

## CHILDCARE AND THE WORKING MOTHER

It is often said that women with pre-school children do not go out to look for jobs and do not keep their jobs. For African working-class women in South Africa, however, this is different. As mothers, and often as single parents, they bear the responsibility to satisfy the basic needs of their children. They have to earn the money necessary to pay the rent and buy food. This is what forces them to look for a job, and to keep their job.

Many mothers go back to work when their children are less than three months old. In all cases, the mothers are back at work before their children reach the age of one. This can seriously affect the physical and emotional health of the mother and the child. One distressed mother said, "...it's hard. I feel it's important that a mother looks after her own children. Money shouldn't come first. But what can we do?"

In this article, Jackie Cock, Erica Emdon, and Barbara Klugman\* look at the problems of working mothers in Soweto, and the decisions they are forced to make.

### Women's work: least skilled, lowest paid, most insecure

Over the last ten years, many more women have taken on employment than before. Women work mainly in the service sector and in the agricultural sector, in the lowest paid and most insecure jobs. Where women work in the manufacturing sector, they are found mainly in the production of food, clothing, and textiles. In these types of production, too, wages are particularly low.

In the homelands, women work in the informal sector, in farm labour, or in state employment, doing heavy manual jobs. In all these work-places in the rural areas, women are low paid and insecure in their jobs, because they can be replaced by other desperate work-seekers at

any time. Women in these work-places are not organised in unions and they have no legal protection. Those women who cannot get jobs have to depend on the little money that migrant workers send home.

Many women from the rural areas are forced, by poverty and desperation, to come into the towns and cities. They often come into the urban areas illegally. If they have no right to live and work in an urban area, the only jobs they can possibly find are jobs in domestic service, or in the informal sector.



### The double shift

In the urban areas, most working women have to work a 'dual shift', a double load of work both inside and outside of the home. Those who have children find it difficult to be mothers and workers at the same time. Under these conditions, women suffer from tension, conflict, and overwork.

For most women in the urban areas, the day starts around 5 o'clock in the morning. On average, these women work 16 to 18 hours a day. This heavy workload at work and at home leaves them with virtually no leisure time, and not enough sleep.

The double load of work both inside and outside of the home also prevents many working women from joining in and working for trade unions and community organisations.

To ease the workload of the woman, and to enable her to actively take up some of the issues that affect her, it becomes necessary that all members of the household take joint responsibility for housekeeping and childcare. Another way of freeing the woman to participate in unions and community organisations would be for households to get together and share washing, cooking, and childcare.



## Maternity rights

One of the things that makes a working-class woman's job insecure is the fact that she has got inadequate maternity rights to protect her during pregnancy and after childbirth.

There are laws that are supposed to protect working women and their babies. For instance, there is the provision that a woman may not be employed immediately before and immediately after the birth of her child. In section 23(2) of the Factories, Machinery and Building Work Act 1941 and in section 13(2) of the Shops and Offices Act 1964 (Act 75 of 1964), it says that a pregnant employee may not work in the period between four weeks before and eight weeks after the birth of her child.

But even with this protective law, the woman is not guaranteed her job back once she is ready to go back to work after her child is born. Furthermore, maternity benefits are, at the moment, available to only very few working women. And for those few women who can claim maternity benefits, the money that is paid out is not sufficient.

In the place of effective laws protecting women, the government suggests to employers that they should deal sympathetically with pregnant women. A lot of leeway is left to employers. This is what makes women even more insecure at their jobs. With no maternity protection, a woman might be fired either as soon as her employer finds out that she is pregnant, or sometime during her pregnancy. Or she might not get her job back once she returns to work after her child was born.

This seems to happen particularly to women employed as cleaners, hotel staff, waitresses, and shop assistants.

## Unions' negotiations for maternity rights

With more union organisation, and more participation of women in unions, negotiations for maternity rights for women have started in a number of industries.

It is particularly the independent unions, including the Food and Canning Workers' Union (FCWU), the South African Allied Workers' Union (SAAWU), FOSATU unions and CUSA unions, who have started the negotiations for maternity rights.

As a result, some companies have included some basic maternity leave conditions as a right of their employees. For example, there is a maternity leave agreement between ASSEMP (the Employers' Association of the retail trade, of which the OK Bazaars is a member) and the retail unions such as CCAWUSA.

## Child care

The problem of childcare is even more involved than that of maternity leave.

Black working class women are, in general, pushed into unskilled jobs and are therefore in a vulnerable position. This is one of the reasons why employers often do not even consider opening creches in the work-place. The state and employers still assume that working class women's families can look after their children. Or they have the attitude that whatever working class women do with their children is their own business, and that the women should bear the costs.

At the moment, no employers provide a creche for workers' children at the work place.

The few creches that exist in Soweto are not funded directly by the state or by employers. There are six WRAB creches in Soweto which are of quite high standard. But they only cater for 720 out of 192 000 pre-school children in Soweto. That is because they take only a limited

number of children, and in most cases, their opening hours are shorter than the working hours of the mother. That is why most working class mothers do not see these creches as an option. Most working mothers therefore rely for childcare on relatives (particularly grandmothers), on neighbours or on childminders. The number of working class mothers who turn to childminders, is going up all the time. For childminders are usually nearby, and are prepared to have the children for long hours and on extra days, if the mother has to work overtime.

Grannies and childminders are often old (usually between sixty and seventy years). Childminders in Soweto care for an average of seven children each, with most of the children being under one year old. Childminders do not have an easy time. Often their houses are not equipped to have many small children around. Quite a few childminders do not have running water in their homes, and many do not have hot water. A number of childminders do not have stoves, and many more have no fridges. Many do not have indoor toilets. Under these conditions, it is not easy to keep bottles sterile, nappies dry, and children clean.

With the issue of childcare, unions and community organisations still have a big task. For unions and management to recognise the need to take up women's demands, there must be well-structured shopfloor organisation which include women workers.

---

This article is drawn from material presented to the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa, Paper no.115, "Childcare and the Working Mother: A Sociological Investigation of a Sample of Urban African Women"