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CHARACTERISTICS OF SELECTED WOMEN WORKERS IN DACCA CITY**R. W. Timm and Thomas Costa*****I. INTRODUCTION**

The social tradition of Bangladesh has not favoured women workers. Their work in the home has been considered as unproductive by male dominated society. Their position was well-stated by the Secretariat of the Copenhagen Conference of 86 governments called to review the UN Decade of Women : "Throughout the developing world, a major problem is that women's work is often invisible. Her work, though vital to the task of meeting the daily needs of the family, goes unrecorded, unsupported and unrewarded" (Anonymous 1980). Women themselves have accepted their position unquestioningly. "The vast majority of our women suffer from deep-rooted inferiority complex. From their childhood they grow up to regard themselves as inferior beings, and are content to accept the subordinate position assigned to them by their family and society" (Jahan 1975). Rural poverty among the landless and near landless is forcing women to come out of the home and work, and to come to the cities as housemaids, brickbreakers, construction workers or to work at other low-status and low-wage jobs. The famine of 1974 was especially instrumental in drawing women, often deserted by their husbands, to seek survival for themselves and their children by working in Dacca city. This study exposes the life situations of those who bear simultaneously the double burden of womanhood and poverty.

II. METHODOLOGY OF THE SURVEY

A survey was carried out of selected women workers in Dacca city from September 1980 to January 1981. Samples of 100 women industrial workers out of a total of 397 workers (32% women) were taken from 5 industries in Tejgaon Industrial area, 3 of which were private and 2 government operated. Six hundred housemaids were interviewed in Arambagh (72), AGB Colony (100), Kakrail (53), Rampura (45), Tejgaon (44), Kalabagan (59), Mohammadpur (38), Luxmibazar (28), Motijheel (56), Kafrul (29) Maghbazar (40), and Dhanmondi (36). One hundred women brick breakers and construction workers

* Caritas, Bangladesh, Dacca.

were contacted in Azimpur (6), Palashi (6), P. G. Hospital area (4), Bangla Motors (27), Motijheel (18), Jatrabari (33), Bashabo (3) and Malibagh (3). It was not possible to do full coverage of a specific geographical area or to do random selection of a certain number of households in each area. Therefore, the results cannot be extrapolated to determine the total numbers of female workers in these categories in Dacca city.

The survey of 600 housemaids was carried out by students of Notre Dame College and Holy Cross College and by several youth groups. They first introduced themselves to the master of the household, explaining the survey and asking about his income. They then requested permission to talk to the housemaids privately. The 100 interviews of industrial workers were carried out by Alo Rozario and Thomas Costa with the permission of the factory managers, and the interviews of brick-breakers and construction workers were done by Thomas Costa. The same characteristics were determined for each of the 3 groups studied: age, education, marital status, home district, number of dependents, other family wage earners, monthly income, medical facilities, working hours and days, leave, years worked, sense of security, job satisfaction, nature of work, maternity benefits and house rent paid per month. In addition, the women were asked about physical and moral abuse at the place of employment, particularly the housemaids. However, they displayed grave uneasiness in replying to such personal questions, even to female interviewers, and 428 out of 700 housemaids interviewed admitted to shyness. The positive answers regarding physical and moral abuse should therefore certainly be considered as minimal.

III. SURVEY RESULTS

Each of the characteristics of the women workers will be considered simultaneously for the 3 groups. Some of the results are self-explanatory, while others require discussion.

1. Age

| | % | | |
|--------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| | Industrial | Housemaids | Brick-breakers |
| Below 14 | 2 | 28.6 | 3 |
| 15-34 | 90 | 52.3 | 60 |
| 35-54 | 8 | 16.7 | 37 |
| 55 and above | — | 2.4 | — |

The greatest number of child labourers (28.6%) are among the housemaids and the youngest was only six years old.

2. Education

| | % | | |
|--------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| | Industrial | Housemaids | Brick-breakers |
| No education | 18 | 75.1 | 90 |
| Primary | 23 | 23 | 9 |
| Secondary | 54 | 1 | 1 |
| H. S. C. | 4 | — | — |
| Bachelor | 1 (failed) | — | — |
| Madrasah | — | 0.9 | — |

3. Marital status

| | % | | |
|-----------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| | Industrial | Housemaids | Brick-breakers |
| Unmarried | 19 | 41.7 | 15 |
| Married | 81 | 58.3 | 85 |
| With husbands | 60 | 21.0 | 57 |
| Husband missing | 1 | — | — |
| Widows | 12 | 21.5 | 20 |
| Divorced | 7 | 15.8 | 8 |
| Second wife | 1 | — | — |

The high incidence of widows and divorcees among the housemaids is the most obvious point. Considering age in relation to marital status, it is seen that several of the housemaids and brick-breakers were above the age of 20, which is well beyond the age at which most girls get married.

4. Home district

| | % | | |
|------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| | Industrial | Housemaids | Brick-breakers |
| Dacca | 43 | 19.6 | 7 |
| Barisal | 19 | 11.0 | 5 |
| Faridpur | 15 | 19.7 | 33 |
| Comilla | 8 | 10.7 | — |
| Mymensingh | 4 | 11.7 | 12 |
| Noakhali | 4 | 2.3 | 8 |
| Others | 7 | 25.0 | 35 |

The high frequency from districts other than Dacca District indicates the difficulties of survival for the landless and marginalised of the countryside.

5. Number of dependents (excluding interviewee)

| | % | | |
|---------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| | Industrial | Housemaids | Brick-breakers |
| 1-4 | 38 | 34.8 | 17 |
| 5-8 | 44 | 49.2 | 68 |
| 9-12 | 16 | 10.6 | 14 |
| 13-16 | 2 | 0.4 | 1 |
| No dependents | — | 5.0 | — |

6. Other family wage earners

| | % | | |
|----------|------------|------------|----------------|
| | Industrial | Housemaids | Brick-breakers |
| No other | 28 | 37.8 | 21 |
| 1 other | 60 | 41.7 | 69 |
| 2 others | 12 | 14.9 | 10 |
| 3 others | — | 5.6 | — |

Widows and divorcees are the highest frequency of those with no other wage earner. Of the industrial workers, the wage of the other family earner is Tk. 201-600 p. m. for 60 per cent of the women, and more than Tk. 1000 p. m. for 12 per cent. Of the housemaids, the average monthly income of the second family wage earner (usually the husband) is Tk. 260 p. m.

7. Wages

| Wages (In Tk.) | Industrial No. | House-maids ^a No. | Brick-breakers, No. | Total | |
|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|-------|------|
| | | | | No. | % |
| No Wages | — | 65 | — | 65 | 7.2 |
| 1-20 | — | 154 | — | 154 | 17.1 |
| 21-40 | — | 220 | — | 220 | 24.4 |
| 1-100 41-60 | — | 119 | — | 119 | 13.2 |
| 61-80 | — | 54 | 1 | 55 | 6.1 |
| 81-100 | — | 49 | — | 49 | 5.4 |
| 101-200 | — | 23 | 35 | 58 | 6.5 |
| 201-300 | 41 | 11 | 19 | 71 | 7.0 |
| 301-400 | 29 | 2 | 27 | 58 | 6.5 |
| 401-500 | 15 | 3 | 18 | 36 | 4.0 |
| 501-600 | 15 | — | — | 15 | 1.7 |
| Total | 100 | 700 | 100 | 900 | 100 |

a. Includes 100 housemaids from Khulna.

The average monthly income of industrial workers is Tk. 354, of brickbreakers Tk. 260 and housemaids Tk. 40.14. Excluding housemaids who work for foreigners, the average is Tk. 25.20 p.m. Industrial workers are the only ones to get bonuses; 39% get four bonuses a year, 56% get two bonuses and 5% get one bonus.

8. Working hours

| Hours | % | | |
|------------|------------|------------------|----------------|
| | Industrial | Housemaids | Brick-breakers |
| 3-5 | — | 3.6 ^a | 1 |
| 6-7 | — | 16.1 | — |
| 8 | 100 | 19.1 | 21 |
| 9 | — | 4.5 | 28 |
| 10 | — | 13.6 | 30 |
| 11 | — | 2.8 | 17 |
| 12 or more | — | 40.1 | 3 |

a. Do work known as *Chuta kaj* (Part time contract work)

9. Working days

| Days per week | % | | |
|---------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| | Industrial | Housemaids | Brick-breakers |
| 3-5 | — | 1.6 | 26 |
| 6 | 100 | 3.7 | 34 |
| 7 | — | 53.7 | 40 |
| Uncertain | — | 41.0 | — |

10. Sense of security

| | % | | |
|-----------|------------|------------|----------------|
| | Industrial | Housemaids | Brick-breakers |
| Secure | 99 | 57.4 | 1 |
| Insecure | 1 | 40.3 | 99 |
| No answer | — | 2.3 | — |

Of the housemaids 40.3 per cent feared the master, 28.2 per cent feared the lady of the house and 21.5 per cent expressed no fear, although some of these felt no job security.

11. Job satisfaction

| | % | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| | Industrial | Housemaids | Brick-breakers |
| Satisfied | 81 | 55.8 | 7 |
| Dissatisfied | 8 | 39.6 | 27 |
| Uncertain or no answer | 11 | 4.6 | 7 |
| Had to take it as a means of survival | — | — | 59 |

12. House rent paid

| Taka | % | | |
|-----------|------------|------------|----------------|
| | Industrial | Housemaids | Brick-breakers |
| 5—100 | 34 | — | 73 |
| 101-200 | 27 | — | — |
| 201-500 | 14 | — | — |
| Above 500 | 3 | — | — |
| No rent | — | 66.7 | 27 |

Of the housemaids 66.7% stay in the master's house, 30.3% stay outside and 2.3% did not answer. The 27% brick breakers who pay no rent live on the roadsides or on staircases.

13. Other benefits

The industrial workers get the most extra benefits. All forms of leave total 44 days per year for 64 women and 40 days for 36 women. Three months maternity leave is granted in the two government factories, but there is no fixed policy for the three private industries. The industrial workers do not get medical benefits, as these are considered to be included in the bonuses. The only other category which gets an additional benefit is the housemaids. Some get no meal (15.6%), but 16.4% get 1 meal a day, 7.1% get 2 meals, 55.2% get 3 meals and 0.4% get more (5.3% did not answer). Of those who got meals, 70% received the same food as the household.

14. Abuse

Only one industrial worker was physically abused and that was by fellow workers. The brick breakers stated that they are constantly ill-treated (99%). Of the housemaids 12.8% replied that they had been abused or harassed. The types of abuse included : pulling off clothes in anger, beating for small mistakes, throwing boiling oil on the body while cooking, beating for late return to the house, scolding, etc. Most avoided the question about moral abuse but 2.3% admitted that they had been sexually abused, mostly by servants but sometimes by the master or his son.

IV. DISCUSSION

Firstly, the survey shows that there is a strong positive correlation between education and income (Tables 2 & 4). Of those who receive less than Tk. 100 monthly (73.4% respondents), 53.9% are completely uneducated. Of those who earn more than Tk. 100 monthly (26%), only 16.6% are uneducated. The greater the education the higher the income, which consequently leads to a better living standard and a higher social status.

Secondly, the incidence of female child labour (less than 14 years) in the home is seen to be extremely high (28.6%). Although child labour is illegal it would be impossible to ban in the present economic situation of Bangladesh. What is possible is to provide part-time schooling for such child workers through non-formal education programmes, such as are carried out by some voluntary agencies for slum children. They could receive two hours education five days a week and still be able to carry out a full day's work in the home.

Thirdly, the survey reveals that widows (21.4%) and divorced women (13.7%) make up a substantial proportion of the female working population. Apparently little can be done through law to protect the human rights of a good portion of the country's married women. We do know of one group of private lawyers who have volunteered to defend the rights of poor women who are thrown out by their husbands. Many more such groups are needed, and religious leaders as well must recognize their role in building up social consciousness and awareness of family responsibilities and obligations.

Fourthly, widows pose a special economic problem, especially those who have little prospect of remarriage. Is it possible to establish some sort of "family allowance system" or "family social security system" for them? All workers of government and private institutions have some sort of social security in the form of provident fund, pension, gratuity, etc. It is only the workers who are the lowest paid and need help the most who have absolutely no economic security for the future when they can no longer work or are dropped from their jobs. More realistic ways of helping poor widows and their families to survive have to be planned.

Finally, it is evident from the case of the brick-breakers that some kind of public hostels are needed for their shelter. One or more voluntary agencies could take up this work, as well as acting as an employment bureau and a guardian of the rights of the women.

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