Women, Work and Health: An Interconnected Web:Case of Drugs and Cosmetics Industries. Economic and Political Weekly 32(43) Oct 25-31,1997 Page No. WS45-WS52.

Women, Work and Health: An Interconnected Web: Case of Drugs and Cosmetics Industries

Sujata Gothoskar

This article looks at women workers in components of the health industry - drugs, cosmetics and toiletries industries - to examine the relationship between their paid work and unpaid work and on the health consequences of the combination of the two. Whether 'work' is recognised as such or not, its impact on women92s health is telling.

I

Introduction

WOMEN's status, it has often been argued, is an indicator of the level of development of particular societies. Women's workforce participation rates, on the other hand, are also related to women's status. These assumptions are seriously under threat with the unfolding of several processes at the level of the economy and households, if not even earlier.

The thesis of feminisation of the workforce globally has also been challenged on several grounds [Elson 19961. One such basis is the questioning of the quality of work women engage in and under what circumstances. It is not quite sufficient to argue that "it is better to be exploited than not to be" [Deshpande 19941. What one needs to seriously question is the underlying relations and the assumptions in the labour market and in the household-decision-making processes that assign particular types of work to men and women. This is as true of paid work as of unpaid work. While looking at women and health issues, we need to consider the structural nawre of women's work and the totality of this work - in its multifarious roles, activities, the time spent as well as the intensity of this time. 91Mis relates to women's paid as well as unpaid work, whether Work is re cognised as such or not; whether the impact on health is physical or mental.

In this article we will look at women workers in the health care industry and at the relationship between their paid work on the one hand and their, unpaid work on the other as well as the health issues they face. Health cafe industry here includes those industries that produce medicine s, soaps and detergents, toiletries as well as cosmetics. The data on which this article is based is part of a

large research project titled, 'Women Workers and Organisational Strategies', which examines the response of women workers in five industries to the changes taking place in their work, household and community over the last decade.

Paid Work

The division of the workplace into male and female spaces has been the subject of a great deal of debate in feminist literature. As Cockburn said long ago, "it is not only people but also machines and workplaces that are gendered" [Cockburn 1983]. According to Roidan, a sexual division of labour is embedded in each social and technical division of labour. Each technological innovation experiences a process of 'gendering' when defined as feminine or masculine. Men and women tend to participate in different spaces, shops or sections in a factory when they usually operate set up different physical technologies that apparently require skills or knowledge also defined as male or female. As feminists have shown, horizontal divisions do not necessarily indicate a 'natural' complementarity between women's and men's jobs or functions, but are usually accompanied by " ; a vertical sexual division of labour which is the main cause of the tremendous wage gap and other hierarchies found between them at work" [Roldan 19851.

At the level of the factory, jobs are closely related to the designation of the worker. The designation of a worker indicates both her job description as well as her status in the hierarchy on the shop-floor. For example, the designation of a 'helper' indicates a much lower and less responsible work content than that of a machine operator. Hence though designation may not be the same as gradation in terms of its connotation vis-à-vis pay levels and skills, they are connected.

Our discussions with the workers - men, women as well as with the management reveal that in most companies, men and women are involved in fairly distinct types of operations, 91though there are some which are common to both. Women work mainly in the packing sections. A few women are employed as sweepers; the area of sales has been completely contracted out to agencies which recruit women and men on a daily basis. Women are not found in the manufacturing, chemical or engineering departments; nor in the warehouses or kitchens/canteens. Most of the plants in our study show this pattern. In the Indian subsidiary of the American pharmaceutical company. Parke-Davis, for example, the departments where men work are the following: (1) the maintenance department, which looks after the repair and maintenance of machines; (2) the chemical plant which manufactures the bulk drugs and formulations; (3) case-packing which is heavy work and involves the shifting and lifting of very heavy boxes in which bottles or tablets are packed; (4) as chemists in the quality control department; (5) in the canteen; (6) in the security

department; (7) gardening; (8) housekeeping; (9) as medical representatives; and (10) in the middle and top management levels. Women work mainly in: (1) the packing department; (2) as chemists, (3) as clerical workers; and (4) There is just one woman medical representative who has been recruited on a contract basis.

II

Contradictory Discourses

There are at least four major actors in the construction of this sexual division of labour in these units and in the industry as a whole. The four actors are the management, the women workers, the men workers and the unions' The perspectives of these four actors were neither consistent wit h each other nor with themselves all the time. The differences in these perspectives emerged depending on the issue being discussed. We will go into these with each of the actors.

Management Perspective

In a sense this could be the most determining one as the recruitment policy of the unit would depend upon the manner in which managements perceive who it is that should be deployed to do the particular type of tasks in the unit.

Gaffarbhai of New India Soap Company, a non-power soap unit, which employs no women at all says: "All the work here is manual. We only employ men as men are multi-purpose workers. They do the mixing, the cooking of the soap, the embossing, the packing, lifting of heavy weights, loading unloading and so on. Women cannot do all these operations." Besides, "there is always the problem of space. Most workers in our sort of units are male migrants from Uttar Pradesh. Their families are in the village. The sexual behaviour of these men is highly improper." Thirdly, & quot; the manual process is unpredictable and it may take several hours - up to late in the night, when women cannot be made to work."

According to Harbans Singh of Gupta Soaps, "the production of laundry soaps requires much more heavy work. Women can only do packing work." ; Also "you need more space If you employ more women". Tushar Sav la of Alfa Cosmetics says: "We give heavy work to boys and packing work to girls."

Patel of P and B pharmaceuticals says: "Women are by their nature better workers. Or may be they are trained to be conscientious. They will not rebel if the work they are supposed to do is bad or boring. They do not to mixed up in politics. They quietly do their work. 91Boys tend to shirk work much more. But women cannot do all the work that boys can. So we have a mix of workers."

However, the mix is rather uneven. In the workforce of about 150, there are less than 30 women workers. This , Patel explains by the fact of women's limited capacities. However, 1 when there was industrial unrest, women had doubled up for men as very few of the women had participated in the strike.

The manager of Bio-chem, had a very different, story to tell. "We had recruited women because they would act as a stopper on the union activities of the ten. The large majority of our workforce consisted of women. And we were proved right... up to a point' Initially women were not involved when a communist union was brought in by the boys. The women stood by us and did all the work ' But then somehow the boys succeeded in getting them involved. And then... the women were the worst... You should have heard the abuses they were hurling at us. Since then we do not have any women here. Besides, the nature of our activities changed drastically. We deal with bulk drugs more and the work involves loading and unloading and work with heavy drums than bottles and strips."

Kantilalbhai Shah of Glamour, a small unit producing soaps for five-star hotels says, "Earlier we had only men - over 25 of them. But we had to shut down the unit due to very intense labour trouble. The unit was shut for over four years. We reopened it with just a workforce of nine workers - six women and. three men. Women do all the work that men do. I here is coin pleterotation and flexibility."

Male Workers

According to Shinde of Roche pharmaceuticals, a large pharmaceutical company, "Women are not trained professionally to do most of the job s that we are trained for like that of boiler attendant, electrician, all the engineering jobs, working achines and so on." Says Vellayudin of Alfa Cosmetics, a small-scale soap making unit, "women are best at packing. Men feel bored and restless doing the same thing day in and day out. Our jobs require moving around in the factory; they must stand and wrap all day." Kisan Pawar of Bombay Tensides, another small-scale unit says, "In this unit men were permanent workers. We do all the core work. Women come and go. They can only do packing."

Women Workers

Says Treesa, who used to work in Hindustan Lever, "Earlier women did all the work. The work on the soap line was very difficult-all manual. 91Men the Rose machines came in. And the work was considerably lightened. But women were replaced by men. Me were given special training; women were not. We never did understand the logic. According to Sandhya from Bugsutn soaps "We did all the work the men did. In fact: we did it faster and so we asked the management to

put us on piece-rate wages than on hourly rates as we were confident that we would work faster and hence make more money than if we were on time-wages. The men continued to be on time-wage s."

Mangala is from Sasa, a unit linked to Reliance, but purportedly, a women's cooperative. She says, "We see the men fitting from inside of the unit to the outside and the other way around. They ate supposed to be doing the work of loading-unloading. Yet once the raw materials are inside, we do the loading into the machines. Besides, we take care of the entire process as well. But we are piece-rated and not officially workers , while the men are monthly rated and legally they are workers, with all the rights that implies." According to Sushma of Geoffrey Manners-Wyeth, "the work on the new carton machine is very difficult. Women cannot do it. We demanded that we need a man on the line.

The Unions

Ajgaonkar, earlier the general secretary of Parke-Davis says, "Women are good workers; but they are good packers. They cannot do anything more." According to Franklyn, an office-bearer of the Hindustan Lever Employees Union, "Women are not trained to work with machines and things. It is not their fault that they cannot work on them". Bekre, earlier the office-bearer of Procter and Gamble Employees Union, "Women are not serious about their work. They want to tun home as s6on as it is 5.15 p.m. 'Me company cannot. rely on them for emergencies as they can on men; nor can the union".

There are several strands to this discourse. These are not all uniform nor are they all in the same direction. They are what Amrita Chha chhi and Renee Pittin (1995) call "shifting and contradictory discourses & quot ; At one level is the tension between `heavy work92 and `boring work92, ` Heavy work92 is something that men do while women are `naturally92 disposed towards `boring work92, which is not the realm of men. These are two totally separate spaces inhabited by people of two separate genders. In reality, they do tend t intermix and interpenetrate, as when there is an a ll male workforce as

in the case of most non-power soap units or when men a re more involved in industrial disputes than women, like in Biochem or P and B or when men and women do identical tasks in different slots in terms of payment systems as in Bugsum. Yet the perception is that this can only be a temporary situation where women do the work of men, while men doing 91women92s work92 may be permitted in certain circumstances, also because the circumstances themselves transform the work to that of men's rather than women's work.

In the work by Chhachhi and Pittin (1 995), & quot ; male discourses on work also acknowledged the similarity of tasks". However, in our, research, men workers by and large refused to see this similarity. This was possibly also due to the fact that in several units, tasks were almost totally gendered. But also possibly because, unlike say the engineering industry, in these industries, most of the jobs were so akin to what are largely considered 'women's tasks' that it was only by asserting the differences between men's and women's tasks, could the men assert their own identity. The unions seem to be reiterating the perceptions of the men workers.

Unfortunately, it was not the male workers but t he management who did seem to partially recognise the women workers' skills and competence at work. 'Me managements perceived this sindlarity of men' s and women's tasks in terms of the content. They however seem to make use of this similarity while', consistently re-establishing the so-called differences. This was possibly a way to reinforce the male identity of the male workers as well as keep women in their place. This however did not keep them from exploiting the similarity of tasks when the need arose .

Women workers were the ones to feel this similarity much more strongly as well as the injustice involved in the denial of it not only by the managements and the men workers, but also by the unions. However, for some women workers, a link was constantly reestablished between heavy, work, machines and masculine physical strength. We will go into this aspect of the perceptions of the women in the case-study of packing lines, which till recently was the all-female space in the production process of these industries. lie second strand is of training. There are two aspects here. Workers trained before they enter the workforce and on-the-job training. It has often been remarked that industrial training institutes with courses like lathe operation, mechanics, and other technical `trades92, tend to discourage women. This is the case in the `990s as well. This may not be true of private institutes, which are too expensive for working class girls to avail of. However, what Teresa points out in the case of HLL is that while the women were doing the tough jobs, when it came to the jobs being mechanised, women were not given a chance to train themselves and they were later discriminated against by the management tot he extent that the re is not a single woman in the HL plant that Treesa is referring to.

Space or lack of it seems to be a problem, especially in the small-scale units. Here the reasoning is obviously not that women need more space, as it prima facie sounds; but that if the two sexes are to work together, more space would be needed. The choice then is to leave women out; not to leave men out.

Here one would need to describe some of these workplaces from where women are excluded. Very briefly, these are tiny sheds, fairly dark; often the floor its unpaved. The cooking of the soap takes place in large utensils, big enough to fill the entire room. The fuel is wood and other material that is put in a pit under the utensil. The workers have no intermittently stir the mixture. In some of these workplaces, in one corner of it, workers cook their own meals and live. These are workplaces that seem unfit not only for women, but for al human beings. This appoints to the nature of the industry and the policies of the government which have failed these workers. Here is a case where women are protected out of jobs and men denied any protection.

This protection of women out of jobs has taken t he form that since the 1970s and in some plants even tin the 1960s managements had stopped recruiting women. A large number of women who were then recruited are almost on the verge of retirement; some have already retired. Others are none of the foci of managements when they design their voluntary retirement schemes. Thus over the years there have been fewer and fewer women working in the large pharmaceutical plants (Gothoskar 1997).

This is also due to the notion of women's abilities and women's work prevalent in management psychology as well as in popular imagination. Often, the manual work women do both at the workplace as well as at home is more heavy as well as requires abilities of thinking and co-ordination than some of the work on machines that is denied to them , simply because they are women.

Women's resistance to some of this work is partly due to these notions; however, partly also because they cannot afford to take on heavy work also in the workplace when they are doing it all the time in their own houses. Training and gender is one strand that links .,workplaces and the labour market with households and the hierarchies within those. Workplaces or the labour market is not the only site or eve n the first are where women are discriminated against. Access to training or the lack of it is a process that confronts girls and women long before they enter the labour market. This is an area where households play a role in perpetuating and aggravating gender discrimination.

Hierarchisation of Flexibility

One important reason for the employers of large-scale units to make this choice is the entire drive for a flexible workforce. By and large, workers by their definition are flexible. Industrial work or for that matter any collective socialised work is not possible without the flexibility of the workers. The debate is not about flexibility or no flexibility; it is about the drive for more and more flexibility and the agents of more versus less flexibility. It is in this context that

managements are grading and hierarchising agents of flexibility. For women their employment is but one aspect of their work life. An important aspect of their work-life begins when they do back hom e from their factories., "We cannot afford to ' be drained out and half-dead when we reach home. We have our second shift out there", says a woman from Parke-Davis. This is also one important reason why women insist on transport facilities to and from home rather than transport allowance; which gives money but not the certainty of a comfortable journey from home and from work.

Men are also known to work more on overtime (which in the organised industry gives double rates of wages) than women. Unfortunately, these are precisely the reasons why in the organised sector women are considered to be less flexible than men and why men are more favoured as employees than women. Secondly, women have leant from experience that they are valued only when they are on their own two feet. Falling ill frequently is something women cannot afford. They often cannot afford to be choosy about the quality and quantity of food and nutrition they can have access to. This is also true when women themselves have some control over the production and distribution of food. Their only chance is to apportion effort in a manner they consider and are allowed to consider as rational.

It is often the complaint of the management and sometimes also of the union that women take more holidays and leave, including unpaid leave than men. One reason for this is that it is women who are responsible for the care of the sick and old in the family, especially children and old parents or parents in-law. But often women feel the need to balance their exhaustion with some minimal rest by taking an off in between. Says a woman employee working in Nicholas pharmaceuticals, " ;The management is quick go to point out that women come to work late and are ear to leave earl . But what about the time in between? Men roam around, chat, talk about investments and do all sorts of things. Once we are here , we belong to the company; that is also why we feel more tired. These qualities of ours are merely taken for granted; while our so-called drawbacks are held against us."

According to an experienced male unionist of the engineering plant of Siemens, when new machines are introduced, the work methods and workloads undergo dramatic changes. For example, when the new moulding machine was introduced, the speed increased from 120 strokes per minute to 360 strokes per minute, an increase of 200 per, cent. This meant a drastic increase in the number and speed of operations workers had to do and a fierce intensity of work. However, the workers, all male, neither objected to this increase nor did they insist on changes in manning level s. This feature was common to most of the all-male workforce we discussed this issue with .

Asked why this was so, many unionists felt that possibly the stamina of men is greater than that of women. Secondly the idea of machismo dominates the actions as well as the inaction of men. Thirdly, for most men, their job is the only avenue where they exert them selves. Their employment is a very crucial92 identity for most men in terns, of a public recognition of their capability; this is unlike the other identities that define women both publicly and privately

This however is not the case92 with the. women in small-scale industries, where employment is insecure 91and the wage levels so low that they are extremely vulnerable otherwise they would not be working in such a situation to begin with. Not that women in insecure employment have no other identity but that of a worker; but often in the face of demands of employers, they have no choice but to submerge that identity, at great cost to their family life, their leisure time, and their health.

Thus the hierarchy of flexibility from the point of view of managements is as follows:

Least flexible Organised women worker's

Organised male workers

Unorganised male workers

unorganised women

Most flexible workers

Hence the well known and well documented phenomenon that the majority of women employed in the non-farm sector are actually in the growing informal sectors of the economy a borers working either as 1and servants or as petty producers and traders.. Apart from their work being extremely time consuming and heavy, it is also the most deprived in technology and capital inputs. Technological marginalisation of female work is endemic in both agriculture and the non-agricultural informal sectors and accounts for the gender gap in wage rates (Swaminathan 1997).

Wage Discrimination

This is made worse when the actual production process as well as policies of recruitment are/not the only arenas for discriminating against women. For example, the wage-levels of women are much less than not only what they need,

but also less than what is due to them as per the law and less than their male colleagues who often do alm6st-comparable type of work.

A surprisingly large proportion of women in our sample were being paid much less than the male workers of their units. Over 69 per cent of the women in pharmaceuticals and about 83 per cent of the women in soaps cosmetics were being paid less than the men. Only 22 per cent of the women in pharmaceuticals and 15 percent of the women in soaps and cosmetics were being paid wages equal to those of them en in their units. The rest of the women did not know the comparative wages at all. A small proportion of the women in the large multinational companies received more wages than the average wages of the men in the unit. This however was because in these units, female recruitment stopped much earlier than the recruitment of the men. Thus women on an average have greater seniority than the ' average male in the unit.

There was not a very striking trend in terms of the relationship between the lower wage scales of women compared to the men and the scale of the units or even in terms of the two industries. In pharmaceuticals, 77 per cent of the women in. small units, 62 per cent of the women in medium units and 74 per cent of the women in the large units were paid less than the men. In the soaps-cosmetics industry, 84 per cent of the women in the small units,. 92 per cent of the, women in the medium units- and 50 per cent of the women in the large units were paid less than the men.

Why were so many women being paid less than their male counterparts? Was it something to do with the differences in the qualifications and skills between the two genders we wanted to know. Not even 3 per cent. of-'the women felt that could be the reason. The largest number of women felt that 'worker status' was the most important reason. This included the fact that more men were permanent, that more men than women were senior in the unit and so on. The second most important reason given by the women for this difference in wage levels was the arbitrary decisions and policies of the management. A large number of women also felt that the productivity level s of men were hi her than those of women. One of the reasons for this obviously was the fact that men were working on different jobs, especially on mechanised processes. The other reason mentioned was that men were more ready to work till late whenever asked to do so. This again brings us to the question of flexibility and definition of a worker by managements.

As Naila Kabeer puts it, "Me different levels of skills, complexity and responsibility used to define organisational hierarchy are seen as products of organisational logic rather than expressions of management values and

preferences. However, these abstract categories are constructed on the premise of a disembodied worker who exists only for the job" [Kabeer 1994].

Sexual Harassment

Women workers face other types of gender specific forms of discrimination and oppressions at their place of work as well. A severe problem women workers face is that of sexual harassment. This is one of those problems that only women face and it is probably one of the few problems that may be perpetuated by not just the employer or the manager, but by the very people who are her work mates. Hence it is also something that women prefer not to talk about.

Hence it was surprising that 56 per cent of the women workers in the pharmaceutical industry and 39 per cent of the women in soaps and cosmetics actually admitted that they had experienced verbal sexual harassment - men whistling at them, making vulgar jokes and comments in a way that the women would hear it, and so on. Four per cent of the women had experienced visual sexual harassment - pictures and writings on walls, on toilets, on paper that is strewn about deliberately. Forty-four per cent of the women had not experienced any sexual harassment. Most of them however said that they had heard of other women having experienced it. Some of them said that they had been harassed by men in the industrial estate but not in the unit they worked in.

In terms of numbers, verbal sexual harassment seems to be the main form of harassment that women confront. The most common site of this seemed to be the medium scale pharmaceutical units (62 per cent) and the small-scale soaps-cosmetics units (52 per cent), though women working in all the other types of units had also experienced this and other types of harassment.

Verbal sexual harassment is something that is generally very common and also a form that the women may perceive of as 'least defiling' as it is furthest from bodily contact or physicality than the other forms. Though many women talked about sexual harassment as a regular occurrence, there was also an underlying thread of the 'type of women 'who are harassed. Thus it is likely that women share a guild of not being proper when they themselves are harassed. This may be one reason for the relative reluctance to talk about sexual harassment as a problem they themselves face. This is more true of physical and visual forms of harassment than verbal harassment.

Problems Women Faced at Work

The problems women workers face while doing the work, i.e., production - process related problems are closely related to the manner in which production is

organised, the 'manning' levels on the production line, the control or otherwise on the speed of the machines and line-speeds by workers. It also depends on the seriousness with which the management and sometimes the union deals with issues of health and safety at the workplace. Unfortunately, this is a much neglected area by both the management and the unions at the peril of the workforce. In our sample this has been adequately brought out as there is a near concentration of all the five responses sought of the question of what the women felt were the most important, production process-related issues they faced.

The concentration is on 'dangerous work' especially in the soaps and cosmetics industry, where 88 percent of the women felt dangerous work was an important issue. In all. she questions on problems faced, the women were allowed five answers to every question. In this case, out of the five answers in two of them 88 per cent and 49 per cent of the women said that dangerous work was the most crucial problem they faced. In the pharmaceutical industry, 'dangerous work' is also an important problem - 41 per cent and 43 per cent of the women said so. However, the most crucial issue facing women in terms of working conditions in the pharmaceutical industry is the problem of increased or impossible workloads - 56 percent, 85 per cent and 21 per cent of the women gave this as their answer. Postural problems was another troublesome area for the women - 50 per cent and 38 percent, of the women in pharmaceuticals had faced this problem. Less than 3 per cent of the women had faced 'no problems' at all.

Some of the conditions of work are such that they need to be radically revamped in order that work has even a semblance of humanness. There are other types of problems that can be taken care of by mere sensitive planning and by following democratic norms, which include taking workers' into confidence while designing or renovating the workplace or setting92 work norms. This is where the concept of 'worker oriented flexibility' may be of some use. This 'worker-oriented flexibility' may, not necessarily sacrifice on productivity and profits; in some cases it might enhance both. However a commitment to such an orientation may demand at least relooking at some of the management practices that have been taken for granted and considered management prerogatives. One case in point is the arrangement of flexible practices rotation - that was largely at the initiative of the women and was so well entrenched in the pharmaceutical industry till very recently.

Physical Conditions

The second set of information obtained was on the problems women faced in terms of the physical conditions at the place of work. Here we had asked women to list up to five problems. The actual working conditions at the shop floor seem to be a very major problem for most women.

The actual physical conditions on the shopfloor seem to predominate all other issues. These included high noise levels, dusty atmosphere, high temperature, poor lighting, bad ventilation, overbearing chemical fumes, humidity and radiation. In the first response, 87 per cent of the pharmaceutical ' and 90 per cent of the soaps and cosmetics women, in their second response 72 and 88 per cent, in the third response 47 and 71 per cent and so on gave this as the most crucial issue faced. Women workers of all the sectors faced this too. A 100 per cent of the women working in the small units of the pharmaceutical industry and 92 per cent of the women working in the small units of soaps-cosmetics mentioned the physical conditions of work as a severe problem. Eighty-eight per cent of women working in the medium units of pharmaceuticals and 100 per cent of those in the ' medium units of the soaps-cosmetics industry reiterated this set of problems. And 82 per cent of the women in large pharmaceutical units and 50 percent of those in large soaps cosmetics units felt strongly about the adverse physical conditions of their working lives.

This is understandable as even when we visited some of these factories for fairly short periods of time, we found it was difficult to talk to the women as the noise levels of the machines were unbearable, so was the air which was full of caustic soda and other chemicals. In most of the units women did not have masks, nor were there any exhausts to carry away the fumes and the chemicals which filled the atmosphere the women were breathing in day in and day out. In units like Sasa, women did the sieving of caustic soda with their bare hands.

Health-Related Problems

Connected to this was the issue of what impact work had on their health .By the nature of the work the women do, they are exposed to all sorts of chemicals and drugs. In some of the lines, where women handle powders of scheduled drugs, their entire system is exposed to these chemicals their skin, their respiratory, digestive and nervous systems may be affected by some of the chemicals they handle day in and day out. In our study we came across several instances of women being rendered fairly ill due to such exposure.

Less than 7 per cent of women had no problems. A small number of women had faced problems of a moderate nature. All the rest had faced either severe - 49 per cent in pharmaceuticals and 63 per cent in soaps and cosmetics - or acute health problems 40 per cent in pharmaceuticals and 32 per cent in soaps-cosmetics. The major problem faced by women in the pharmaceutical industry was related to severe back ailments like spondylitis, constant low back pain. Another serious health problem was exposure to chemicals ~ both internal as well as skin related. A few of the women had faced pro blemsrelated to their reproductive functions

like repeated abortions, heavy and painful menstrual flow. Having to handle glass bottles as well as unguarded machinery has given rise to problems like repeated injuries, sometimes fairly serious ones. There does not seem to be any correlation with the sector of the unit in this case.

In the soaps and cosmetics ' industry, handling raw materials like caustic soda with bare hands, without any protective gear like either gloves or a mask and similar conditions of work have given rise to several respiratory and skin problems among the women.

Several very serious accidents were also reported to us, often in hush-hush tones. One major source of accidents is the very low piece-r ate that prevails some of the units in this industry. A very serious accident had occurred in the Sasa factory of Lijjat Papad, where the woman was trying to remove the last batches of the mixture that is to be shaped into soaps , and another woman by mistake switched on the large mixer. The woman is said to have got entwined in the blades of the mixer. She was dead before she could be taken to the hospital. All this was told to us very quietly when the supervisor had left for a92 couple of minutes.

We witnessed a few striking incidents ourselves. While we were being shown around the shopfloor in a soap factory, the workers were working on the embossing machine - the machine which ultimately gave shape to the soap cake as well as embossed the name of the soap on it. The women would pick up square shapeless soap cakes, place them on the niche of the machine and bring the lever down on the cake with force - all this in a split second, over and over again. We had this feeling of horror watching the heavy lever come down on the soap cake. What if a finger gets in? Instinctively, we told the woman to be careful. She raised her hand to show us her fingers. The top portions of two of her fingers were missing. Several workers showed us their fingers as well. These were young 20-year-old women and some men who had their entire life in front of them and no fingers. In an earlier study we had looked at how women working on life-saving drugs like broncho-dilators were having severe, health problems including those related to their reproductive system and how after a struggle by these women, instead of radically changing the work system permanent women workers were replaced by contract male workers [Gothoskar, Banaji and Kanhere 1984].

Several employers have insisted on excluding women workers from hazardous jobs based upon the possibility of reproductive injury, while at the same time, as in the case cited above, they have continued to employment in jobs which expose them to hazardous substances in excess of legally accepted standards. This double-edged position raises serious questions of discrimination against both

sexes. From one point of view, women are denied employment; form another, men are denied protection [Swaminathan 1997].

This 'protection' to women is offered or imposed in another discriminatory manner. It is only in better-paid occupations that women are 91protected '. The lower-paid sector gets no protection from serious and pervasive risks. When the risky and often heavy work is unpaid, it is only women who seem to pervade it.

Women's Unpaid Work

Just as conditions at the workplace are a n important determinant of the health conditions women face there, so also living conditions are an important aspect of the ease or otherwise with which women perform their unpaid labour. This is especially so because, the home is the site of not only the unpaid work of women, but often also of some form of paid work as well.

Home Ameneties

In our study, almost 16 per cent of the w omen had no easy access to as important a necessity as water. One per cent of the households of the women in the pharmaceutical industry had no facilities whatsoever while 6 per cent had only electricity. Of the households of women in the soaps-cosmetics industry 2 per cent had no facilities at all while 12 per cent had only electricity. Just 50 pet Cent of the women had electricity, water and a television set in their house, another 25 per cent had a toilet inside their house as well. Thirty-two per cent of the women in pharmaceuticals and as many as 61 per cent of the workers in the soaps-cosmetics industry New no access to any of the labour-saving device s, not even a cooking gas. Apart from the precariousness of their housing conditions, women and their households faced several other problems in the neighbourhoods they live in. These included; (1) Lack of basic amenities like water, electricity; (2) Lack of amenities outside the house like drainage, street lighting; (3) Lack of medical facilities; (4) Lack of PDS facilities,; (5) Violence against women; (6) Law and order problems like hooliganism, bootlegging; (7) Communisation of life; (8) Housing related problems like harassment by the landlords, unrepaired housed, leaking roofs; and (9) Problems with neighbours in terms of harassment especially of single women.

Contribution of Women to Households

Very often the contribution that the woman makes to the household determines her status in the household. On the other hand, it may also be argued that the status of a woman in the household may decide to what extent she can have some control over her own earnings. Often in households as elsewhere, women

are not recognised for what they are in terms of their likes, hobbies, interests or aspirations. There is no or a very limited concept of women' s autonomy. The resources that belong to women - her earnings, whatever property or assets she may own, her time, her abilities - are considered to be rightfully at the disposal of the household. How those resources are to be distributed or allocated is also the prerogative of the household. An important related problem is who decides what is good fond the household and how are those decisions taken?

A great deal of literature exists which indicates that what a woman earns determines the nutritional level of the household and that a rise in the woman's earnings raises this level while the male earnings often contribute to an increase in his personal consumption rather than household consumption. At another level, for the vast majority of the poor households, women's contribution to the household seems to be a very crucial component of their subsistence and seems not only to determine the quality of life but also the quantity and frequency of meals the households would have access to.

According to our study, 16 per cent of the women in the pharmaceutical industry and 7 per cent of the women in the soaps cosmetics industry seem to run their households entirely on their own. In about 44 per cent of households of the women in the pharmaceutical industry and 34 per cent in the soaps-cosmetics industry, the women respondents seem to shoulder over half the financial burden of the households. According to our data, in the pharmaceutical industry, only 1 per cent of the women did not contribute anything to the household, 15 percent contributed less than half their wage, 2 per cent contributed half their wage, as many as 57 per cent contributed more than half their wage and 24 per cent contributed their entire wage to the household kitty.

Of the women workers in the soaps and cosmetics industry, 2 per cent contributed nothing, 2 per cent contributed less than half and 2 per cent contributed half their wage to the household. Sixty-six per cent contributed more than half the wage and 27 per cent their entire wage to the household.

The data on women's contribution to the household could be interpreted in several ways. The women in the soaps and cosmetics industry come 'from extremely depressed households where the per capita income is extremely low and closer to poverty line standards than most other industries. There seems92 to be no other way to survive but to pitch in whatever every member brought in As her or his wages. This may be moretrue of divorced women who have no other reaming member in the household. Or alternatively, the divorced women could be the heads of the households who decide the allocation of resources.

There also seems to be a difference between the two industries. While the data on women's contribution in the pharmaceutical industry is somewhat spread out, though not equally, from one end of the spectrum to another, almost all the women in the soaps and cosmetics industry seem to be contributing large parts of their wages to the household. At a more general level, what can we say about the relationship between women's contribution to the household and women's status in the household? Does women's autonomy in the household increase with her contribution? Or does her autonomy get represented by the fact that she can keep part of her wage for herself - either for personal consumption or savings?

There were several instances in our data, especially in the case of married women, where her entire wage was taken away from her forcibly and she had almost no status in her own household. Shantabai working in a medium sized cosmetics unit and Daivavata working in Sasa soaps were both first wives of husbands who had more than one wife. Their role in the household was more like a provider of resources, without any of the privileges that would naturally accompany such a role, especially when played by men.

From our experience we felt that even if in a few cases women did not contribute directly to the household in terms of a large chunk of their wage, they did make specific contributions to the household in terms of certain items or for example paying of medical bills, etc. Though we found that women did contribute a great deal in kind, they pitched in whenever it was necessary; they bought whatever was needed and did not restrict themselves to specific items of contribution, as we had presumed. Only 15 per cent in our sample did not contribute in kind at all; all the others did. In fact, several women told us that they contributed more than half their wage tot he household and at the same item contributed several item s like children92s clothes, etc., in kind. In effect, they contributed "their entire wage to the household.

Several research studies have made this point about the almost total contribution of women to the households as opposed to the rather limited contribution of the men. Does this fact of a woman's contribution of her wage to the household have any implications either for the contribution! of the male members in domestic work or alternatively does the woman get respite from her responsibility towards domestic work?

Domestic Work

Logically speaking, there should be an inverse relationship between the monetary contribution women make to the household and the effort in terms of the hours spent in doing domestic work. However, as one is aware, logic does not always work, especially when it is against the interests of the dominant and

the socially powerful, i.e., where patriarchy dominates relationships as well as political economy. According to a very detailed analysis of reproductive work in households by Nancy Folbre, whether in the home or the market, women do a disproportionate share of the work, of social reproduction. A great deal of empirical and historical research , much of it feminist in orientation, shows that this generalisation holds for most areas of the world over most of the period of recorded history. What explains this sexual division of labour? This question cuts to the heart of political economy: the relationship between choice and coercion, efficiency and exploitation [Folbre 19941].

We will briefly go into the correlation between the direct economic contribution of the women and their contribution in terms of the hours of domestic work they put in the household as it has emerged in our study.

Only one among the pharmaceutical women workers did no t contribute at all to the household expenses. She put in three to five hours of work at home. Out of the women who contributed less than half the wage , 86 put in more than five hours of domesticworkandl4percentputinbetween three to five hours of domestic work. Out of the women who contributed half their wage, 50 per cent worked for more than five hours and 50 percent worked between three to five hours at household work. Of the women who contributed more than half their wage, 65 per cent worked for more than five hours, 32 per cent worked between three to five hours and a mere 2 per cent worked less than three hours at domestic work. Out of those who contributed their entire wage, 65 per cent worked for over five hours, 22 per cent between three to five hours and 13 per cent worked less than five hours.

Among the women workers of the soaps and cosmetics industry, only 2 per cent of the women did not contribute to the household and they worked over five hours doing domestic work. All the women who contributed up to half the wage, did between. Three to five hours of domestic labour. Eighty nine per cent of those who contributed the total wage worked for over five hours; 11 per cent of those who contributed more than half the wage and 18 per cent of those who contributed the entire wage worked between three to five hours at domestic work. Nine percent of those who contributed their entire wage worked less than three hours. Thus we could find no correlation saying that if women contributed in one way, they could opt out of another way of contributing to the household or at least the effort would be proportionately reduced. No way.

Reproductive work is an inevitable aspect of women's lives in this society, irrespective of their age, marital status or their role in 'productive' work. However, within this broad perspective, the role of women in the hierarchy of the household defines the nature and amount of effort and time women spend

on reproductive work. The marital status of women is an important aspect of their role in the hierarchy of the household.

When we correlated the data on marital status with the data on the hours of domestic work women put in, the results were somewhat expected. Generally speaking, as many as' 63 per cent of the women in pharmaceutical industry and 33 per cent of the women in soaps and cosmetics had to put in five hours or more of work at home. Only a few unmarried women could get away with not doing any domestic work. None of the married women could do so. Over92 percent of the married women, over 80 per cent of the divorced women, over 70 percent of the widowed women and less than 37 per cent of the unmarried women had to work for five hours or more, some up to nine hours a day. In greater details, out of the women who work in the pharmaceutical industry, 12 percent of the unmarried women spend less than three hours in domestic work, 49 per cent between three to five hours and 39 per cent spend over five hours.

Among the married women in the pharmaceutical industry , none work for less than three hours, 8 per cent work between three to five hours and 92 per cent spend over five hours each day. Even none of the divorced women spend less than three hours at domestic work ; 14 per cent work between three to five hours and 86 per cent work for over five hours. Among the widowed women, 14 per cent work for less than three hours, 14 per cent between three to five hours and 71 per cent spend over five hours doing household work.

Of the women who work in the soaps and cosmetics industry, none of the women except the widowed women spend less than three hours at domestic work. Out of the unmarried women, 80 per cent work for between three to five hours and 20 per cent for more than five hours. Hundred per cent of the married women work for more than five hours. Twenty per cent of both the divorced and widowed women work at household work between three to five hours, and about 80 per cent for more than five hours.

It has generally been observed that men work for longer hours at the workplace, e g, several of them work several shifts at a time, while women do not work for such long hours. It has been argued that women have to anyway work an extra shift at home and have a long work day. Is it possible that women who work for fewer hours outside home work more hours at home and vice versa?

The curve of the table of the two industries correlating these two factors, shows extremely interesting results. In both the industries, the weight does seem to be on the combination: more work at the workplace , less work at home. Fifty per cent of the pharmaceutical women workers and 41 per cent of those in the soaps and cosmetics industry followed this pattern.

The pattern followed by the next largest section of the women in the pharmaceutical industry is of women who work eight to eight and a half hours at the workplace and between three to five hours at home ., For the women in the soaps-cosmetics industry, the second largest section - 22 per cent - were women who work for nine to 1 0 hours per day at the workplace and five hours or more at home.

This combination of nine to 10 hours at the workplace and five hours or more at home is the third largest group - 17 per cent - among the women in the pharmaceutical industry; while the third largest group - 12 per cent - in the soaps-cosmetics industry comprises of women who work for 11 to 12 hours at the workplace and over fiv6 hours at home. About 33 per cent of the women working in the soaps-cosmetics industry and 17 per cent working in the pharmaceutical industry seem to be the worst off in terms of an extremely long and extended work day with very little in return. Hence it is not surprising that a fairly large proportion of the women told us that over the years their leisure time has reduced drastically. Though this was generally true, the marital status of the women did have a. significant impact on how much leisure time had reduced.

Male Contribution to Domestic Work

How much respite women will get from household work depends on how much the menfolk of the household will contribute both regularly as well as occasionally, in terms of crises. Three seemed to be no significant differences in the behaviour of the men in the households of the women working in the two industries and hence we have combined the data of the two industries here.

The contribution of the men of these households were i n no way very significant possibly because men do not have a clearly define d reproductive role [Kabeer 1994]. In our study, about 52 per cent of the men in these households 'did not regularly do any' of the domestic chores ; over 27 per cent of the men 'helped marginally'; over 8 percent of the men rendered 'significant help' and less than 1 per cent of the men contributed 'as much as the woman' of the house.

Many more men seemed to help in times of crises and other occasions than they did regularly. About 28 per cent of the men did not regularly do any housework but did some household work occasionally; over 26 per cent of the men did some minimal work regularly and rendered some help when there was a problem. This is what Kabeer refers to as "gender-related rigidities in the intrahousehold substitutability of labour" which result in women having to balance a multiplicity of demands on their time [Kabeer 1994: 1061.'lt has also been observed that although women have taken over some of the tasks that were

traditionally outside their domain , most men are reported unwilling or unable to share women's work. Whenever someone has to assume someone else's role, it is the women who automatically assume men's roles and not vice versa [Lado quoted in Haddad et al 19951.

Types of Tasks

What were the types of tasks men participated in? It w as interesting to see the differences in the type of chores men did regularly and those they were prepared to do in times of crises. The times of crises included situations like: illness of the women of the household, women having to go out - either out of town, or to her workplace or elsewhere to do organisational work and so on. Out of the tasks that men shared on a day-to-day basis, over.71 per cent were what we have called 'less gendered jobs'. These included marketing, taking the children to. school or taking the studies of the children.' Only 29 per cent of the tasks performed by the men were 'gendered' jobs, jobs that are traditionally more identified as women's work - washing clothes, washing utensils, cooking,. etc.

However, out of the tasks that the men did occasionally, in times crises just over 50 per cent were gendered jobs and a little less than 50 per cent were non-gendered tasks. Presumably, these are tasks that may be done by men when there are situations when women cannot perform them; otherwise they are rightfully women's tasks.

Leisure Time

An observation often made is that the burden to maintain the household and the living standards of households often falls disproportionately on certain sections within the household, depending on the hierarchy of members in the household. Women are more often than not, at the lower levels of this hierarchy. As times become more difficult, several studies in different countries have shown how arduous life becomes for women-reduction in consumption, increase in efforts and time spent in working at home and outside, often resulting in reduction in leisure time for women. Women's time as well as their ' resources much more than men's are seen to as the property of the household to be disposed of according to the needs of the households. Underlying is the notion that women should and will act altruistically rather than with self-interest. What is seriously lacking is a "concept of individual agency for women independent of their embeddedness as members of families" or households [Barooah 19941.

According to Elson, an increase in unpaid labour in the household made it possible to treat the switching from one form of paid labour to another as costless. So long as households absorbed the costs of resource allocation without

any implications for the monetary variable s (wages, prices, balance of payments, GNP, etc.) then resource allocation could be treated as costless' [Elson 1992]. Does this phenomenon affect all women in the same manner or is it differentiated according to other characteristics of individual women. Does the marital status of the women in any way affect their leisure activities and the time spent on these?

According to our study, about 15 per cent of the unmarried women working in the pharmaceutical industry had never had any leisure time at all; 44 per cent said their leisure had reduced due to having to spend more time on paid work, e g, more over time; 22 per cent of the women had to spend more time on household work, e g, by having to process food that was earlier bought in a more ready form and for 19 per cent of the women, their leisure time had not reduced at all. Among the married women in this industry, 20 per cent had never had leisure time, for 28 percent leisure time had reduced due to more paid work, for 44 per cent due to more household work, and only for 8 per cent had leisure time not reduced. Among the widowed women, while 14 per cent of the women said that their paid work had increased, 72,per cent said their household work had increased and 14 per cent had not experienced a reduction in their leisure time.

In the soaps and cosmetics industry, among the unmarried women, 20 per cent had never had leisure, for 40 per cent, leisure had reduced due to more paid work; for 20 per cent leisure time had not reduced and 20 per cent of the unmarried women were not sure how things had changed for them .About 10 per cent of the married women had never had any leisure, for 43 per cent leisure had reduced because of more paid work; for 33 per cent leisure had reduced because of more household work and for 14 per cent leisure time had not shortened.

Among the divorced women in the soaps and cosmetics in dustry, 40 per cent had never had any leisure; for 40 per cent their leisure time had declined due to more paid work and for 20 per cent of the women leisure had not reduced. For the divorced women in soaps-cosmetics, 50 per cent had experienced a reduction in leisure due to more paid work; for another 30 per cent this was due to more household work and for 20 per cent leisure time had not shrunk.

For married women as well as for the widowed women, increase in household work was an important reason for reduction in leisure time. Similarly, relatively few married women felt their leisure time had not shrunk as compared to the other women. Divorced women seem to experience more acutely than others the non-existence of leisure time in their lives. Possibly, they have to cope with both increasing paid work as well as increase in unpaid work. is definitely seems to be the case with the women in the pharmaceutical industry. A review of formal time

allocation studies confirm that, on average, women in developing countries put in more hours per day in non-leisure activities than do men [Juster and Stafford 199 1, quoted in Fladdad 19951. This aspect has important implications not only for the mental and physical well-being of women but also for the organisational possibilities. In order to be able to better their lot, they need their time to think, talk, work, etc. Precisely because of their tight time pressures, they cannot afford the time and hence cannot better their lot which would be able to afford them more leisure time.

According to a recent UN survey on the situation of women, the so-called austerity measures adopted due to the structural adjustment programmes have been far from neutral. "Women, and especially women in poverty, are among the hardest hit." Women have had to respond to the hardships faced by their households... "by increasing their work time and workload both inside the house and in the marketplace; so much so, that the increased workload of women has come to be termed the 'invisible adjustment' of households, communities, and countries in crisis during the past decade" [Borooah, 19941.

This is an attempt, albeit a partial one, to explore t he results of some of the intersecting structures of oppression". Partial, because while we have looked at what could be broadly called class and gender oppression that these women have experienced, it was not possible to include other structures of oppression like caste, minority status, etc. As Naila Kabeer puts it, "While gender is never absent', it is never present in pure form. It is always interwoven with the social inequalities such as class and race, and has to be analysed through a holistic framework if the concrete conditions of life for different groups of women and men are to be understood"[Kaberl994]. This is an attempt at a frame work that remind us of them multiple identities and multiple oppressions that seem to reinforce each other and at the same time define and delimit the possibilities for women.