

A Question of Rights

By *Firuza Pastakia*

Cet article décrit le travail accompli par le Women Workers' Centre, une organisation syndicale communautaire qui fournit des conseils juridiques et de l'aide aux femmes travailleuses de Karachi au Pakistan. L'organisation aide les femmes à combattre la discrimination en milieu de travail et à s'organiser pour créer de meilleures conditions de travail. Les efforts de l'organisation ont donné de bons résultats, mais elle tente toujours d'atteindre un niveau plus élevé de soutien et de reconnaissance auprès du public.

"Before these women came here," says one resident of Shershah Colony, Karachi, who works in a pharmaceuticals factory, "we had to go searching for someone who would listen to our problems, and could give us some advice. Now we don't have to go very far."

The Women Workers' Centre (wwc) operates part-time from a small room in the Shershah Colony offices of the Mutahidda Labour Federation. Everyone in the vicinity knows who the women who work here are, and many children play noisily in the courtyard of the building. Most women living in the area go out to work, and are grateful for the wwc's presence here to deal with their problems.

The wwc was set up as a result of the findings of a 1988 survey conducted by the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER) that drew attention to the exploitation of women workers. It aims, in its modest way, to redress some of the terrible injustices women are subjected to at their workplaces. It provides legal advice and assistance to women in order to solve work-related problems, and facilitates their participation in collective bargaining.

Women now constitute a significant proportion of the labour force in the country, but their labour continues to be exploited. Industry in Pakistan has long been segregated—with certain types of industry employing only women—and women workers are generally much worse off than men.

This became clear in the 1988 survey. What seemed to be rare cases of exploitation were actually quite common, if not the rule, in most industrial sectors in the country. The survey showed that the majority of women workers do not know what their rights are under existing labour laws. Those who do are not likely to take any action against their employers if these rights are violated. The survey also showed that women are more reluctant than men to form unions, or to participate actively in unions if they already exist. They have no access to a forum in which to voice their complaints. Moreover, women have no knowledge of govern-

ment departments and institutions that implement labour laws, and no means of access to them.

Since its inception, the wwc has been besieged by women victims of all kinds of discrimination and mistreatment at work. The first case to be brought before the wwc was of three women at Shahbaz Garments, Karachi, who felt they had been unfairly dismissed. The wwc helped these women—who would otherwise have simply sought alternative employment—to take their case to court.

As a result of their meetings with the workers at the Centre, other women at the same factory decided to form a union. Management, however, tried its best to prevent this from happening. Work was withheld from the women; their guardians were called to the factory and told that their women were undermining the family's *izzat* (dignity), and would be better off within the *chardiwari*; union officials were offered bribes. The management also allegedly managed to get an illegal stay order from a civil court in order to prevent the union from being registered. Their case, with the help of the wwc and Nabi Ahmed's Mutahidda Labour Federation, has also been taken to court.

Amma Hawwa had been working at Freshwater Fisheries for fifteen years when some women from the PILER survey interviewed her. Some time later, she was dismissed, and no official reason for her dismissal was given. She turned to the wwc for assistance, and her case was taken to the labour court. She was offered her job back, but she turned it down.

There are many other women like Amma Hawwa and the women at Shahbaz Garments, who are employed in small and large industry in the country. And their seemingly isolated cases of unfair treatment are actually common practice.

The PILER survey results reflected the need to teach workers about labour laws, and the rights that these laws guarantee them. The wwc publishes a pamphlet, *Raushni*, in which these laws are discussed at length. Case studies are also printed, to show how these laws can be implemented. Apart from publishing *Raushni* as often as their meagre funding allows, the wwc also regularly holds workshops and seminars related to these issues. Meetings have also been held, but they are poorly attended. "We contacted other women's organizations, we met them personally, but everyone there has some reason or other for not showing up," said a worker at the Centre.

Despite the lack of cooperation, however, the wwc has managed to make its mark. Apart from labour-related cases like those of Amma Hawwa or the workers at Shahbaz Garments, the wwc has also assisted women in matters of health care and personal

law. "There was this woman who had been divorced by her husband, but he refused to let her remarry. He would threaten her; he made her life a misery. She came to us, and we put her in touch with some lawyers, and her problem was sorted out."

The Women Workers' Centre has also helped to legitimize working for the rights of women workers. "When we first started up, people thought these are women, they will just talk, but they won't do anything," says a wwc employee. But now they know that we are serious. Now we are not even allowed to enter many factories, because the management fears that we might start union trouble.

Women, however, have generally had a poor record of forming and running their own labour unions. Apart from the fact that many are unaware of their right to unionize, most women workers are afraid to get involved. For most, it is easier to take home a smaller wage than to create a fuss and face losing that wage altogether. It is for this reason that most women labour activists like Kaneez Fatima and Gulzar Begum, come from outside the labour force. No woman worker has become involved at that level. "That makes solving women's problems very difficult," said a wwc representative. Solving the problems of women workers is made even more difficult by the fact that the special nature of these problems is not recognized. Although women now make up a very large proportion of the labour force, they are still treated as second-class, cheap labour. And because industry in the country has been strictly segregated, it is difficult to make a concrete case for equal pay for equal work. Industries like garment manufacturing, fisheries and pharmaceuticals employ only women in certain sectors of their production process,

making a comparison almost impossible.

Even today, in most cases, a woman's wage is half of what a man would be paid to do the same work. And because women have not created a strong enough lobby against this kind of discrimination, the exploitation continues unabated. Laws do exist to prevent the blatant exploitation of all workers, including women. There is, however, no foolproof method to implement these laws, and there are, it seems, very few people who really care.

Although several women's organizations exist in the country, few of them have addressed the issue of women workers. Fewer still have taken up the cause seriously. "Perhaps it is the long hours that one has to put in," says one wwc employee, "or the unglamorous nature of the work involved." Whatever the reason, the wwc continues to operate in virtual isolation, with very little public recognition, and almost no support. It is perhaps only in the Shershah Colony, where women flock to its offices for guidance, or just a chat—or in the minds of a handful of people who are aware of the work that it does—that the Women Workers' Centre really exists.

Women's organizations have taken on several other issues such as rape and the Hudood Ordinances in the past. In their widely publicized campaigns, however, they have somehow overlooked the rights of women workers. And, they have ignored the women who have chosen to take on this task.

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