CHAPTER III
WOMEN AND THE WORKPLACE

In this Chapter, we explore the conditions at the workplace for women and the relations they establish there. We look at the specific measures adopted by the state as well as the mill managements to facilitate women's role as workers. We seek to examine whether the facilities so provided -- such as creches, food canteens, lady doctors, maternity benefit, similar to those witnessed in early-twentieth-century England resulted in the co-option of women workers by the colonial state. We present the specific hardships that women faced on becoming part of the factory system. The gendering of work lives and their consequences for women in reorganising their role models constitute yet another area of discussion. This we take up, by examining the various factors that helped construct men's and women's identities -- wages, the conditions of work and welfare legislation, especially that relating to maternity benefit.

Initially, in the inter-war period, access to work was relatively easy, it being a period of formation
of a number of new mills. Women too benefitted by gaining easy access as we have discussed in the previous chapter. They too imbibed the work ethics and discipline of the mills and got used to the scheduling of their lives by the mill siren that signalled the time to go to work, the time for recess as also the conclusion of work hours for the day. The centrality of the reordering of time to the workers' life at the mill is brought out by the following joke, which was not cliched as it might seem today, when it originally appeared: The mill manager asks the clerk where he should put up a notice for the workers, and gets the reply, "On the clock." This constant monitoring of time by the workers was not a characteristic of pre-industrial work. The workplace was not only something wholly new as a structure but also constituted on entirely different cultural practices from those of the agrarian society. Many of them can only be described as unpleasant in the extreme. In Madura, for example, the women and men never dared eat food anywhere in their new workplace, where the English dorai could see them as it would mean trouble. It is said that if they were found eating inside the mill, sand was thrown on their faces by way of punishment. Consider-

1. See Chapter II, for details.

2. Anandavikatan, October 27, 1940, Madras.
ering the fact that most mills did not provide dining rooms till quite sometime later, it is conceivable how much oppression they experienced.

Many a time, the workers faced such harsh treatment from one among themselves -- the maistri. The maistri abused them, shouted at them and fined them for the smallest of mistakes. The workers were made to adhere to various norms. A young Madura ring-frame male worker was taunted by the maistri for wearing a clean white veshti, smearing sandalwood paste on his forehead and wearing a flower behind his ear. The worker was actually transgressing dress codes, as workers were generally expected to be clothed in the cheaper, coloured lungis and not the clean white veshti reserved for those of the higher social order. The fact of there being different dress codes for different social strata is noted by Janet Kelman, who writes, "a particularly bright saree-clad woman attracted my attention, who turned out to be a relation of the

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3. P. Muthiah Naidu Private Diaries, Harveyppati Colony, Madurai. In the Madura mill, that day in the afternoon, all men came for work in white veshti, with sandalwood smeared on their forehead and flowers behind their ears, to protest against the insulting behaviour of the maistri, proving their point.
That the factory and its environs were restrictive in many ways may be seen in a folk song from Ambasamudram where workers described the ethos of the mill as follows: "In the distance the dorai is coming, keep three feet off or he will beat you for three days..."

For the woman, the workplace was constraining more than in just physical terms. The constant fear of advances from the all powerful maistri' is an oft-repeated complaint from women workers to every authority for possible redressal. The Royal Commission on Labour recorded this as a universal phenomenon all over India. In Madurai and Coimbatore, there were many attempts to seek redressal from the management through the maistri's suspension and the appointment of a female maistri in departments where women worked in large numbers.

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5. A. Sivasubramaniam, "Folk songs of Textile Mill Workers." in A.I.T.U.C. Souvenir, Madras, 1985. The author asks if workers could be beaten up for walking in front of the Dorai, what would happen if they committed a mistake.
There are many popular stories of the difficulties faced by women workers. A story by C. Rajagopalachari narrates the plight of a woman worker in Madras saddled with an unwanted pregnancy, castigated by her community and thrown out on the street. Notable among the genre of stories describing the miserable plight of the workers' lives are the short stories of Pudumaipithan, in which he particularly discusses the woman worker's world where 'morality' and 'decency' were at times sacrificed at the altar of the need to survive. For example, one of his characters gives in to an amorous admirer, in order to light the hearth at home for at least making gruel for her unwell, drunken husband. Implicit in both these stories is a perception, grounded in the middle class notions of morality of their authors, of the ultimate point of deprivation of womanhood being infringement of her sexuality, constituting immorality. Highlighted, however, is also the extremely poor material life of the working class.

**Factory Legislation**:

"The general effect of legislation was not to exclude women, but to define terms for their participation in waged factory labour, balancing off
their domestic work against wage work -- a balancing act performed at some cost to the women involved”. The development of capitalism also brought in its wake a series of reforms relating to working hours, conditions of machines permitted to be used and facilities for the workers. The legislation enacted in India, in the form of the Indian Factory Act, 1881, and its subsequent modifications, was influenced by pressure from the industrial lobbies of Lancashire and Dundee. They feared that the Indian entrepreneur would achieve greater competitiveness through overwork and underpayment of their workers. In 1896, the Dundee Chamber of Commerce sent a representation to the Government of India, seeking to restrict the employment of women at night in India. This measure was considered unnecessary for India by the colonial government.

In India, the Factory Act of 1881 marked the beginning of the colonial government’s endeavours to influence labour regulations and industrial management by British laws and practices. This Act defined what

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7. Department of Commerce and Industry. F. no.35, Factories[A], April,1-4, 1906, N.A.I.

8. Legislative Department Proceedings, A, No. 118-338, April 1881, N.A.I.
a factory unit was, as also the measures that were binding on an industrialist to operate a factory. It endeavoured to prevent the overworking of children but little effort was made in the interest of women workers. The Indian Medical Department advised the inclusion of women also as a section to be protected from overwork, night work and long hours. Acts that incorporated the recommendation followed in due course. The fact that India was a colony of the then most industrialised nation had great consequence not only for the course of Industrialisation that took place but also the pattern of legislation.

We must bear in mind that such legislation operated, initially at least, only at the plane of paperwork. Rarely were they operational in the various mills. The impetus was in the number of Factory Acts and Commissions that were constituted. Initially, the Commissioner of Labour played the role of a conciliation officer in disputes. Later a whole department was created to look after working of the Factory Act, looking into the disputes between managements and labour for which a Trade Union Act of

9. Ibid. F. Engels in Conditions of working class in England discusses problems for women emerging from their working in the modern factories.
1926 as also the Trade Disputes Act of 1929 were formulated. There is a whole corpus of material on the regulation of even the unions in individual units by the government through rigorous enforcement of Trade Unions Act which required the unions to file annual returns to gain official sanction. The degree of importance given to labour matters, post-World War I, may be gauged from this vigorous interventionist strategy of the government which in a very formal sense did attempt to introduce contractual capitalist relations at the workplace.

By the Indian Factory Act of 1891, the limit for working hours for women was eleven and that for children, seven hours per day. There was an attempt by legislation to restrict hours of work in Madras Presidency too following the Act. Thus introduced was the one-and-a-half hours rest time for women. In an enquiry conducted in Madras as to whether the 1891 Act was in force, it was found that generally women and

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10. Dev. Dept. (conf.) G.O.4085, 30-10-1946. A bill on labour dispute was introduced whose architect was Gulzarilal Nanda. It was sent to V.V. Giri, Minister of Labour for his comments. It was introduced as a measure to curb political unrest created by Communists all over India. Recognition of a union in an industry was to be given only if it had at least 15 per cent membership. However the bill was dropped.

children were irregular and given to taking breaks. But still their working conditions were found to be suitable for their health. It was observed that women in factories were by no means overworked and that the absence of complaints was evidence of contentment. It is of interest to note that the absence of protest is not viewed as the result of the inability to protest, for fear of losing work or the workers' general lack of empowerment.

In 1908, the Factory Commission further advocated measures to curb the "overexploitation" of women in Industries. It was suggested that the working hours for women be identical with those for young persons. The time limits for employing them was between 5 a.m. and 7 p.m. This was earlier 8 p.m. for women. The logic behind bringing forward the conclusion of the women's workday by one hour, as cited in the report of the Indian Factories Commission, was that if women left slightly earlier than men, they would be able to discharge their domestic duties. However, women em-

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12. Ibid.
ployed in the ginning mills were excluded from the bar on night work. The argument was that most of the women who worked in the ginning mills were middle aged and, therefore, did not have the "moral problems as younger women" and that most workers in these mills were women and therefore it would not be difficult to get them to work. Here again, operative was the concept that the morality of younger women engaged in night work was constantly at risk and that, therefore, they needed to be controlled, unlike the older women. The Commission however opposed the employment of women as cotton openers as they felt that women's attire was not suitable, as it caught the cotton fluff, making the women workers more vulnerable to accidents. And thus feminine attire was deemed to be the cause of accidents, rather than the inadequate safety measures at the place of work. These recommendations were used in the enactment of the Factory Act of 1911 which reduced working hours to eleven and introduced rest-time of an hour-and-a-half for women.

The Factory Commission at Madras in 1908 found tacit acceptance from C.B. Simpson and Binny and Co. for the policy of clubbing together young persons and

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15. Ibid., pp.64, 41.
16. Ibid., p.64.
women in the same class. The ideological notion that this promoted was that of the inferior productive capacity of women as compared to that of men -- providing a firm basis for differential wages. Though the provision of rest-time was made mandatory by the early mid-day recess for women, it was rarely practised, except during factory Inspections.

The next Act of consequence for women workers was the Act of 1922, whereby the government excluded women and children from all heavy work. Act II of 1922 also made provision for complete prohibition of night work for women workers. It recommended fewer working hours, too, for them, as also the provision of more creches and disbursal of maternity allowance. This had severe repercussion in heavy Industries immediately in the form of replacement of female by male labour, but had different consequences in the cotton textile Industry. In Madurai, problems with employing women arising from the Act came to light during the 1937 strike, when the issue of ban of night work for women was cited by the management as the principal factor forcing unem-

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17. Ibid., p.304.

18. The Hindu, June 28, 1918, Hindu Library Madras. This was the case at the Choolai mills in Madras.

ployment on some 613 odd women in the ring-frame department. (This was a period when the cotton mill production was increased owing to greater market demand; and night work was introduced to meet the higher demand for yarn).

That women workers had to be protected to ensure a supply of healthy workers in the future was very much part of the 'common sense'. It is in the thirties that we hear of a recommendation by the Chief Inspector of Factories to reduce working hours to 8 per day for women. This was made in the light of the incidence of high infant mortality, and therefore as a measure to help bring it down. By this time, in Madras, the B&C mills had gradually been eliminating women from the workforce, while in Choolai they were still employed for lower wages than men. However in Madurai and Coimbatore, they continued to find work in the new mills which were being set up.

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22. Ibid.
The legislation intended to better the women workers' lot, thus, limited women's access to work. Exclusion from underground work, night work, hazardous heavy work in some departments was built upon social valuation of womanhood as representing frailty, weakness, deserving of protection. It was the sexuality of women as perceived by the State that called for the prohibition of employment of women at night. Certainly, involved very deeply is the notion of domesticity of women but more involved in such restrictions are social mores of "protection of women" from the "dirty streets" at night. But reality was portrayed differently. A story about Ponnagaram (a mill cheri) by Pudumaippithan narrates the tragedy of life for the poor. 'Ammalu, a mill cooly short of money to provide for her drunken, ailing husband "disappeared into the darkness" with someone to earn three quarters of a Rupee to make gruel'. This is a very moving story presenting the appallingly distressful existence of the working class where too the woman is deprived of even her dignity in order to survive.

26. Ibid. The story was written sometime in the thirties of this century.
Such legislation was premised on middle class ideology of gender segregation. The official prescription to resolve women's problems was to create a separate space for women -- in the form of canteen, rest room, latrine.... (In the Radhakrishna Mills in Coimbatore, it was remarked that women were shy to use a common canteen and therefore only few made use of the facility. Therefore the way out was seen in dividing the canteen into two spheres -- male and female. Undoubtedly in the prevalent social values, this was more acceptable but they came from the involvement of the middle class in factory reforms. Their perception is operative in the official level discussions to increase maternity benefit leave from four to six weeks. A factory administration document reads as follows -- nine weeks is a very long time for a class of women accustomed to work during child bearing. Also attested here was the doubt of the Inspector if it was in the best financial interest of women workers. Note may also be taken of a debate between the chief inspector of factories and the commissioner of labour on the eligibility of an unwed woman worker for mater-

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27. Public Works Dept. (Labour), G.O.2092, 22-7-1944, T.N.A.

nity benefit, as the relevant statutes offered no clarity on the matter. To the credit of the officials concerned, it must be noted that the benefit of doubt went in favour of the woman.

Labour Welfare:

"In the factory, discipline and smooth flow of production is (sic) only possible if there exists at least a minimum degree of constitutionality, a minimum degree of consent on the part of the workers". Such an idea was central to the coming into being of various facilities for the workers provided by the state or the entrepreneurs.

The mill managements, especially the Binny's at Madras and the Harveys at Madurai made a number of houses for their workers, helped settle their workers better at the workplace with canteens, latrines, drinking water facility etc. But, these were those excep-

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29. Ibid.


31. Dev. Dept. G.O.1232, 28-8-1923. There was suggestion that 'For Women only' for latrines be written in the vernacular. Also Dev. Dept. G.O.1564, 4-7-1940, T.N.A.
tionally few mills where such endeavours came about. But, with the development of worker's unions, Nationalists taking up issues of labour as also local level leaders' pressures, things took a different turn by the thirties. In 1937 there were suggestions coming from the District and sessions Judge Madura, that the best way to get the workers to accept night shift work was by introducing some extra allowance. He suggested that "It will of course be ideal if a profit sharing system is introduced by providing for the payment of a small share or bonus out of profits in times like Deepawali or New Year as this would take away the feeling that labourers have no share in what is produced by the sweat of their brow."

It was thus inbuilt into the system of resolving, labour problems to placate labour to gain consent. In this context, it would be in place to bring into discussion the evolving culture of Diwali bonus, Pongal clothes, holiday for Karthikai, etc. Various facilities at the workplace to the workers also evolved in a

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32. Dev. Dept. G.O.1588, 22-6-1939, describes facilities in the various mills, T.N.A.
33. Dev. Dept. G.O.2735, 7-12-1937, T.N.A.
34. Ibid.
35. P.W.D. G.O. 1041, 6-4-1942. T.N.A.
policy framework that preferred consensus to that of repression to win over the workers. Hence evolved the system of maternity benefit, creches, tiffin room, tea for night workers and such other benefits for workers. Also important was the force through demand charters of the workers unions. The Madura mill housing co-operative at Tiruparankundram, 6 kilometres from the mill was set up with Rs.2 lakhs as gifted by the management. The scheme helped S.R. Varadarajulu Naidu enlist support for his union. Soon this encouraged such demands in other mills with Rajah mills at Madurai as also some of the mills at Coimbatore providing houses.

Reformist attitudes towards ameliorating the miserable life and working conditions of labour laid special stress on women workers' issues. Conveniences such as rest rooms for women, creches with ayahs to care for the female workers' children and, most importantly, maternity benefit which was made mandatory from 1935, resulted from such concern. Accordingly, the Coimbatore Labour Union leader C. Basudev requested the Venkatramayya Enquiry Committee to introduce work cards, which would provide workers with documentary

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36. Dev. Dept.1564, 4-7-1940, T.N.A.

37. Indian Factory Administration Report, 1942, 1946,T.N.A.
proof of their regularity of service. This, he felt, would be of particular assistance to women workers in claiming maternity benefit. An instance of the accommodation of the cultural practice of taboo on physical contact during menstruation (owing to presumed impurity) was the demand raised by C. Basudev that the women workers be given three days' leave in the month if they so wished. Thus, gradually the workplace was also constituting elements of a feminine culture to accommodate the reproductive role of womanhood as also social values of the time.

In the course of accommodating women's role in industry emerged recommendations from even a Commissioner of Labour that working hours for women in all factories be reduced from nine to eight so as to give them ample time to attend to domestic responsibilities and care for their children. It was a practice in many mills especially the Madura mills to let women out five minutes earlier than men. This was probably done to prevent any harassment of women by male work-

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38. Dev. Dept. G.O. 2711, 6-12-1937, T.N.A.
39. Ibid.
40. Bulletin of Indian Industries and Labour, No.10, 1921, Madras.
41. PW&L Dept. (Conf.) G.O. 703, 27-2-1930, T.N.A.
ers. Complaints of lack of security for women to move on their own after sunset lent strength to the argument that women be kept only for work in the day time. But it as such promoted segregation and the continuation of the traditional practices of seclusion for women. Thus it was in many ways a reinforcement of women's control by social practices and not as much a measure signifying progress for women, as older notions of 'proper time' for women continued to be upheld.

The Madras Labour Union very early on involved women workers through special meetings and also mooted a proposal to start a baby welfare home and tried to secure maternity benefit for all deserving women. Later, the Indian Factory Administration through various amendments of the IFA, especially in the forties, made it mandatory to provide creches, canteens and better health facilities. In Coimbatore, the Southern Indian Mill Owners' Association agreed to set up creches and employ a lady doctor for each group

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42. Law General Dept., G.O.2012, 17-6-1926, T.N.A.

43. PW&L Dept., 2953, 19-8-1942, T.N.A. There is a suggestion made by the factory administration for appointing an Assistant Inspectress of Factories. Also PWD 2650, 12-10-1945.

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of mills only as late as 1943. But even then, they either could not find women doctors or used it as an excuse to cover up not honouring the agreement. Later, the post-war Reconstruction (Co-ordination) departments sub-committee for women suggested that "more persuasion be put on employers to provide canteens for supply of food to women workers." In 1941, an Assistant Inspectress with medical qualifications to look after the interests of women had been appointed. She was responsible for Coimbatore, Madurai, Tinnelvely, South Kanara and the Malabar region. Sure enough, she was successful in making contact with the women labourers and instructing them on their rights. This provided the impetus to the demand to appoint lady welfare officers. It was argued that "experience showed that women were reluctant to seek assistance from male labour officers." Rooted in such perspective was also an ideology that segregated male/female space. The exclusivity of women's problems also however allowed to come into being women's representatives which henceforth opened

44. PW&L Dept., G.O. 998, 9-6-1943, T.N.A.
45. Ibid.
47. PWD, Dept. G.O. 2650, 12-10-1945, T.N.A. Also PW&L 1132, 23-4-1945, T.N.A.
up a whole range of avenues for middle class women as Assistant Inspectress, lady doctor etc. in the various mills.

And these proved to be a silver lining to providing better living conditions for women. The SIMOA most reluctantly brought changes. However, as late as 1950, of the fifteen mills employing more than three hundred women workers, only six had women welfare officers, three nurses or compounders to care for women. And even if the creche came into being, women workers could not easily go to take care of their children’s needs. In fact, the dispute between Chandrakanthi and R.K. Mills management was the worker’s complaint that she was not even allowed to look after the feed demands of her child and was accused of poor outturn.

Gender bias even in disbursal of welfare bonus occurred at times. In Coimbatore, during the war years, workers were distributed D.A. in kind. Then there was a dispute on how much D.A. should be given to

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women reelers who were doing piece rate work. Therefore output of some 20 hanks per day was made mandatory to receive full D.A. Also on the issue of bonus it was stated that at the Meenakshi Mills, Madurai in 1943 when everyone who had taken less than 43 days leave were given bonus only seven out of the three hundred odd women engaged as reelers were found to be eligible. Hence, even in such welfare matters, women and men who were constantly engaged as badlis who did not figure in the regular register were deprived of benefits.

Thus, through the piece-meal welfare measures in various mills, women workers did get some relief. For example, the appointment of a female maistri or welfare officer did help resolve some of their problems. Instances of maistri's sexual advances, need for leave during the menstrual period, and facilities for nursing infants could best be understood by these women. This is not to suggest an "essentialist" argument of femininity. Rather, it is to suggest the social pressures where the women workers could best relate to a woman representative in the cultural context of a deeply

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51. Ibid.
52. Janasakhti, 23-8-1944, Karl Marx Library, Madras.
conservative society. Most importantly, women could not bear to think of discussing issues such as menstruation with a male stranger as sexuality was much suppressed, mystified and controlled (for women all the more so). And hence a female-intermediary officer did play a significant role in better representation of women’s interest through legislation, however symbolic or unrepresentative a contribution that might be.

At one level, labour welfare was crucial to the survival of these multitudes of underpaid workers. But, yet on another plane, it did renegotiate practices based in the earlier value system into the new ethos of the factory. And in that, the woman was most identified with her role as a mother of the future generation and in her centrality to the institution of the family, which was, in every measure, sought to be protected. Though the factory system integrated women into the productive sphere, it created certain exclusively feminine niches and upheld practices which fed on separate identities of gender. At the same time, through ameliorative measures and demands for more of the kind, politics, at times centred on the woman, thus creating space for her visibility.
In India, too, sometime after in Europe, during the third decade of the twentieth century, efforts were made to make the payment of maternity benefit mandatory through legislation in the legislative councils. It was championed by social reformers like N.M. Joshi, V.J. Patel and V. Ramaswamy Mudaliar in Madras.

The Madras Social Service League, in 1922, wrote to the Commissioner of Labour, Madras that "as infantile mortality among the children of working class is to a great extent due to women being employed almost up to the time of confinement", the league hoped the government would do best to save children from premature death. The AITUC bulletin of February-March 1925 also urged the government to "bring legislation prohibiting employment of women in factories, mines and other industries, at least six weeks before and six weeks after childbirth and providing adequate maternity allowance during the period."

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54. Home Dept. [Public], F.no 31/15/1931, N.A.I. It was the opinion of the Labour Administration Department too. The need to bring about such changes is upheld by Modern Review, V.27, Jan.-June 1920, Calcutta, p.211, N.M.M.L.
It has been observed that it was a custom for women to abstain from work after confinement. There was, however, difference in the period of confinement as practised in different parts of India. "The length of time that women abstained from work after confinement varies considerably in different parts of India. Religious and social customs prescribe certain periods varying from ten to forty days. However, it was noted that women belonging to lower castes could ill-afford such customs owing to economic circumstances. According to G.M. Broughton, an interval of two to three weeks of a month elapses before the women come back to work in Madras, while in Bombay, women leave a fortnight before and return a fortnight after child birth. The women interviewed by the RCL in the various cotton mills of Madras Presidency stated that they would stay away for about 6 months in the course of child birth.

In Madras, maternity benefit was first introduced

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in the twenties in the Basel mission. The scheme was first proposed in the Draft Convention passed at the first International Labour Conference at Washington in 1919. The RCL in India expressed the need to implement such a benefit scheme on the ground of social justice and humanitarianism -- "the general standard of living being so low it was perceived that greater value be attached to the health of the woman worker and her child in a vulnerable period of life." Legislation was seen as necessary especially for women workers. This proved to be instrumental in V. Ramaswamy Mudalair's introduction of the maternity benefit bill in the Madras Legislative Council in 1932. The government soon enough legislated upon it and presented the Madras Maternity Bill of 1934.

Initially, the government entrusted the task of providing maternity benefit to the various industrial managements. A whole Inspectorate of Factories was engaged to keep a check on them. Though the maternity benefit bill came into being as early as 1934 in

58. Dept. of Industry and Labour, L 1150(C), 1924, N.A.I.

59. Dept. of Industry and Labour, L 1806(1), 1932, N.A.I.

60. The details of the disbursement of maternity benefit are given in Tables V, VI, VII.
Madras, there were a large number of mill managements evading payment of the allowance. There was not much co-operation from the managements of the mills. In fact, initially one of the more conservative mill owners had stated clearly to the Chief Inspector of Factories that, if such a legislation was introduced, women would be dispensed with in his mill. The South Indian Chambers' memorandum could not see any reason as to why "such compulsory internment" was asked for and wanted the penalty on employers not to exceed Rs.100 in place of the proposed Rs.500. Besides, they felt that the entire burden was on the employer. In Coimbatore, a union memorandum stated that the Rajalakshmi mill management coerced women workers at the point of entry to mill work to undertake that they would not bear children for five years. A tall order indeed.

61. P.W.Dept. (L), G.O.2493 L, 16-11-1934, T.N.A. In Madras Presidency, Section 4 (1) of the Act stated: "No employer shall knowingly employ a woman in any factory during the four weeks immediately following the day of her delivery." Section 5(1) specified: "The maximum period for which a woman shall be entitled to M.B. is seven weeks, three weeks before and four weeks after (delivery)".


63. The Hindu, "Maternity Bill, South India Chambers' Memorandum", 26-6-1934, Madras, 1934.

64. Development Dept. G.O.2054, 23-8-1938, T.N.A.
considering that most of the women employed were young and married. That such attempts were made to control reproduction at a time when maternity benefit was rarely disbursed is a significant indicator of the lengths to which managements could go, to avoid payment of benefit. In Madras, the Choolai mill management dismissed two workers in an advanced stage of pregnancy, but had to reinstate them on account of pressure from the Madras Labour Union. Despite being given legal permission to absent themselves for child birth, women on returning to work, sometimes had to pay Rs.5-10 as bribe to get back their job.

There were plenty of problems with the bill. The labour union in Madras demanded that the allowance be higher, and be made before confinement, as the woman would need the money when out of work. More importantly how many women actually received the benefit may be gauged from Tables V, VI and VII below.

"Of twentyfour mills employing 6,000 women only 11 employing 4,000 paid any benefit in 1936 and 16 mills

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65. The Hindu, "Madras Labour Union", 21-4-1926, Madras.
67. PW&L (MS), G.O.-121 L, 15-1-1930, T.N.A.
### Table: District-wise Disbursement of Maternity Benefit

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<td>(3) + (4)</td>
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### A. Coimbatore

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<th>Paid</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>(2)/(1)</th>
<th>(3)/(4)</th>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>949</td>
<td>778</td>
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<td>1340</td>
<td>1157</td>
<td>7210</td>
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<td>12.1</td>
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<td>934</td>
<td>654</td>
<td>3877</td>
<td>8-8</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>12608</td>
<td>1055</td>
<td>898</td>
<td>5906</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>85.2</td>
</tr>
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<td>1951</td>
<td>12019</td>
<td>1215</td>
<td>1086</td>
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<td>12-6</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>89.4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### B. Madurai

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Claimants</th>
<th>Paid</th>
<th>Paid</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>(2)/(1)</th>
<th>(3)/(4)</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>3948</td>
<td>506</td>
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<td>9220</td>
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<td>9.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>3866</td>
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<td>221</td>
<td>5403</td>
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<tr>
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<td>8338</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>5662</td>
<td>810</td>
<td>686</td>
<td>2929</td>
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<td>12.3</td>
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<td>1947</td>
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<td>750</td>
<td>682</td>
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<tr>
<td>1948</td>
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<td>709</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>16156</td>
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<td>12.8</td>
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<td>2164</td>
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<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>5866</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>14910</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>89.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>5866</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>14910</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>89.8</td>
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Source: IFA Reports for the respective years, T.N.A., TNLCL, Madras.
## Maternity Benefit of Disbursed for Madras State, 1935-1951

### Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Claim-Workers in MB</th>
<th>No. of Paid</th>
<th>Paid</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total Amount</th>
<th>Disputes (2)/(1)</th>
<th>(3)+(4)</th>
<th>Average %</th>
<th>% Amount of Benefit</th>
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<td>28184</td>
<td>489</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7143-12</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<td>1321</td>
<td>921</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>21253-15-6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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<td>38070</td>
<td>1715</td>
<td>1210</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>70.6</td>
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<td>1939</td>
<td>39776</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>1408</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>3.6</td>
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<td>2040</td>
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<td>3.9</td>
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<td>1942</td>
<td>45622</td>
<td>2210</td>
<td>1857</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>4.1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2294</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>49661-2-0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>46301</td>
<td>2192</td>
<td>1858</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>50059</td>
<td>2888</td>
<td>2428</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>84211-6-6</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>4.9</td>
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<td>3534</td>
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<td>19</td>
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<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>91.3</td>
<td>43-</td>
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<td>4167</td>
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<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>38-9</td>
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**Source:** IFA Reports for the respective years, T.W.A. and Commissioner of Labour Madras.
### Table VI

Maternity Benefit Payments - Cotton spinning, weaving and other industries of Madras Presidency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No of Fact.</th>
<th>Av No Wom</th>
<th>No Clm</th>
<th>No pd.</th>
<th>Others pd.</th>
<th>Totl Amt pd.</th>
<th>IFA Cases</th>
<th>Clm prop of 2.4% women pd. % paid clms.</th>
<th>Av a</th>
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<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>17420</td>
<td>2023</td>
<td>1693</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>41156-2</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>1943</td>
<td>51</td>
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<td>1625</td>
<td>1433</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35008-10</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>53</td>
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<td>1652</td>
<td>1402</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>41979-12</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946*</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>18618</td>
<td>2369</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>79936-13</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>1947</td>
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<td>2416</td>
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<td>73</td>
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<td>99447-12-6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14.9</td>
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</table>

* We have only taken the data for cotton spinning, weaving, ginning and dyeing industries.

* The massive increase in the number of factories is from the repeal of the old IFA 1934 and the coming into operation of IFA 1948 whereby non-power factories employing more than 10 persons also came under the purview of the Act.

Source: The Indian Factory administration Annual Reports for the respective years, T.N.A
"Of twentyfour mills employing 6,000 women only 11 employing 4,000 paid any benefit in 1936 and 16 mills employing about 4,600 women paid any benefit in 1937. Therefore 13 mills with 2,000 women in 1936 and 9 mills with more than 1,500 women paid no benefit. Only 2 per cent of the female workers benefited in 1936 and 3 per cent in 1937."

An enquiry into the immediate cause of a strike at Mahalakshmi mill Madura, in 1938, found one of the grievances to have been the denial of maternity benefit. The manager apparently removed from service women who had claimed maternity benefit or were likely to do so. On enquiry by the District Magistrate, it was found that in 1937-38, twentyseven women who had otherwise been regular absented themselves from work for periods ranging from four to six months. On inspection of the factory records, it was found that from 1935 onwards, only about six women had been paid maternity benefit in a mill which employed more than 175 women. Therefore, to the D.M., there was good reason to believe that the management was evading and

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68. Coimbatore Textile Enquiry- Venkataramayya Committee Report, Madras, 1938, p.159. T.N.L.C.L.

69. Dev. Dept. 3044, 18-12-1938, T.N.A.

70. Ibid.
systematically dispensing with services of women who claimed or were likely to claim maternity allowance.

In a letter from the Commissioner of Labour, Mr. Rutherford, to the Secretary to Government, Henderson, it was stated that in the textile mills of the Presidency, the maternity benefit claim worked out to be 35 out of 1,000 women and of them half were ineligible for having been absent for more than 14 days in the nine month period. Thus, consistently, the issue of maternity benefit non-payment, or evasion was raised by unions of the workers in their demand charters. In Madurai, S.R.V. Naidu convened a separate meeting of the women workers to communicate to them the details of the amendment to the Act. He specifically raised the amendment as being important in helping women regain employment after child birth and hoped for legislation to give widows benefit as also unemployment insurance, for women at least, to begin with.

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71. Dev. Dept. G.O. 3044, 18-12-1938, T.N.A. Earlier, when the Act was initially introduced, some conservative mill owners had hinted that the services of pregnant women would be dispensed with in their respective mills.


73. The Hindu, Madura Labour Union Meeting for women, 31-5-1939, Madras.
The memorandum of grievances of the Coimbatore District textile workers, Singanallur, pointed out that four weeks leave for women was insufficient. Therefore, it was suggested that provision be made for three months' leave without pay. They also demanded that the policy of stopping such women workers when they are unwell to return to duty after delivery be stopped. This was corroborated by the conciliation officer, Coimbatore, who too, attested to the need for more time to be given to women as leave before they came back to work after childbirth. And this was deemed necessary owing to the absence of creches and adequate welfare schemes. Hence it was demanded that a clause be introduced that "women workers be given the right to resume their old places when they turn up at any time within four months after the date of confinement." At this point, women were engaged in supplying for war orders and soon also owing to labour shortage during the plague, they were even employed as spinners in some mills, and were therefore an important constituent of

74. PWD(L), G.O. 4134, 12-11-1942, T.N.A.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
The factory inspections during the period clearly pointed to problems of implementation. In 1939, the factory inspectorate had received seventeen complaints on the evasion of maternity benefit. Of these, fourteen were in respect to non-payment of benefits claimed by women workers and three for refusing to reinstate women workers after the expiry of maternity benefit granted to them. On enquiry, it was found that the complainant for non-payment were not legally entitled to the benefit, and the complaints against not being reinstated were because the women had overstayed the period of one month allowed under the Act without leave. This is a clear instance of how the loopholes in the Act were availed of, liberally by the management by resorting to technical interpretations of questions of continuity of service, legal eligibility, absenteeism, etc. Thus, even minimum basic welfare measures were tampered with, to the advantage of the

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78. Ibid.
79. Dev. Dept., G.O.1564, 4-7-1940, T.N.A.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid. In the Report of the working of the Factory Act, for 1946 thirteen prosecutions were made - 6 for failure to maintain registers under the Act and seven for not having exhibited the notices, fines were imposed therefore.
There were many limitations in the Act itself. Section V.(1) of the Act demanded that women work at least nine months in the factory preceding pregnancy. Therefore, even if a woman was absent for a single day, she lost the right to benefit from the scheme. The lacuna was well manipulated to suit the entrepreneurs.

As observed by the Coimbatore Enquiry Committee, it was the natural order of things that women take a day or so off while pregnant. A number of complaints were registered by women to the committee in Coimbatore. Though the women denied taking leave, the management constantly defended non-payment as being from absenteeism. Therefore recommendations of a personal card system was suggested for in 1938. But then, we have innumerable complaints later from the workers, of how various kinds of tampering with the record of individual workers were made by the maistri -- of output of work, of being late for work, etc. And the

82 Venkatramayya Committee Report, Madras, 1938, p.161. opcit.
83 Janasakhti, 21.11.1945, Madras. The union complained that entries made were not right, women were given Rs.9 per month as a doffer but were made to work as spinner, whereas spinning was a better paid department.
number paid maternity benefit in the 1940s were by no means larger than in the thirties. In fact, as late as 1950, non-payment of maternity benefit by mill owners was an issue. According to the notes of a Communist Party document seized by the police, "A large number of women are denied maternity benefit totally. And almost all women, the moment they take leave under the Act are dismissed. They are refused service after delivery."

In fact, on this score the Madura mill management was justly proud that it paid three times as much maternity benefit as paid in any other mill as benefit and that too not at the stipulated eight annas, but 12 annas. And this had been observed by the Strathie Committee enquiring into the problems of the Madura mill. Even as early as 1938, though they employed only one-sixth the total women workers in the Presidency, they paid more than 50% of the total maternity benefit disbursed.

Some mills, for example the B&C mills, gradually excluded women from their workforce. So also did the Choolai mill management. But we find from our fig-

86. Dev. Dept., G.O.1384, 30.5.1938, T.N.A.
ures on the composition of workforce that women continued to find place for themselves in a number of new mills that were coming up in Coimbatore, Madurai, Rajapalaiyam, etc. during the period. And it was not as if the maternity benefit bill led to their exclusion uniformly. This was so as the number of benefits disbursed continued to be insignificant as little as 2405 claimed M.B. in 1949 which was 15 per cent of the 16,124 women employed, on an average, in cotton spinning and weaving mills.

Wages

The issue of wages is a much disputed arena for the simple reason that the grounds for payment were by no means rational. To the worker, there was always the scope to demand more, while for the entrepreneur there was always the urge to curb it to the minimum. As regards the payment of wages to women, the rationale operative was the secondary nature of women's work. Well grounded in the patriarchal family structure was the enunciation of the male wage as primary and later the concept of the living/fair wage as accommodating the upkeep of the male labourer's entire family. This,

we shall see, was the determining factor for the low wages of women. A male doffer earned more than did a woman doffer. That cannot be explained as being the result of lower skill, as we shall discuss later in this section. In this, regional variation is also marked as in Madras the wages were higher than in Madurai, which, however, rated better than Coimbatore in terms of the wages paid.

One of the factors which encouraged the Coimbatore mill owners to set up mills in the district was the adequately large supply of cheap labour available in this area. Especially so was the case in the years immediately post-depression, when not only were rural wages at their lowest level, but sizeable numbers of handloom weavers, pushed out from their traditional crafts by increasing competition from Japanese goods, were available as well.

In this section we take up the issue of how wages were determined on the basis of gender and how such a construction resulted in a lower valuation of women's productive capacity. And through an extremely schemat-
ic wage table in the appendix we seek to highlight the empirical details of such ideological differentiation.
In Madras Presidency, after an initial increase in wages towards the end of world war I, a number of mills introduced wage cuts after 1926. Following it, came the recession in the cotton textile industry in the face of lack of protectionist policies and stiff competition from the Japanese yarn and textiles in the market. In one mill, the cut came in 1926, in another seven mills between 1926 and 1933. There was a decrease of wages by twelve and a half percent in half the mills which responded to the government questionnaire on wages in cotton mills. Thus, between September 1933 and 1934 there were massive cuts in the wages of workers which continued into the later years too.

During the ministry period (1937-39), there were great expectations for relief measures. Though the Venkataramayya Award did come about in 1938 suggesting certain minimum wages for various categories of work, there was no follow up in the individual mills in

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89. Public Works and Labour (MS), G.O.121L, 15-1-30, T.N.A.

90. Dev. Dept. (Conf.), G.O. 1242(MS), 10-5-1939, T.N.A.

91. Dept. of Industry and Labour, L-1823(7), 1934, N.A.I.
implementing the Award. Against this, a number of protests as also strikes were staged by unions. Even though the SIMOA was at this time reaping profits, endorsing the need for greater support from government, such as better wagon facilities for transportation, workers were still denied any standardised wages. In fact, in some mills in Coimbatore there were attempts to cut down wages of the doffing boys and women waste-pickers at this time. It was in this background of World War II, of increasing cost of living, that a major agitation was launched by N.G. Ramaswamy in Coimbatore asking for a 25% increase in workers wages.

Women were mainly engaged for the reeling and winding work. Some also found place in the ring-frame department. Though their work is cited as having been less heavy, an MLU memorandum cited as to how women did the extremely heavy work of carrying big bales of cotton in the mixing department at Choolai mill. In the Madura textile workers union complaint register is lodged the moving detail of how even pregnant women

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92. Soon there was disillusionment among sections of labour as V.V. Giri, Minister of Labour, let the Lakshmi Mill strike drag on for twenty days. See P. Jeevanandam, Tamarai, Jeeva Shirrappu Malar, Supplement, March 1963, Madras.


94. P.W.Dept. (Ms), G.O.1041, 6-4-1942, T.N.A.

95. P.W&L G.O.1192 (L), 11-4-1930, T.N.A.
reelers were forced to bring their quota of cops from a
tank near the reeling department. This was not only an
arduous but also a dangerous task as they had to jump
down to fetch their necessary cops. A demand of the
Madura textile workers union was to eliminate the
practice of women being asked to mind 9 to 12 spindles
in one winding department and that there be a unit of 6
spindles. This is indicative of the complexity of
work for women winders in the cotton mills. As their
wages were paid on piece rate, it meant that during
lean periods, when there was sharing of work, e.g. if
three women worked on a reel, it also meant lower
wages, a dwindling of their income.

Very early on, in 1929 the Legislative Council
advocated the fixing of a minimum wage for which an
enquiry committee was set up. It concluded that
since standardization was itself a difficult task, the
fixing of a minimum wage was even more difficult if not

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G.O. 448, 21-2-1938, T.N.A. Also mentioned is an
attempt by the management, during the Vysia Mill strike
in Coimbatore, to compel workers of 1/2 and 3/4 side
to do 3/4 and full side respectively, against which
they protested.

97. P.W.D., G.O. 1041, 6-4-1942. Also Dev. Dept. G.O.
448, 21-2-1938, T.N.A.

98. P.W&L Dept., G.O. 2806, 5-1-1929, T.N.A.
impossible. Such was the opinion of the Commissioner of Labour. But workers unions as for example the corporation workers in Madras, demanded the fixing of a minimum wage. The Coimbatore mill strike committee demanded fixing a minimum of Rs.25 for men, Rs.20 for women and Rs.15 for boys.

As early as 1917, in Madras G. Slater et. al. in a survey pointed out the inadequacy of wages for workers to eke out a living. In a discussion in which union leader B. Shiva Rao, the chief Inspector of factories and the Commissioner of Labour participated, the reason for trouble and strife among the working class was ascribed to lower wages. And, thus was perceived the need for greater welfare measures to bring change in conditions of work for labourers.

That, there was a move to demand a minimum wage is significant from two angles. First, it could help change the absolutely depressed wage structure whose depressed status owed not a little to the low wages

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99. Dept. of Industry and Labour L878, 1931, N.A.I.
100. Dev. Dept. G.O.2711, 6-12-1937, T.N.A.
102. P.W.L.Dept., G.O.1101, 3-4-1930, T.N.A.
paid to certain categories of labour in general and to women in particular. Secondly, the raising of such a demand articulated worker's perception of how such differences worked. And therefore the need to get a minimum lower limit fixed for all categories of work. Thereby in effect also attacking the possibility of substitution of male labour by other categories of labour available cheap.

Thus came into play the demand for equal wages. The professed basis for wage discrimination by the mill managements was women's irregularity, fewer hours of work and lower productivity. Hence the socially constructed dichotomy of gender perception of strong, able male and weak female was coopted into the wage structure to the detriment of the women.

Various unions did take up the issue of differential wages. The Coimbatore Strike Committee demanded in 1936 that "men and women workers be assigned equal

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104. The Hindu, Coimbatore Strike Committee Resolution, 3-1-1936, Hindu Library, Madras.

wages. In fact, in Madras Presidency too, as in Bombay, a very large section of women were reelers and winders. And there was a small faction in the ring frame department engaged as spinners or doffers. The unions targeted those doffers in their demand for equal wages. Though such demands were articulated in conferences and union discussions as also in the recommendation of the Award of 1938 and 1948 such difference persisted.

Differential wages premised on distinctions between male and female, and between urban and rural operated to the benefit of mill workers. In fact, as late as 1942, the argument of the Coimbatore rural mill owners for lower wages than in urban mills was that their workers were from the agricultural population - unskilled, raw, inefficient and therefore accrued

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106. The Hindu, 3-1- 1936, Madras, Hindu Library.
107. Dev. Dept., G.O.2711, 6-12-1937, T.N.A.
108. See Radha Kumar, op. cit. for relevant details of the Bombay textile industry.
109. Dev. Dept., G.O. 3189, 20-8-1946, T.N.A. We discuss this at the end of the section.
110. The Hindu, 18-4-1939, Madras, report on the textile workers' conference at Coimbatore.
greater loss to the mill owner. Besides, most women were engaged on piece-rate wages and, therefore, the payment for reeling created many problems. A demand of the Coimbatore mill workers' union was as follows, "In weighing yarn brought by the reeler no deduction more than 2 pounds be made for the gunny bag." The complaint made by the union stated that 10 lbs of yarn was deducted from the weight of the gunny bag which was more than the stipulated 2 lbs. What do we make of such a demand? It surely implies that the women perceived their work as being systematically undervalued.

In the Rajah Mill at Madurai, during the period when D.A. was given to workers to help them in times of increasing cost of living many women were not given the normally allocated D.A. The union demanded that reelers be given a uniform rate of D.A. and that it also be disbursed to workshop employees and women cotton pick-

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111. P.W.D. G.O.1041, 6-4-1942, T.N.A. The government press communiqué did not, however, accede to the demands of the rural mill owners saying that workers' wages were a sheer 26 per cent of cost of production excluding the cost of raw material.

The adjudication felt that 20 hanks per day be accepted as the criteria for eligibility to claim full D.A. It was also suggested that it would be facilitated if the distribution method of the quantity and quality of yarn was well supervised. Thus stringed on with D.A. was a minimum output demand, a regulating of assignment. And if workload was lower women lost out on D.A. Being a woman's preserve, a reeler's loss was mainly women worker's loss. Thus for women apart from an ascriptive low wage status in the Industry, earning losses resulted from factors such as underweighing, lower output and job sharing at points of crisis in the Industry.

The issue of wages remained unresolved right upto 1951 when a plan for a legislation on payment of wages was proposed. During an enquiry in 1937, it was found that in the Madura Mills, the average wage of a reeler per month was Rs 14-8-0. However, it was noted that women of average ability could earn Rs 15-6-0, and

114. Ibid.
115. Dev. Dept. G.O.3370, 28-8-50, Minimum Wage Legislation. Equal wage for equal work in Dev. Dept. G.O.-4701, 20-11-1950. During the conference of the labour ministers there was discussion on the question of equal wages to men and women. Also stated was that the minimum wages in Madras textile Industry was Rs.30 for men, 26 for women.
even a maximum of Rs 19-6-9. It was also noted that men earned less than did women in this department, because of lower output. In 1946 the Adjudication of the dispute at Rajah Mills, Madura, while discussing the issue of uniform rate of wages to be paid to male and female doffers, concluded that distinction was artificial. The Female doffers in fact were doing the more skilled work of spinning. Therefore to him it was justified to give the female doffers who do the skilled work of spinning the same rate as applicable to a female spinner, that is Rs.12-2-0/month, which corresponds well to the male doffer's wage of Rs.12-4-0 rather than the prevalent Rs.9. The Tribunal in 1946 enquired why there were differences in wages. An answer from management was that women were employed purely from philanthropic humanitarian reasons especially the women waste pickers who were deemed old age pensioners. But it was found that women were engaged in as strenuous work as men and therefore the Tribunal Award of 1946 recommended parity in wages for men and women.

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Thus the question of wages being equal was the jinx of the labour movement - one arena that clearly reflected the social conditioning and ideologically the inheritance from the patriarchal institutions in which it germinated. Even though the Coimbatore mill workers union argued that "there is little difference in the quantity or quality of work between men and women", they could not force such a settlement. Similarly enough, when it came to the question of taking up the issue of transfer of women from spinning to the reeling department, which was from a higher to a lower emoluments department, there was no objection in principle except that women be paid wages as per their area of work. That, women were deemed secondary wage earning members inhered in current ideology. This was why the Madura Labour union leader S.R.V. Naidu supported the young male ring framers in their protest against two week consecutive night work by promising them that future entry of women in this department would not be encouraged.

119. Dev. Dept. G.O.2711, 6-12-1937, T.N.A.
120. Janasakhti, 25.3.1939, Karl Marx Library, Madras.
121. Strathie Award for Madura, Dev. Dept G.O. 1384, 30-5-1938, T.N.A. Dev. Dept. G.O.2735, 7-12-1937.T.N.A.
Conditions at the Workplace:

By the thirties a number of workers unions represented the interests of the workers. There was the Coimbatore Labour union, Coimbatore District Textile Workers Union, Coimbatore mill workers union at Coimbatore, the Madras Labour union in Madras, the Madura Labour union and the Madura textile workers union by the end of the decade. At this juncture, representations for better working conditions in terms of hours of work, facilities at the workplace as also wage related changes had been made. Some concessions like night workers being served tea, installation of humidifiers in the cotton mixing department, creches, tiffin rooms, disbursement of maternity benefit were gained. However, in the various mills implementation was not uniform. Many managements continued to evade paying maternity benefit, setting up creches or even providing clean drinking water.

Appalling were the consequences of mill work on

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123. P.W&L. Dept., G.O.804, 16-3-1942, T.N.A.
124. Dept. of Industry and Labour, L-878(14), 1928, N.A.I. Also Dev. G.O.2059, 23-8-1938, T.N.A.
the health of the worker. Long hours of work was especially strenuous. Most mills made no provision against the high degree of humidification. Adding to it was the poor lighting and ventilation. In such circumstances, watching the electric spindles proved to be unbearably strenuous. In fact, in a story by Puddumaippithan on Ponnagaram, the cotton fluff on the hair of the women is suggested as to be easily mistaken for grey hair. This dust in the hair was stated to be a reason for various health disorders among workers. Though provision for control of artificial humidification was made in Madras by 1936, of the sixty eight mills investigated only seventeen had introduced any mechanical device even as late as 1942. This meant that in the fiftyone mills workers had to bear with symptoms such as fatigue, discomfort, weakness sometimes leading to mental disorders. Thus, generally the health of workers was uncared for, despite a whole Inspectorate of factories existing to monitor conditions -- the mill technology remained at its rudimentary level.

127. P.W&L.Dept., G.O.804, 16-3-1942, T.N.A.
That there was a number of welfare measures introduced has been noted as being significant. But, then the question is whether such demands had been implemented. We find that though there were representations by unions, and discourse at the governmental level, seldom were such measures fully or even substantially implemented in many mills. Despite coercion by union through sit-in strikes demanding some facilities, most mill owners violated even minimum norms laid down by the Factory Administration. Good drinking water, latrine facilities, tiffin room continued to figure in most demand charters.

Women too had specific demands like creche, separate rest rooms as also female maistris, which were rarely fulfilled by managements. However an issue in which women suffered most was the denial of maternity benefit by managements. We do have evidence of how difficult work for women was. In the Mahalakshmi Mills at Madurai, shortage of reels for the wroughts, where

128. N.C. Bhogendranath, op. cit. In Chapter-2, he provides a comprehensive list of the kind of changes initiated by the various mills.

129. Royal Commission on Labour, V.VII, Part II, London, 1931, p. 60. Women breast-feeding their children were constantly asked, why they took so much time over it by the maistri.

130. Ibid., pp. 148, 61.
women worked, was common. Hence women had to fetch their required quota from the tank and it is complained that even if women workers are pregnant they are made to go down into the tank to gather the reels.

The parameter that defined the conditions of work for women had the added dimension of vulnerability to sexual assault, mental agony, and sexual harassment by various officials at the workplace, especially the jobber or the maistri. Very early on, a major strike at the Madura mill was in protest against the harassment of women workers by the maistri for their involvement with union work. However, no action was taken against him. The premise for an increment for women worker spinners at Rajah mills, Madurai was at the discretion of the management, which meant that it was imperative to be in the good books of the maistri. What this entailed is clear from the number of protests lodged by women to members of Royal Commission on

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133. Native Newspaper Report for Madras, Desabhaktan, 14th April, 1920, N.A.I.

Labour in 1929 against the behaviour of maistris.

The domination of the women at the mill by the maistri was manifested in many ways. On returning from leave after child birth, they could gain re-entry only if the maistri ordained it. Sometimes, they bribed him Rs.4-5 to get their jobs back. Besides, while working they took the women to task if their work was deemed below par, by calling them names and accusing them of being immoral. The maistri's questioning of their social status as 'moral women' worked psychologically to create insecurity in the minds of these women. Oppression of this kind was in addition to physical punishment such as being made to stand in the sun. An instance of such disciplining of is that of a section of the women workers of the Coimbatore Cotton Mill being made to stand in the sun for showing the temerity to demand that they be allowed to inspect the accounts book to verify the wages they were due. These conditions were not unique to any particular centre of the industry in the Presidency.

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135. Ibid.

136. Ibid., p.148. op. cit.


It was in such a situation that S.R.V. Naidu at a
public meeting at Madurai appealed to the management to
139 appoint a public employment agency. He alluded to a
certain case of a woman falling prostrate at the feet
of a maistry for a slight fault of hers. Here we have
a class example of how because of the mechanism of
symbolic violence, domination takes the form of a more
effective, in some sense more brutal, form of oppression."
But then, we also find that the maistris wage was tied to the output he could obtain. In 1945,
we get a mention of about thirty two maistris who got
low wages owing to a decline in production with absent-
141 teeism due to plague. Thus, women through use of
symbols of morality, violence, denial of work was
harassed by the maistri. But he in turn was also tied
to the same system by being denied regular wages on
lower level of output by the management. Thus even the
power of the maistri was not unfettered.

Apart from sexual exploitation, overtures, inva-

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139. The Hindu, 11-6- 1930, Madura Labour Union Meeting, Madras.
141. P.W&L(MS), G.O. 64, 6-1-1945, T.N.A.
sion of dignity of a woman by the physical manhandling while taking her thumb-imprint, other forms of exploitation are also cited. There are even reports of a practice of taking commission by getting a day's work without payment. A demand of the Coimbatore District Textile Workers' union was that "workers should not be compelled to work in their private capacity in the houses or fields of the mill owners." Also cited is the favouritism of the maistri towards particular workers. Kamalam a reeler of CS&W mills, Coimbatore from 1945 told us that there were fights in the departments owing to such practices of the maistri. Thus built into the factory system was also such patronly relationship which continued to be part of the institutional structure of power relations.

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142. Dev. Dept. G.O.2532, 12-10-1938, T.N.A. The CLU complained to the management as to how Annammal was pushed by the breast by the maistri. Instead of taking note of the matter, the management reprimanded the union for taking up such 'non-issues' and warned the union leader that in future they would not take him seriously.

143. Dev. Dept. G.O.2532, 12-10-1938, T.N.A.

144. P.W.D.[L], G.O.4134, 14-11-1942, T.N.A.


146. Oral transcript, Interview with Kamalam, reeler in CS&W mill from 1945 in Coimbatore, 1991. This was also recorded in the complaints from other mills.
There were innumerable protests against indignities committed by maistris. Both in Coimbatore and Madura the woes narrated by women of the torture by the Rangasamis, Mookaswami, Ponnaswami or VeluPillai were grounds for the demand for female maistris. In departments like reeling and winding which employed mostly women, it was perceived that the appointment of a woman instead of the practice of having male maistri would prevent malpractices. But it also gives us some idea as to how much violation of women’s dignity occurred at the workplace. To the union, the taking up of such a demand was a sphere for articulating women’s interest, but for women it meant more, much more. It helped open up a range of issues of their representation through women, and to consciousness of their rights at a broad plane. To the trade unions, impressive indeed was the involvement of women. During 1936-37 there was official statistics which pointed out an increase of about 2000 women members in trade unions.

147. Dev. Dept. G.O.3044, 18-12-1938, T.N.A. Mookasami’s taunts at Mahalakshmi Mills, Madurai. Velu Pillai, a maistri of Mahalakshmi mill against whom the women complained, to the union, cited in MTWU complaint Book, dt. 3-7-1952.

That, women were employed for long hours between 5 a.m. and 8 p.m. had certain consequences. The hardship under this system was aggravated by the practice that children and women, not infrequently, remained in the mill until such a time when their relations were free to accompany them to their homes. This was because popular feeling was against the practice of permitting women to go out alone at night. Kamalam, a worker at CS&W mills from the 1940s told us that late in the night, if it was 8 p.m. or so, some seven women including her went back with the maistriamma. Thus, there was some sort of protection in moving with an elderly person in a group. Circumscribed here is an ideology of womanhood which denied her freedom and safety to move about at night, unless in respectable, secure company.

That it was an exercise at balancing housework with mill work for women, is stating the obvious. But to add that it was almost static a condition between 1914 and 1951 is agonising. Though women’s work time

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150. Ibid. op. cit.

began only at 7 a.m., they were at the machine at 5.45 a.m., working through the lunch interval to make sure that they did not lose their jobs as 'permanent workers'. The latter years were when the trade union movement was banned with workers' morale at the lowest with declining job opportunities. It was also a phase for keen competition at the workplace. A complaint from a worker at Rajah mills, Mariappam to the union demanded that the "Madura textile workers' union should see to it that women are not worked overtime." And that it be a male preserve!

Various mills resorted to cutting down their heads of expenditure, dismissing workers for the most trivial reasons. The Kaleswarar management at Coimbatore declared a lockout like that on 13-6-1949. At Palaniandavar mills, Udamalpet protest was lodged as the management did not give work to fortytwo reelers. Similar forced leave was given to reelers.

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153. Ibid.
at Ramalinga Choodambikai at Coimbatore. Women would work even for ten hours to fulfil the quota assigned to them for fear of losing work. The stage was set for the massive onslaught against labour in the fifties where retrenchment, increased workload as also mechanisation led to displacement of workers. Workers in Coimbatore were made to wait outside the gates to be told if there was work or not -- the erosion of their status from permanent to daily wage labour. At the Harvey mill in Madura, on account of enmasse transfer of women reelers from the Pandyan mill, women reelers with nineteen to twenty years of service were reduced to Thakara Velai (ordinary workers) getting only a week’s work in a month. At Kothari mills there were complaints from workers’ union of discharge of reelers for no fault of theirs. According to Mr. Karmekham, an office bearer of the MTWU at the time, soon the management introduced cone

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157. Ibid. Dev. Dept. G.O.2921, 25-6-1951, such was the dispute between women and management at Kamala mills, Coimbatore.


159. Ibid, op cit

160. Ibid.

161. MTWU Complaint book, complaint from Muthammal & Vavuddiammal (15095) [thumb imprints], dt.7-6-1952.

162. Dev. Dept. G.O.791, 18-12-1948, T.N.A.
winding and power reeling leading to diminished avenues for women and gradually they were eliminated from the labour force. Therefore, it appears plausible that even in the areas we have surveyed, some avenues for work were lost to women on account of changes in the production system e.g. the baling machine, introduction of power reeling and cone-winding. These measures reduced the demand of workers in a unit. Besides we have also seen how departments like reeling and winding as also ring frame soon were also employing male labour. Thus it was not because of maternity benefit why women lost jobs, rather a number of factors including mechanisation of the production process which co-opted material conditions, social values of women’s roles as also rationalisation in the Industry which reduced women’s opportunities. In fact, there has been the argument that women workers were the biggest losers in the context of rationalisation in the Industry which appears true in our area of study. This is reflected in the declining proportion of women in the total workforce as has been pointed out in Chapter II.

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163. Oral transcript Interview with M. Karmekham ex-General Secretary of MTWU during the years 1948 onwards, Madurai, 1990.

164. Ibid