

at least eighteen years. Working for four families, she collects a total pay packet of Rs 95. Her starting salary those many years ago was Rs 7, she remembers. Incidentally, since 1960 the real value of the rupee has come down to just under 17 paise, according to one official estimate.

Chamundeswari is perhaps 22 years old. Her husband has deserted her. She lives alone with her child in a little hut in Someshwara slum. She works for four families too, and makes Rs 100. How does Chamundeswari make do? "Where else can I go," she

SPOTLIGHT

ted? If every employer were to come face to face with the living conditions of their employees, the answer would be in the affirmative. Even so there would be no pressure on the employer, (usually the housewife) to pay the domestic more than the average Rs 30, which is half the cost of a simple cotton sari. If Radhamma quits, there is Shardamma. And if Shardamma too cannot afford the low wages,

nas often been. 'If you don't like it, you can quit. 'But domestic workers in Bangalore, where job conditions are erratic and often degrading, desperately need to be organised. To begin with, simple ameliorations are required. Standardised minimum salaries, paid sick leave, paid holidays, festival bonuses, etc. These demands are not beyond the means of most employers. And yet, few housewives will voluntarily provide these rights to their workers.

These rights, however have been wrenched out of employers in other cities like Delhi, Pune and Bombay, where the lot of the domestic is a bit better. In Pune, for instance, a spontaneous strike was launched by some women workers. They refused to go back to work until standard salaries and holidays were negotiated. The ploy worked. The movement was later unionised as the Pune Molkarin (domestic worker) Sanghatana. Much progress was made to improve their working conditions. Many basic demands, like a minimum wage of Rs 60, a month's salary as yearly bonus, Diwali gifts etc. were met with.

A similar organisation was recently set up in Bombay. The women of Bandra East, a suburb which provides armies of domestics to the surrounding areas, got together to press for their rights. There was even an attempt to set an employment bureau of and for molkarin. For some time, the women showed a strong sense of solidarity. Later though, the enthusiasm petered out.

It is not easy for domestics to organise themselves. Unlike factory workers, they do not converge at a common workplace. It is difficult to create loyalties among scattered fellow workers. Besides the one-to-one relationships between the employer and the employee is private not subject to outside scrutiny. Most state governments hold the view that this being the case, there is little they can do to intervene. Also, working conditions very greatly. There are several benevolent employers who feed their servants, give them clothes and extra money. For women with no concept of their own worth, it is hard to define this as exploitation.

The low wages given to domestics merely reflect the low esteem that housework is held in. For centuries, women's work has been deemed unproductive, and does not count as part of the gross national product. Much controversy has, of course, been raised over this. If the housewife's work is so demeaned, what about her servant's? And so the domestic is landed with two menial jobs. For one,



THE AVERAGE PAY GIVEN TO A DOMESTIC SERVANT IS Rs. 30, MERELY HALF THE COST OF A COTTON SARI. ON THE RARE OCCASION THAT THEY ASK FOR A RAISE THEY ARE MERELY ASKED TO QUIT. IN THIS ARTICLE THE AUTHOR STRESSES THE NEED TO ORGANISE DOMESTIC WORKERS IN BANGALORE WHOSE JOB CONDITIONS ARE ERRATIC AND OFTEN DEGRADING.

she cleans her own home at zero wages. For another, she cleans other people's homes for just a little more.

Everyone knows that western societies do not employ housewives any more. In fact, Westerners are known to envy the middle classes of developing countries with their docile, cheap labour. In consumer economies, labour saving devices and instantaneous cultures have reduced the need for menial labour. This is a

real threat in urban India as well. Already, today's housewife, with her two minute noodles and perhaps her washing machines, is less dependent on the domestic than her mother was. But this is not good news for the millions of women who lurch to the cities with no training other than 'Women's Work', which is still in their destiny. It simply makes the value of their work sink even lower.

The scenario is always the

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say that a day's salary, Re. 1, cut for every day of absenteeism. Then there is the perpetual fear of eviction for those who live in slums. There is even a fear of husbands, often drunk, quarrelsome and uncaring. There are children, as burdensome as the loans which make domestics indebted to employers. There is sickness, hunger and unhappiness.

None of this is new. It sounds too much like the weary refrain from a monotonous song. Yet these people are real. Most of them live in the Laxmipura or Someshwara slums in Ulsoor, the core of the city. When asked if they have ever thought of organising themselves like the women in Pune, most of them are amused and incredulous. But they are obviously interested by the possibility. Already many women's organisations are at work with domestic helpers. Suvarna Mohan from Women's Voice, for instance, has been helping the slum dwellers of Laxmipura for four years. Certainly, the women there, often the main breadwinners of the family are now more aware of their rights, within the family and with their employees.

At some point this awareness may translate itself into something more concrete, like it did in Pune in 1980. When it does, many employers of domestics in Bangalore, who are now enjoying what is definitely among the cheapest labour in the world, will agree that it is about time.

DISTAFF TALK

There's good news from Parliament this week. After the constant clamouring of women's organisations, the Family Courts Bill was introduced in the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday.

If the Bill is approved and passed every state government will have to set up these special courts that will strictly deal with cases relating to marriage, separation, divorce, conjugal rights, child custody, maintenance and property, dowry, rape and prosecution cases are also likely to be referred to these courts. At present, all these cases are scrutinised by the civil courts, juvenile courts and even social welfare boards.

The primary aim of the setting up these family courts will be to settle family disputes without any adherence to rigid rules of procedure or evidence. Experts have felt that ordinary courts with their technical and legalistic approach are unable to do justice to these cases. The family courts will, instead, provide a preventive and therapeutic approach with the help of sociologists, psychiatrists and marriage counsellors so that the entire family unit is studied before judging a case. In other words, to enquire into the real cause of the trouble before deciding on a case. As one Judge describing the function of the family court said 'the process is one of helping the parties to help themselves.'

Of course this may sound and, in reality, prove to be an ambitious project. But with increasing number of marriages straining under the arranged marriage system in urban India, family courts will no doubt come in handy in sorting out this problem. Besides the in camera nature of hearing will also allow the rape victims to come forward more willingly with their version. As a woman advocate from the city said 'Let's hope they will stick to their original plan to have plenty of women judges.' The need to study the family construct in dowry cases may also prove useful in the long run.

However, not every one is comfortable at the thought of these family courts. Some feel that clubbing rape, dowry and prostitution cases with those of divorce will merely isolate crimes against women and reduce the serious connotation of these cases. A valid argument which does not spare the family courts from their share of suspect. The informal nature of hearing that will be the special feature of these courts should not reduce the severity of the judgments. Treatment and diagnosis apart, no criminal should be allowed to go scot free. Instead the intention should be given high priority to the dowry and rape cases, instead of isolating them from the mainstream of other criminal activity.

After all the method of diagnosis may be different, but the disease must be manifested.

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