

THERE are more than 5,000 outworkers in Leicestershire and their numbers are growing all the time. Most of these workers belong to the Asian community settled in England. Leicestershire is one of the main centres for outwork in England. The majority of workers, perhaps 3,000, work in hosiery and knitwear trades. Shoes, leatherware, packing, box making and assembly work are other important areas.

The bulk of these home based workers are women of Indian origin. These women work for extremely low wages. Their husbands are unemployed because the textile industry in the area is undergoing a recession. The whole burden of the family's economic survival has fallen on women who also perform all the household chores. This has resulted in a double burden on women.

How do these women cope with their dual burden? Who takes care of their children while they work on the machines from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day? What is the division of labour within the family? How are resources allocated within the household? Who makes decisions in the family? These are some of the questions I tried to explore.

Those women who were fresh migrants were worst hit by the survival system. They had only a basic education and very few of them were graduates. Their educational background was not adequate for them to get the kind of jobs they would have liked. For that, they needed further training courses, which were denied to them by their families. Their husbands and other members in the extended family felt that any kind of investment to train women was not necessary, especially since women could earn by working in a factory or by working on machines at home.

Most of these women had been trained to work on the machines in a very informal way, by their friends and relatives. They got work after learning from each other and by recommending each other to the employer for whom they worked. Sometimes, they even shared work, if the need arose, to help each other.

Yet, all of them worked in seclusion

RITA SARIN

Making Visible The Life Of Women

Indian Immigrant Outworkers In UK

This article is based on extended interviews with women of five families in their homes and briefer talks with others at meetings of the Leicester Outwork Campaign which works for the rights of women who take in work from factories to do at home.

within the four walls of their houses. They worked from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., sometimes taking time off to eat lunch or for a cup of tea or to serve food to the children. They got no holidays or leave benefits.

All the women to whom I talked, felt secluded from outside contacts and failed to organise themselves for any collective action to fight for their rights as workers, even though they knew they were underpaid.

One of them said: "Sometimes, it is days before I see a new face. All I do is cook, serve, and work on these machines. Someone comes and picks up the work I have done and leaves me some more bags of cloth to be done. Every minute seems to be a penny and I become a victim of my own work."

All of them knew that their families were surviving on their incomes yet other family members always referred to them as supplementing family income. One of the women had to sit and work constantly on the machines during

her last days of pregnancy since her husband was out of work. She said: "I had a hard time during my pregnancy, but I could not imagine stopping work. We needed more money for the expected baby. I thought of my child and forgot about myself."

Another said: "Imagine, I did not breastfeed my child because I had to leave her in my mother's home while I worked on the machines. My husband did not want me to breastfeed as it would reduce my work output. But I have told him that if I have another child I will breastfeed it."

One may think that since women are the main earners, they must be acquiring some sort of power in the household. But this is not true in the cases I studied. All the women said that the husband was the head of the household. He was the main decision maker on all issues and would consult them only if he felt like it. Mrs S. aged 48, told me-"Despite my contributing to the family income for the past 25 years, I have no say in money matters. He uses the money as he thinks right. He always says, 'But I do everything for you' and never bothers to ask me if I really want what he is doing. My opinions are secondary and if I ever try to be assertive, I get battered."

Since almost all the interviewees belonged to families whose men were unemployed due to redundancy in the textile industry, they were passing through downward mobility and had very limited resources.

Most of the women felt deprived at all levels and accepted the situation as a

necessary condition for the family's survival and existence. Mrs. M, aged 36, said, "All I worry about is to keep some money every month for my sanitary napkins."

Another said, "Whenever there is a little so called extra money, which is rare, my husband wants to put it away for a better home befitting his status or to keep it for some future investment in a business he would want to start some day or to get good clothes, mostly for himself. He never thinks of getting some modern equipment to lessen my work burden. My needs always come last on the priority list."

In this situation, do women feel secure? What is it that belongs to them? Can they operate independently to seek economic security for themselves?

Every one of the women told me that all moveable and immoveable property belongs to the husband or other elder males in the family. Mrs. B, aged 26, said, "Everything belongs to him, but I have no reason to doubt him, so everything belongs to me too. Of course, if he decides to leave me for any reason, it will be hard luck for me. But then this is the accepted system."

Another 28 year old, Mrs. F, said: "You may be right in asking me what belongs to me, but even if I realise the fact that nothing is in my name, how will this realisation help me? If I ask for an investment in my name, that will spoil the relationship with him immediately, and what is the point of that?"

Mrs. S, aged 48, said: "At this age, I do feel quite insecure, because my husband batters me for every small thing and has been foolishly investing money on the advice of his natal family without even informing me. I know I need to do something about it, but how? I do not know." Lack of any support system makes the situation even worse for these women since they cannot turn to their natal families for any advice or support.

Such responses clearly throw into doubt the belief that the family gives economic security to all its members. My talk with a few women outworkers seemed

to substantiate the notion that under poverty conditions and in situations of economic crisis, families extract a surplus by depriving women and children of basic necessities like nutrition, education and leisure. This results in a differential access between men and women to new resources, as the extorted surplus enables men to seek more paying and more prestigious work.

Mrs. M told me that her husband is out of work at present but wants to start his own factory for which "I have to work on the machines till night. My children also work on the garments which he brings home. This is the age for them to study



and play, not to work. But he feels that this is the only way by which we can make fast money and enable him to become self employed."

None of my respondents got a special diet while they were, lactating. Mrs. F said, "I have just had a child and I am breastfeeding while doing outwork but he has never bothered to question me about my diet or show any concern about it."

Mrs. M had more to say, "Yesterday, my child burnt his feet and was admitted to a hospital. While I was working on the machine, my little one, who is three years old, consumed a whole bottle of medicine and I had to rush her to the doctor. I could not finish my outwork and also I had to go

and see my son in the hospital. Despite all this, all I heard at the end of the day was: 'Oh, you only made £ 2 ? What have you been doing?'"

Four out of five of my respondents reported 'depression' again and again while talking to me. Three of them had been admitted to a hospital due to acute depression. They expressed a deep desire to communicate with someone who understood their family problems. Lack of control over their lives and lack of work status led to critically low levels of self esteem, isolation, monotonous and repetitive work, extremely long hours and total responsibility for the organisation of the household.

I enquired whether they would like to do some other kind of work and whether they wanted to do outwork at all? The issue of acquiring skills emerged from this enquiry. Mrs. S, when she came to the UK, was a trained school teacher but needed to take a short course to teach in the UK. She immediately asked her husband to invest the mofley to let her take the training so that she could teach and earn as she desired. Her husband and his family flatly refused to invest in her education or training and instead asked her to work in a factory on a mechanical job. She said, "Something died in me that day. I wanted to be a teacher but they wanted immediate money in the family. I hate this work ; sitting all the time, all day, in a room with no one to talk to."

Mrs. F also said that she did not want to work, confined in a room with four children. She said: "I would like to do something which takes me away from this house for some hours every day. I wish I could study further and get a job." Similarly, the others wished to be trained for better jobs but the family survival needs made it impossible for them to take a break from their drudgery.

Mrs. M said, "My husband is out of work these days, yet he never thinks of helping me. I am running the home but he can afford to choose his work. I was never given any option." At times, the women

felt victims of their families' survival strategies.

Some conclusions which distinctly emerge from this small piece of research are that:

1. There is general asymmetry in the family's decisions regarding labour deployment and investment in the future of its members.

2. Under poverty conditions and situations of crisis, women have to work more than other members, even forgoing their basic necessities.

3. Participation in paid work may not necessarily reduce women's subordination within the family.

4. Women's seclusion in the home with perpetuates the "ideal formed by the

family regard to her existence.

5. Despite women being the main wage earners, they do not avail of childcare facilities but depend on informal structures to help them in taking care of the children.

There is a need to bring about structural changes in the institution of the family to provide justice to all its members, especially to women. □

Let The Body Lie

*Let the body lie
Do not disturb it.
You've worked at it enough when it
was breathing.
Now let it lie
In the cold gloom of this inveterate
room.*

*The pulse beat hard to meet your
grim demands,
Pacing her blood to measure with
your blood.
The eyes are heady sockets
That saw nothing
Caught in the inner darkness of their
fears.*

*The mouth's a mockery
False teeth! Snap them out! Don't
blubber!
Shut 'I say Mum'.
Keep your mouth
shut.*

*Don't let your gaze stop at those
shrivelled breasts,
Snap them apart and hang them on a
wall.
This body did not need them
Nobody ever did.
The arms were kept aside to hold the
children,
Press those blazing birds against the
heart.
The legs that ground the floor
Lie bruised and swollen,
Now let them tide into the other
gloom.*

*One more body to be done under In
the dim light of this inveterate
room.*

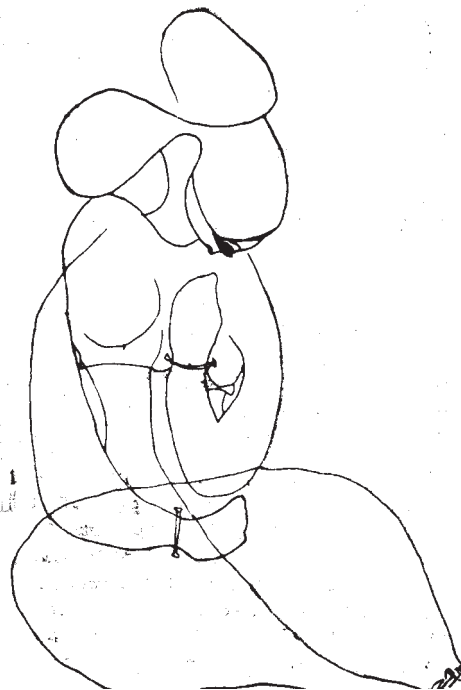
—Rashmi Sehgal

Haikus

I
*Caged desire,
like a hungry tiger,
bares its teeth
and growls
at the forbidden prey.*

II
*My life—
a withered rose
in the buttonhole of your coat.*

—Neera Parmar
(translated from Hindi)



A Married Woman's Prayer

*Goddess
have the grace
to prevent
my loss of face.*

*Redeem at last my new moon fasts, the
coconuts I broke
for you—
from force of habit,
it is true—
in fear
heaped flowers
at your feet,
and sweets.*

*Nonetheless,
confess
you were close-fisted
with your favours
when they mattered.*

*Confined within
a pale and close design
I shattered.*

*Quick, make redress,
Fetch my shards
from oblivion. ...*

—Vasanthi Surya

(Extract from a new book of her poems,
The Stalk of Time Cre-A 268, Royapettah High
Road, Madras 1985, Rs 16)