

They Give Us light But live in Darkness

COAL gives the country much of its light, heat, energy. But the lakhs of workers who toil to make this possible live in darkness and oppression. Life is difficult and death always at the door, whether in the shape of accident, disease or the threat of unemployment. The picture usually projected of a mine worker is a man in a safety helmet with a coal pick in his hand. But the mining industry also employs about 75,000 women.

In 1975, International Women's Year, the Labour Bureau (Ministry of Labour, Government of India) decided to conduct a study of the condition of women workers in mines which are covered by the Mines Act, 1952. These included all coal, iron ore, manganese, stone, fire clay, china clay and white clay, lime stone, dolomite, silica and other mines which employ ten or more women. About six percent of coal mines and eight percent of other mines in each state were studied. Specially designed questionnaires were used to collect information from employers, women workers and heads of households. Records and registers being maintained by the units were also examined. We present here a report based on the findings of this study.

Protection or Persecution?

In 1919, women formed 38.1 per cent of the colliery labour force. For every ten men employed underground, there were seven women doing the same job. 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'. This was a convenient way of evading the real issues.



-Jolly Rahtagi

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. The fact that workers are plentifully available even for work that means death, as for instance in the silica mines, where the inhaling of poisonous dust corrodes the lungs, slowly and painfully killing the worker, only points to the prevailing poverty and destitution. To throw women out of jobs and into starvation is a strange way of showing concern for their welfare! It only makes them more dependent on their husbands' earnings and leaves them absolutely helpless if their men get disabled, die or lose their jobs.

What induced the government to be so 'humanitarian' towards women while remaining unmoved by the hazards faced by men workers underground, and equally callous to other kinds of dangers faced by both men and women workers overground? 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 just as soldiers were being used on the battlefield. In 1946 the ban was reimposed and the women again thrown out of work! This process was very similar to what happened in England and the US. During the war women had taken over the men's jobs in

factories, fields, hospitals, services and had virtually kept the economy going. After peace was declared, the state launched a massive campaign to persuade women into getting married and having babies—after all, the population had been depleted by the slaughter of so many soldiers and civilians!

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 constituted 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 of hers is given employment.

Equal Pay for Unequal Work

The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, is supposed to have come into force in mines from May 1977. Before Independence, women did only the heavier jobs but were paid much less than men. In those days, employers generally preferred to recruit female labourers. As various Minimum Wage Acts and Wage Awards came into force in different states and the concept of equal pay for equal work was gradually introduced, women almost ceased to be the source of cheap labour for employers. This is a major reason why employers are now trying to get rid of women workers and following the policy of discrimination during recruitment. In some mines, employers go to the extent of saying that they are incurring losses due to the provision of equal wages for men and women. That is, they clearly admit that they want to make fatter profits by exploiting women even more than they do men workers.

71 percent of women are in unskilled and 29 percent in semi-skilled jobs. There is not a single woman holding an administrative, executive or managerial position in any of the mines. Nor are women ever promoted from unskilled to semi-skilled or supervisory levels. None of the mines have a regular channel of promotion for women. By keeping women in the lowest-paid, unskilled jobs and never allowing them to move upwards to higher-paid jobs, the employers cleverly evade the equal wage legislation. In fact, as the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, 1975 pointed out, not only in mines but most of the older industries, the majority of women are employed in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations. Employers deliberately recruit women only at these levels and never train them for graduation to higher levels, so that their wages can be kept lower than those of the men. Women become a pool of cheap labour for employers and can be used to replace men at lower levels, if the men through trade unions begin to demand too many of their rights!

The other trend in many industries is that while male

workers may graduate from one level to another, women workers tend to remain at the level where they are recruited.

The fact that women do unskilled, that is the heavier but lowest-paid work, explodes the myth that they are being 'protected' by laws which forbid them to work underground or on night shifts. Women are observed to carry baskets of ore weighing upto 35 kilograms. In the stone mines the highest proportion of women (46 percent) are employed on the stone crushing machine as unskilled labour. These women carry headloads of material up to the machine while in technical processes of running the machine, only men are employed.

The average wage rates of women are much lower than those of men workers. In the iron ore mines, women get 67 percent less than men in their minimum total pay packet and 80 percent less in the maximum pay packet. Women are quite blatantly paid less than men for doing the same jobs. Thus in many mines, the male ore washing operator earns Rs. 2.50 daily and the woman Rs. 1.81. The male helper earns Rs. 2.63 and the woman Rs. 1.08. The average weekly earnings of women workers employed in open cast workings in iron ore, graphite and bauxite and above ground in asbestos mines were even less than half of the corresponding earnings of men.

Besides this direct breaking of the law, the employers also indirectly evade it by not employing men and women for the same jobs so that they do not have to pay them the same wages! The lowest-paid jobs are 'reserved' for women. According to the S.O. Wages Survey, this restriction of women to a few selected tasks is one of the most important factors adversely affecting women's employment, and the condition of women in the mining industry is typical of their condition in industry generally.

Legal Rights Ignored

Not only are the jobs 'reserved' for women the unskilled and therefore the lowest-paid, they are also usually paid at piece-rates instead of time-rates. It thus becomes easier to discriminate, because the women work longer hours but are paid according to their output, not according to the time put in, while the men are paid a fixed wage for a fixed number of hours and are under less strain to increase output. 55 percent of women in coal mines are employed in wagon loading and overburden removing which are deliberately paid at piece rates. Only seven percent of men workers do these jobs! Both the average minimum and maximum earnings of women engaged as general mazdoors and miners in iron ore mines, excavators or diggers in manganese mines, stone-breakers, carriers and earthbreakers in limestone and dolomite and wagon loaders in china clay, fire clay and gypsum mines are much less than those of corresponding male workers.

The government machinery to implement the equal wage legislation is highly ineffective. In any case, it is impossible to ensure equal wages to all workers doing the same job without

first ensuring job security. Hiring on a temporary or casual basis is one of the oldest means used by employers to evade laws which protect the interests of labourers. 56 percent of all women workers in the mining industry are temporary as against 21 percent of the men. A large number of these women are still 'temporary' after five years of service and some are 'casual' workers after ten years of continuous service. In a large number of sampled units, not a single woman holds a permanent status. Often, employers deliberately cause breaks in service so that the women cannot claim permanent status. The women are utterly helpless and have no bargaining power—they can be thrown out at a moment's notice. In one quartz mining unit studied, the employer terminated the services of all the casual women workers who were being paid less than male counterparts, just before the visit of the field investigators to that unit.



—Jolly Rohtagi

There is only three percent literacy among the women. Illiteracy is often cited by employers as the reason for keeping women in unskilled jobs. However, no attempt is made to provide educational or training facilities to women. Though the law requires employers to provide schools for workers' children, only 25 percent of them actually do so. 55 percent of boys and 23 percent of girls attend school. Most girls have to leave school and look after the house and younger siblings while the parents are at the mines.

Women Work, Men Decide

75 percent of the women are married and the average age of marriage is 16 to 19 years. With the dual burden of housework and employment, women workers are generally left with no leisure time at all. This backbreaking responsibility of keeping

the house running increases the exploitability of women as paid workers because it effectively keeps them out of joining in any form of organized protest, leave alone organizing themselves independently.

The day of an average woman mine worker begins at five a.m. She spends an average of four to six hours on domestic labour before and after her eight hours of hard manual labour at the mines. The quarters provided are usually far from the work place and transport facilities are almost nil. 35 percent of the women interviewed live more than two kilometres away from the mines and have to travel to and fro on foot. They also spend a lot of time fetching water as most employers ignore the law which requires them to provide a clean drinking water supply. 88 percent of families are dependent on some common source of water supply located far away from the dwelling place. Water is drawn from wells, tanks, rivers, ponds and mine pits. Such water is obviously unfit for consumption and very dangerous to health. In some units there is an acute shortage of drinking water.

95 percent of the women do all the housework which includes cooking, washing clothes and utensils, cleaning the house. However, approximately 40 percent take part in what are classified as "family decisions" but are actually decisions primarily affecting the woman herself. Such decisions are choice of family size, education and marriage of children. In a majority of cases, even the decision about the number of children which vitally affects the woman's health, life and right over her own body, is taken solely by the husband.

.02 Percent Is Too Much!

The welfare statutory provisions classify creches, maternity benefit and separate toilets for women as special welfare amenities for women. This is another form of discrimination against women. Are children only the responsibility of mothers? Do they not contribute to the employers' profits by doing housework and freeing parents for a certain period of time and are they not the next generation of labour required by the industrialist? Why are toilets for women workers supposed to be "welfare benefits" while toilets for men workers are taken for granted as a necessity?

Though the cost of providing these so-called welfare amenities for women adds up to only 0.2 to 1.8 percent of the total wage bill, employers avoid providing them and complain that these statutory provisions act as a deterrent in the employment of women! Only 50 percent of units are complying with the Mine Creche Rules and only 7.2 percent of the women in these units actually use the creches. Mothers prefer to leave their children alone or with older children because the creches are more of a farce than anything else. They are situated so far from the workplace and the living quarters that the women face another problem in going to leave or fetch the children. Further, the children are badly neglected, not fed according to the schedule given in the rules and often ill-treated or beaten

by the crech staff who are untrained people.

So also, the dispensaries have only male doctors on duty. Women workers, vulnerable as they are, are naturally wary of going to them for any complaints that would require physical examination. Thus many dangerous diseases remain undiscovered till complications develop and women suffer in silence, even die from sheer neglect. The rules provide for maternity leave after a woman has worked continuously for 160 days. Since most women are temporary or casual labourers, continuous service cannot be proved from records even though they may have been working for years together. Employers see to it that breaks of a couple of days are recorded in the service of permanent women workers so that they can be deprived of maternity benefit. This benefit is supposed to include a medical bonus of Rs. 25 but even this ridiculously low sum is rarely given to any of the women.

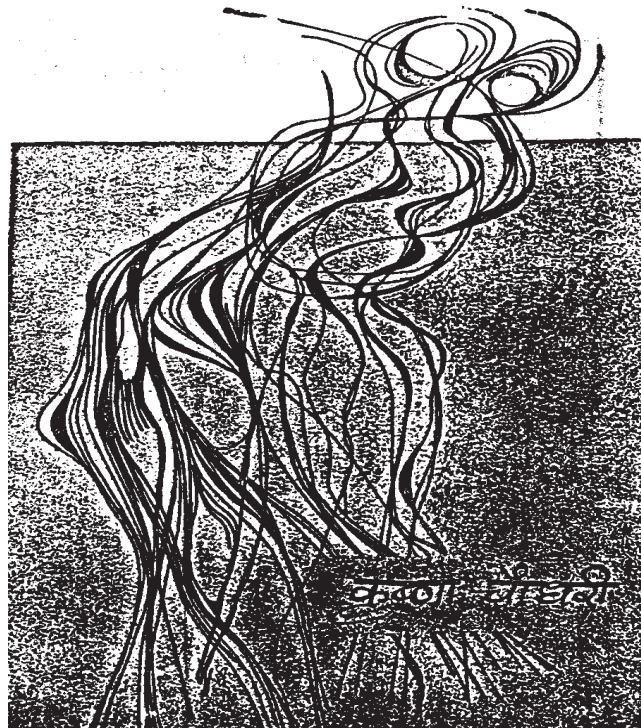
Unions Unconcerned

All this injustice to women goes unnoticed even by the trade unions. In fact, a large majority of women are not even aware of the existence of the Maternity Benefit Act, Mines Act and Mine Creche Rules. The trade unions have not bothered to inform them even of their legal rights, leave alone trying to spread consciousness about the rights that should be further demanded. 55 percent of the women are totally unaware of the various legislative provisions meant to protect them from health hazards and economic exploitation. And this inspite of the fact that 52 percent of the women as against 69 percent of the men are members of unions. The women are just sleeping members, their position in the hierarchy of their own 'representative' body being as low as is their position in the employment structure. Not a single woman was found working as an office bearer or even holding a prominent position in a trade union. Most of the women members take no active part in the functioning of the union. In fact, those who are not members, when questioned, said that they felt that membership would serve no useful purpose for them and in any case their domestic work left them no time or energy for union activity. The intensity of this dual exploitation of women as earners and domestic workers is also the reason why they cannot take part in recreational or cultural activities of the workers. No separate recreational facilities are provided for them.

The Real Story

If this impersonal and inadequate government survey reveals such horrifying facts, the reality must be far worse than we can imagine. More work must be done to bring this reality to light. We invite readers to send in any material they may have on women mine workers, particularly interviews and life sketches. This survey treats these women workers as objects of concern. We need to hear their story in their own words need to know about their lives as they experience them, see them. We hope some of you will try and bring the voices of these women to **Manushi**. □

THE SAME OLD YARN?



i want to draw out
each thread of the mind,
to understand
its colour
its texture
its own feel
softly, carefully i
want to untangle
this jungle of the mind
to straighten out the
lifetime of threads
realize them, analyse them
then put them back
—straight!
i want to weave sense
into the thoughtless tangle of twine
to remove the kinks,
the confusions,
the untold ravellings
but there is much danger in what i do...
what if the thread
breaks
even as i pull at it?
what if sanity
snaps
even as i try to reinforce it?

Deepti Malhotra