CHAPTER U

PLANTATION LABOUR:

LIFE IN THE ESTATE
CHAPTER - V

PLANTATION LABOUR : LIFE IN THE ESTATE

In the previous chapter we have studied the socio-economic background and the living conditions of women plantation workers. Like most women workers, plantation workers also suffer from various forms of deprivation such as poverty and lack of access to utilisation of society's resources. The socio-economic status of women workers is closely related to the nature of work they perform. As observed by the National Committee on the Status of Women in India "The gradual commercialisation and modernisation of the economy and the efforts made by government to replace traditional by modern institutions of credit and marketing to stabilise ownership of land and to maintain minimum wages have by no means succeeded in organising the production relations or in controlling the degree of exploitation of the weaker sections, either in agriculture or in nonagricultural occupation in their sector"¹.

¹. Towards Equality, op.cit. p.87.
In view of the close relationship that exists between the overall status of women workers and the nature of their work life, a study of the conditions of work existing in different occupations where women are employed has become very important. As noted before, a study is especially meaningful in the case of plantation workers who are placed in a highly unique situation. This is because, though, their soci-economic status is not very different from that of women workers in unorganised sector occupations, they are considered as representing the organised sector of economy by virtue of the fact that plantation labour is governed by the Plantation Labour Act 1951. It is also true that there is a steady increase in recent years in the number of women workers in plantations.

Women workers in coffee plantations who form the subject of this study perform a number of jobs considered as skilled. In plantation operations generally, when men and women perform the same type of work they receive equal wages. Most plantation owners prefer women workers because women tend to be more sincere and less union oriented. All these factors
bring out the need for a detailed study of the worklife of women in plantations. This chapter analyses the worklife of women in plantations with reference to such factors as categories of women workers, types of work women perform, hours of work, rest and holidays, wage structure, total days of employment and the issue of preference for women plantation workers by the management. The Chapter begins with a description of categories of women workers in plantations.

CATEGORIES OF WOMEN WORKERS IN PLANTATIONS

Plantation workers can be broadly classified into two categories namely, those who work in company owned estates and those who work in plantations under private ownership. As mentioned earlier, the largest number of plantations are under private ownership. In the area under study there are four major company-owned estates and the rest are all private owned plantations. In our sample too, the workers in privately-owned plantations form the majority (81.25 percent N=325). Those who work in company estates constitute only 18.75 percent (N=75) of the sample.
Not all plantations employ all workers on the same terms of work or wages. We find among plantation workers

i. Those who work fulltime but on a temporary basis.

ii. Those who work fulltime and on a permanent basis, and

iii. Those who work fulltime but as seasonal labour.

Those who work as fulltime temporary labour have work throughout the year: whether they work or not is a matter of their choice. They are also not entitled for benefits such as provident fund, gratuity, coverage of medical expenses, maternity benefits etc. Temporary fulltime workers are not bound to work in the same plantation all through the year and hence tend to move from one plantation to the other. The permanent fulltime workers are attached to only one plantation and in view of the fact that they are entitled for the service benefits mentioned above, they have to work on all working days. Seasonal labour, as the name itself suggests, are employed only during certain peak seasons
when the load of work in plantations is very heavy. It is quite interesting to note that there is a heavy demand for seasonal labour and hence they get paid more wages than even the fulltime temporary or permanent workers.

Our sample consisted of all the three categories of workers mentioned above. Table 5.1 contains the details.

TABLE 5.1
CATEGORIES OF WORKERS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of employment</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temporary fulltime</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>47.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent fulltime</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>45.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seasonal</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can be seen from the data in table 5.1 that temporary and permanent workers are found in relatively equal number in the sample. The temporary fulltime workers form the single largest category of plantation workers. Large number of workers prefer to work as
temporary labour because it gives them the freedom to move from one estate to the other.

Temporary nature of work is also conducive to absenteeism, a trend which is commonly noticeable among wage labour. Seasonal workers do not have work throughout the year, but they can call their terms during peak seasons, seasonal labour is in great demand during the coffee picking season.

TYPES OF WORK WOMEN PERFORM IN PLANTATIONS

The important plantation operations in which women are engaged are weeding, spreading, manure spraying pesticides, digging small pits, grafting, picking of coffee fruits, maintaining nursery, cleaning roads, cleaning the drying yard and a number of other odd jobs. Unlike in other forms of agricultural activities, women in plantations, by and large, perform almost all plantation jobs. The only typical male jobs are climbing trees and digging large pits. Women plantation workers also provide a sharp contrast to other women agricultural workers in the sense that when they perform the same jobs that men do they receive equal wages.
There is a general view that women agricultural workers are confined to unskilled operations. This is in fact one of the reasons why women receive lower wages than men. But in our area of study there seems to be a marked preference for women to do the most skilled job, namely grafting. Women generally do not have access to acquiring skills and are often deliberately kept away from access to skilled knowledge. But in plantation work women seem to be preferred because they are found to be very sincere and hard working. They are also less prone to alcoholism and other diversions which keep men away from work frequently.

While in other forms of agricultural operations women are almost exclusively confined to certain unskilled and lowpaid jobs, in plantations there is no activity, perhaps with the exception of tree climbing, which women do not take part in. Most women, either as daughters or as wives, are familiar with all plantation jobs and hence they can easily fit into any job which is assigned to them. Even if they are not familiar with plantation jobs, they have no chance but to learn these tasks because as Karlekar opines "Among poor women
where employment has been the pattern of life for generations, questions of whether to work or not are of no relevance. Further, pre-pubertal employment and in any cases jobs before marriage, are not uncommon." ¹

HOURS OF WORK

There are generally no fixed hours of work for agricultural wage labour. But plantation workers as a rule seem to be having regular schedule of working hours. All workers in our sample had a 7.5 hours workday with a lunch break of half an hour. The plantation management in general is very particular about the reporting time of workers. Permanent fulltime workers are provided with quarters in the plantation area itself and hence do not require much time to reach the place of work. At times the work spot may be just adjacent to the labour line and at other times it may be at some distance. But their work spot is within the vicinity of their dwelling.

In the case of temporary fulltime workers, however, the working day stretches beyond the actual working hours because they have to leave their home much before the actual working time. Their dwellings are situated at distances ranging from 1/2 Kms to over 6 Kms from the workplace. They cover the distance between their homes and their workplace mostly on foot. Only when there is a heavy load of work the plantation owners make arrangements to transport them by their vehicles. Occasionally workers also use public transport.

It is not really meaningful to measure a women's work day only in terms of the actual number of working hours. A women's work day starts much earlier. A woman's work day normally starts at 5 AM in the morning and often extends upto 10 o'clock in the night. Whether or not they work outside, men generally do not help women in household chores. It is not an uncommon sight to see men while away their time chitchating, drinking or smoking in evenings. For that matter, men are not generally expected to take part in household work even in middle or upper class families. It is only in a handful of families that men share the burden of
domestic work or child rearing. There are a number of studies to show that women work for longer hours and contribute more than men in terms of total labour energy spent on the household members.  

Women, almost single handedly or with some help from other family members, carry on the day-to-day activities of the household. Even after a hard day's work on the field they toil in their homes doing a number of odd jobs that include cooking and serving food, attending to children and animals (if there are any). What Horowitz and Kishwar wrote about women agricultural labour in Punjab more or less holds good in the case of our subjects too. The unending toils of women were well brought out when they wrote. "Women's activities centered on a continuous round of domestic and/or field labour. Their working day was much longer than that of the men of the household. The survey was carried out during the cotton picking season,  

1. See an analysis of the situation of children in India, UNICEF, p.78.
a time when most women from both agricultural labourer and jat land owning households were heavily involved in field labour. Among the 13 agricultural labourer women who went to the field (only one 80 year old blind agricultural labourer women did not go), the average length of the work day reported by these women was 15.5 hours every day. On an average, they spent almost six hours a day on domestic work. Typically, they got up at 4 or 5 a.m., did cooking, cleaning and other household work until about 8 a.m., reached the fields by 9 a.m. and picked cotton till about 6 p.m. In the evening, they returned home between 6 and 7 p.m. and then spent the next few hours till 9 or 10 p.m. doing house work. The average 10 hours work day in the fields includes time that they took in going to and coming back from the field. Though it is likely women agricultural labourer's work day remains very long even when they do not go to the fields, the information we gathered was insufficiently detailed to demonstrate this.

Women themselves barely recognise the immense value of their labour either outside or inside homes. The National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector had a point to make when it observed "Although women work for longer hours and contribute substantially to the family income, they are not perceived as workers by either the women themselves or the data collecting agencies and the Government as all of them do not recognise the multidimensional functions of women which include their productive and reproductive labour. Women quite often are the major earners for their families. This also goes unrecognised".¹

REST AND HOLIDAYS:

One may at the outset feel that issues like rest or holidays have no meaning for women workers in poorer sections of our society. But any discussion on women in

general, and working women in particular, is likely to be left incomplete when an important question like leisure time is not raised and answered. While workers in almost all organised sector jobs are entitled to regular and paid holidays, women plantation workers do not seem to be enjoying this facility, either out of choice or compulsion. To those who work in organised sector a weekly holiday is a must. They also do not work on public holidays which are steadily on the increase in India. Besides these holidays they are also entitled to benefits such as casual leave, sick leave, privilege leave, earned leave, maternity leave and the like. These are considered as paid holidays and the workers, as a right, claim these holidays.

Our sample of women plantation workers did not seem to really enjoy either paid or unpaid holidays. They often worked without even a weekly holiday, if pressure of work and above all, the pressure of hunger demanded so. There were times when our subjects worked 'over time' or even on weekly holidays in order to earn some extra money to meet family needs. Plantation work is generally available throughout the year and if women are
willing to work there is really no dearth of employment. Most women make use of these opportunities. The hand to mouth existence which they live forces them to be always on the look out for sources of earning. The neo-classical view that "women participate in wage labour regardless of childrare or domestic work since it is the economic pressure which in overriding the domestic responsibility",¹ seems to be true in the case of women plantation workers also.

The issue of leisure or rest is closely linked to the amount of free time one gets and also the resources available. Generally organised sector jobs bring other advantages such as loans and a number of economic incentives, leave travel concessions and facilities for travel to home town. Plantation workers inspite of being considered as a part of the organised labour force are not entitled to any of these privileges. Let alone availing leave and other related privileges, they do not even have adequate free time, leaving aside the question

¹ Shanmuga Sundaram, Y: Women Employment in India, 1993, p.15.
of taking rest. Though classified as organised workers the condition of plantation workers is more or less like that of women agricultural labour. Rest or holidays are unthinkable propositions for our subjects. Sheer monotony and drudgery characterise the life of plantation women labour. The following quotation which gives an idea of an average day in the life of the village women more or less can also be used to describe the situation in the life of our subjects: "One common element in the life of rural women throughout the country is that the responsibility of running the household and caring for the children falls almost exclusively on their shoulders. She usually has to take on the sole responsibility for the drudgery of household labour and care of the children, even when she works long hours in the family fields as part of a small subsistence land holding household or performs back breaking agricultural work as a landless labourer, or as a tribal peasant women, looks after most of the cultivating operations as well as the gathering and marketing activities". Whether or not a woman works outside the

house certain routine jobs are thrust on her and very few women can indeed extricate themselves from the clutches of this routine.

While discussing the issue of holidays, a compulsory reference has to be made to provisions of maternity leave. Women workers in organised sector employment are compulsorily entitled to maternity benefits. In the organised sector the woman worker is entitled to three months maternity leave, free hospital facilities in some organisations and also reimbursement of medical expenses, if there is a provision. Women plantation workers receive the benefits of maternity leave with wages only if they are employed on permanent basis. Temporary workers have to remain out of work during the period of child birth and for those days that they choose to remain at home.

Women who work on a permanent basis are entitled to paid maternity leave for 12 weeks. At least this is one period in their lives when they can get some rest. But women who work on a temporary basis generally return to work within three to four weeks, because they cannot
afford to remain without wages for a long time. It is also true that poor women have got used to returning to work in a very short period after child birth because of their life conditions.

Our subjects were also asked whether they had any access to recreation. Their answers have been presented in Table 5.2.

**TABLE 5.2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leisure Activities</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chitchating with neighbours</td>
<td>199/400</td>
<td>49.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching T.V.</td>
<td>64/400</td>
<td>16.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewing films</td>
<td>30/400</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>05/400</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the data in Table 5.2 it can be seen that the only form of recreation for about 50 percent of our respondents is chitchating with their neighbours. Only a small number of respondents go to movies to watch television. Given the fact that there is no electricity in the dwellings, possessing a T.V. set is out of
question. In company estates, a T.V. set is generally provided in a community hall and some workers during their leisure time occasionally watch T.V. Their working and living conditions do not allow them enough time for recreation. Occasionally a few of our respondents also went to movie shows in the nearby theaters. But most women, however had no access to any form of recreation. As observed by Horowitz and Kishwar "Their lives seem so overburdened with work that keeps them bound to the house that the idea of use of leisure time outside the house seems remote".

Whatever their economic condition, men generally take time off from their routine work and find some way of relaxation. What Chakravorthy says about the families of agricultural labourers more or less applies to our subjects and their menfolk too. "In between his work, a man still finds time to smoke his hukka as long as he pleases and may find a group to play cards in the shade of a tree. A woman does not even have time to

attend adequately to her nursing baby. The baby is put on a hammock made of cloth suspended from the branch of a tree or fastened on the back of the mother while she is working.

It is a little too presumptuous to discuss about leisure, especially while making a reference to poor working women, because whether they work outside or not, they all work at home. The situation in the case of poor working women was well described by the Voluntary Health Association of India in its report: "all working class women work, whether they are wage labourerers or not. Labour in the home is not only reproductive and social with regard to the upbringing of the family and care-taking functions, but also productive, as women's work replaces goods and services, which would otherwise, be purchased in the market, such as fetching water, gathering fuel and fodder, grinding cereals, maintaining cattle, kitchen gardens, weeding, winnowing, harvesting, and a myriad other functions such

as tailoring, maintaining the house structure and repairing it, and tutoring children. Hence, it can be said very confidently, that there are fewer women than men who do not work at all. In fact, if women work outside home, they are consistently working a double and when children etc. are ill, a triple shift, day after day. Women, on an average have much longer total hours of work than men$^1$.

**WAGE STRUCTURE IN PLANTATIONS**

Women all over the World, by and large have been discriminated in almost every sphere of life (ILO, 1974). This discrimination is more conspicuous in the field of economic activity which was till recently considered a man's prerogative. The presence of discrimination against women at work is no longer a conjecture; it is not even debatable. A larger number of research studies, committee reports and surveys have produced a plethora of data attesting to the

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Though women plantation workers are considered as part of the organised sector labour force, their wages are by and large on the lower side. The wages of plantation workers are governed by the minimum wages act and the scales are fixed by Karnataka Planters' Association (KPA) in consultation with Government of Karnataka and representatives of trade unions. Their wages are subject to revision from time to time. When this study was conducted, women plantation workers received a daily wage of Rs. 27.39 paise. However, now a new wage scale has come into effect from 1st April 1995. As per this revised wage scale the total wages

payable to plantation workers from 1st April 1995 is as follows.

**WORKERS EMPLOYED IN COFFEE, TEA AND MIXED ESTATES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BASIC</th>
<th>V.D.A</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>31=00</td>
<td>+ 2=97</td>
<td>33=97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescents</td>
<td>28=62</td>
<td>+ 2=97</td>
<td>31=59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**WORKERS EMPLOYED IN RUBBER ESTATES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BASIC</th>
<th>V.D.A</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>32=00</td>
<td>+ 2=97</td>
<td>34=97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescents</td>
<td>29=54</td>
<td>+ 2=97</td>
<td>32=51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Circular NOLR-21/94-95 of the Karnataka Planters' Association dated 27-03-1995.

Male-female differentials in wages is a very distinctive feature of agricultural work. In spite of the Minimum Wages Act and the Equal Remuneration Act, women workers always tend to receive lower wages than men. But coffee plantation workers do not suffer from such severe discrimination. Atleast in the estates
where this study was conducted, both men and women received equal wages for equal work. There are, however, studies which have made a reference to unequal wages even in the case of women plantation workers. The fact of our subjects being paid wages on par with male labour stands out as a very unique case. Such a situation may be due to many factors. There has been a tremendous expansion in the plantation industry in recent years and hence there is constant demand for labour. Where the demand exceeds supply, the worker is always in a position to call the terms. If there is wage discrimination there is a likelihood that women do not show an inclination to work in those estates. The recent and sudden rise in coffee prices is also a factor that has created a higher demand for wage labour. A second factor which places a heavy demand for female wage labour is the sincerity and work commitment of

women as mentioned earlier. Yet another factor which is responsible for the employer's preference for women is their near total non-participation in union activities. All these factors put together accounted for our subjects receiving wages equal to those of men.

There are, however, certain types of jobs which are exclusively performed by men. Men climb very high trees to clear branches of trees in order to facilitate the coffee plants from receiving the right amount of shade. This activity of climbing high trees or clearing branches involves an amount of risk as well as physical exhaustion. As a result men who are employed in this activity receive a daily wage of Rs 75 to 100.

It is quite interesting to note that seasonal and even temporary labour often receive wages higher than those of permanent workers. Permanent workers get such benefits as free quarters, water for domestic consumption, firewood and of course provident fund, gratuity, maternity leave etc. Hence their wages are fixed. Their wages have neither shown an upward nor downward trend. But temporary and seasonal labour do
not receive any of these benefits. In times of heavy work and during peak seasons the employers pay more than the prescribed wage in order to attract temporary and seasonal labour.

By virtue of the fact that women plantation workers are in the organised sector workforce and come within the ambit of labour legislation, their conditions in respect to wages are better than those of unorganised sector women workers. Yet, their wages are not sufficient to ensure the enjoyment of at least the minimum wants. Where other conditions are not favourable even a reasonable wage does not help in adding to the quality of life. Women, as a group, suffer from various forms of deprivation and their working or not working does not make much of a difference in their condition.

Studies on women and work abound with theories on wage differentials between men and women. Barring the service sector and other organised sector jobs, almost everywhere women receive lower wages. This is especially true of agricultural sector where women,
inspite of being major contributors receive lower wages even though they do the same type of work as men. It is also true that agricultural jobs traditionally performed by women are lowpaid. Women's work is by and large classified as unskilled, soft and less arduous. The economic system in any given society tends to discriminate between men and women by upholding the values of the male dominated labour market that women's work is less rewarding than men.

It is not that these inherent gender biases in the wage structure have not been questioned. The existence of both biological and psychological differences between men and women's leading to differential output have also been severely questioned.¹

¹ See Encyclopaedia Britanica, vol 16 p.154, Shanmugasundaram, Vedagiri 1984, "An international perspective of higher education and economies of women". National seminar on education and employment for women in India, publication, Mother Teresa women's university, Kodaikanal.
Yet, gender based wage differentials continue to exist in most forms of agricultural activity.

From our data on wages of woman plantation workers it appears that wage differentials do not affect our subjects. In view of the great demand for women workers in plantations in the area of this study, perhaps there are no wage differences between men and women. However, it can be said that our subjects stand out as a unique case of women workers in the agricultural sector as those who are not being victimised by the wage market.

TOTAL DAYS OF EMPLOYMENT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

It has been mentioned elsewhere that workers in the organised sector are entitled to a number of holidays. But inspite of being considered organised sector labour plantation workers do not seem to be enjoying this benefit. Sheer economic compulsions force women plantation workers to make use of as many working days as possible. It is one thing, that, the more number of days a person works the greater will be the economic benefits. But such a situation can have severe consequences not only on the physical wellbeing of a
person but also on his/her overall development. This is especially true in the case of women.

At the outset, long drawn working hours and absence of weekly holidays can create restlessness which in turn affects both the body and mind. As such, poor women have very little rest in their day-to-day life. It has been stated that their working day normally stretches from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m.. Besides doing hard physical work in plantations women have also to walk relatively long distances to and from the work place. Even after returning from plantation work they continue to work at home and this leaves them little time either to think of their development or that of others.

Interaction with women plantation workers revealed that an overwhelming majority of them work almost throughout the year. It is not that they have no desire for rest or leisure but their economic condition has created a situation where foregoing even a days work will mean losing about 25 to 30 Rupees. Hence women workers generally make use of every available opportunity to earn some money.
In the Indian society women are almost always exclusively responsible for child care and performance of domestic chores. Frequent child bearing and rearing put severe strain on woman's physical and mental wellbeing. It was found that the maximum number of subjects have between 3 to 4 children. A good number of them also had miscarriages. Observations revealed that most women plantation workers had not given enough spacing between one child birth and another. There would have been a great deal of physical strain during each child birth which in itself could have taken its toll on their health (a detailed discussion of the health status of our subjects has been undertaken in chapter VI).

When a woman is constantly working, she is also likely to have very little time to think of her or her wards' future. A large number of our respondents have been working since the age of 12 or 14 years and have had no opportunity to get any access to benefits of development. This is reflected in the fact discussed in Chapter IV that nearly 76 percent of our respondents are illiterate and about 60 percent of them were married.
around the ages of 15 to 16 years. Illiteracy, early marriage, frequent child bearing and rearing and continuous work inside and outside the home are all a vicious circle from which most Indian women have no outlet. This vicious circle manifests itself in women having less access to education, skill and training, and hence they lag behind in exploiting the instrument through which they can attain equality. The present situation of illiteracy amongst women is positively related to high fertility rates and infant child mortality rates, further perpetuate gender inequalities.

Where women are under constant pressure to work for a livelihood and work round the year without any break, their wards' future will be severely affected. Women in the organised sector have enough leisure and resources to plan for their children's development. Choosing the right school for educating their children, deciding the future course of action for their children, providing them the right type of ethos required for learning and working are all priorities for women in economically advantaged groups. But for the poor women, neither their environment nor their conditions permit any such
future planning. When they are leading a hand to mouth existence it is difficult even to raise enough resources for meeting the basic requirements of life. When such a situation is coupled with constant work and no rest or leisure, women's development is severely affected. The Committee on the Status of Women in India summed up this situation cogently when it observed "The average woman in rural areas can give little attention to the bringing up of her children. With dual roles and without any mechanical aids for house work, she is really overworked. So also are the women engaged in unskilled or semi-skilled work in organised and unorganised sectors in urban areas. Overwork, more than a culturally acquired attitude of unconcern about public affairs, is responsible for the limited participation of women in activities like those of the trade unions or political parties. They may become vocal and assertive only when non-availability of essential commodities or escalating prices threaten to upset their household routine".

1. Towards equality, op.cit. p-87.
The plantation industry in recent years has seen a spurt in the number of women workers. This situation raises a very important question, i.e., is this increase a result of the desire on the part of women themselves to join the plantation force or is it the consequence of a preference for female labour? While it is true that women are taking to plantation work on a large scale because of the availability of work almost throughout the year and hence the assurance of a steady source of income, it is also true that there is a marked preference for women workers on the part of employers. Women are always considered to be sincere workers, hardworking, easily manageable and less troublesome. Women can also be easily hired and fired. It is true that women are less prone to those vices which are on the increase among men workers.

In this connection it has been aptly pointed out by Lal Das: "The employer's/Manager's preference for women generally stems from the fact that women are preferred in tedious and repetitive jobs with no need for
education and training. They employ women workers because they are more docile, could be paid lower wages and had little job mobility resulting in lower labour turnover. As women occasionally took part in trade union activities their interest can be bypassed because of their weak bargaining power. The employers employ, as far as possible, a lesser number of women worker so that legal requirements are not applicable"¹.

Women, once they enter as wage labour have little choice to decide what jobs they do or do not do and how much they are going to be paid. Whether they are already acquainted with the tasks assigned to them or not also hardly matters. For most women it is the need to keep the family going that drives them to wage labour. It is this helplessness which is exploited by employers. It is also on account of this that "inspite of industrialisation and mechanisation, there are certain spheres of the economy which are heavily dependent on the labour of unskilled or semi-skilled

women. Certain jobs are unlikely to be taken over either by machines or by men. An investigation of one such area which employs women in large numbers is the subject matter of the present book. It is important to note over here that continued female employment at certain levels does not necessarily mean an enhancement of personal status. Women work because it is essential to keep the wealth going. Again, in an environment of expanding opportunities for the working class male, the women sustains the family whilst the man tries to move into the modernising economy.

This preference for women in certain labour intensive and low paid jobs is a universal phenomenon. Based on data on the position of women in Asian countries Wong express the view that "rather than bringing about economic independence, employment in certain spheres led to the exploitation of cheap female labour. In the rapidly expanding manufacturing sectors in these countries, women formed 40 to 50 percent of the

labour force. However, incorporation into the modern economy did not lead to a stable economic position. With the existing structure of unsophisticated labour-intensive industries, women worked long hours in textiles, garment and electronic concerns. Further, women provided a pool of cheap labour, working mainly as operatives and semi-skilled employees. Deprived of training and promotional facilities, they were the first to be retrenched when there was a slump or fluctuations in the international market.

In this chapter a study has been made of a few important aspects relating the work life of plantation women workers. Women workers in coffee plantations who form the subject of this study perform a number of skilled jobs, including that of grafting. Tree climbing and digging large pits are the only two jobs exclusively performed by men. When men and women perform the same type of work they also receive equal wages. An interesting point that emerges from our study is that

planters prefer women workers because women tend to be more sincere and less union oriented. There are generally no fixed hours of work for agricultural wage labour. But plantation workers as a rule seem to be having a regular schedule of working hours. While workers in almost all organised sector jobs are entitled to regular and paid holidays, women plantation workers do not seem to be enjoying this facility, either out of choice or compulsion. They often worked without even a weekly holiday. There were times when our subjects worked 'over time' or even on weekly holidays in order to earn some extra money to meet family needs.

Male-female differentials in wages is a very distinctive feature of agricultural work. In spite of the minimum wages Act, and the Equal Remuneration Act, women workers always tend to receive lower wages than men. But plantation workers do not suffer from such a severe discrimination. At least in the estates where this study was conducted, both men and women received equal wages for equal work. However, jobs such as tree climbing or digging large pits which were performed exclusively by men were paid higher wages.
It is quite interesting to note that seasonal and even temporary labour often receive wages higher than those of permanent workers. During times of heavy work and during peak seasons the employers pay more than the prescribed wage in order to attract temporary and seasonal labour. In spite of being considered organised sector labour plantation workers do not seem to be enjoying holidays or rest.

On the whole, it can be said that, on a relative scale the conditions of work in the case of wo-en plantation workers are better than those of their counterparts in other forms of agricultural work. However, they are still far away from receiving many of the benefits associated with other organized sector jobs.