years working on a garment. Many of them were dropouts from school. 35 percent women were totally illiterate though a majori-

ty had elementary education. Young women who could not study any further and were not allowed to go out to work found home-based work the only way to earn money, either to support their family or to buy their own necessities. 23 percent women were unmarried and 70 percent were married. A majority came from large families and had taken up this work due to dire economic necessity caused by the unemployment of other (male) family members or insufficiency of existing income. In spite of several members working in a family, 33 percent were below the poverty line i.e. had a per capita income of less than Rs. 75/- per month. Women's income, meagre as it was due to low rates, went towards subsistence of the family.

For a majority, the reason they worked at home and not in the factory was that they were tied down with little children and house-hold work. Domestic work was a crucial factor in keeping women at home. "If we go out who will do the housework?" was a repeated question. Working at home women were able to intersperse wage work with house work. While they talked about the possible flexibility of working hours, it was clear that they were under tremendous pressure to accomplish many different tasks in a limited time. Another important reason for home working was that there was no other work available.

Women normally waited for the work to be brought to them. The contractor or the agent brought the work and contacted them to come and collect the material. Only in the absence of work for long periods women would approach the contractors looking for work. Availability of work was always uncertain. It was dependent on the demand, prevalent fashions, proximity to the contractors etc. Thus in some areas it was available throughout the year and in some only for a few weeks.

Distribution of work among women followed a pattern. Usually the contractor would give maximum work to those considered good workers, i.e., *those who worked without asking questions*. Work also spread in ripples, those living close to the

contractor getting it first and the others later. In any locality several types of work would be going on simultaneously and there would also be a profusion of rates. Women did cut work (cutting out cloth from embroidered patterns), hand embroidery, crochet, tracing, button-stitching and thread-cutting. The variety of jobs and rates prevailing at the same time led to a total mystification of the ways of fixing of rates. None of the women could give any rationale for the existing rates. While some women did maintain a record of the pieces they received, others left it to the sub-agent to record the amount of work done. Each job was done on a piece rate and most contractors adjusted the rates so that women earned 3-4 rupees a day or less. On an average women worked for seven hours a day. Rates varied not only according to the type of work but also from one locality to the other. For example, women received anything from 50 paise to Rs.2.50 paise per piece, for cut work. Hand embroidery fetched the maximum per piece, i.e. Rs. 15.00, but the piece generally took four days to complete with 6½ hours put in every day. They were paid the lowest piece-rate for stitching buttons, i.e., one paisa per button. To earn the official minimum wage they would have to stitch 1166 buttons in 8 hours.

What did women think of their wages? Because of the profusion of rates and delay in payment, they were often not able to 'see' what they earned for a job. Payments were not made at regular intervals, every contractor using his/her own method of payment. Some would pay the workers only after they had received payments from the main factory, others paid weekly or monthly. Often the daily earnings were so low [that women preferred to let them accumulate with the contractor. They would take it either in the case of an urgent need or when a decent amount had accumulated.

The system of organising production at piece-rates in womens' homes had vicious effects on the workers. If they demanded higher rates, they were simply asked to stop work or told that they could not expect a 'man's wage' since they only worked for a 'few' hours. This claim was not true as most women worked really long hours. Working at home, even women did not see their work as work.

They negated their work and earnings because they did not enter a factory gate and their earnings were also too meagre and erratic. "Is this any work?" was an oft repeated question in women's discussions on their work. However, a majority of women were so desperate for paid work that they were willing to cut each other's rates. Piece-rate production thus generated competition and division among women. Women were often isolated despite working besides each other in the same neighbourhood. Since the source of work would often be different, information regarding existing rates etc. was not shared. Contractors' method of spreading work around and encouraging competition on the one hand and the vast potential of available labour on the other, prevented women from organizing and demanding higher rates. Confined to their homes and living in different parts of the city, many of the home workers did not know much beyond the name of the contractor or the sub-agent who brought them work.

They were aware that they could get a higher wage in the factory. But as no jobs were available they were forced to take on this work. ●

The Housewife

If the woman's husband is asked what his wife does

The Answer is

Man:— My wife *does not* work

Then

Who bears this world in her womb?

Who gives birth to the farmer, the worker?

Who Cooks, Washes, Cleans, fills water?

Looks after the child, the sick?

Whose labour gives men their leisure for liquor,
tobacco and card sessions?

Whose labour gives men their strength to go to work

Who labours without being noticed

With sewn lips, without being paid,

Without being appreciated ever.....

.....Oh! never!

Vibhuti Patel