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# The Afrikaner Women Of The Garment Workers Union, 1918-1939

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**2015-01-12**
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## Leisure of the Garment Workers

The GWU's intimate involvement in the lives of the garment workers made the union increasingly sensitive to the particular gender-related needs and desires of its membership. The union was willing not only to consider requests by its members, but in an effort to extend its membership, the union broadened the scope of traditional trade unionist concerns to include social and leisure activities, with the purpose of attracting a wider range of women employed in the industry.

The nature of the leisure activities organised by the union, such as dances, hikes, picnics and cultural and library services, was often altered to suit the requirements of the female membership of the GWU. For example, Hester Cornelius once, in an attempt to provide some entertainment in the "drab lives of the workers", suggested that members should remain behind to dance after union meetings.[106] Supported by Sophie Venter, she also suggested that sandwiches be provided at these meetings held after work. It was felt that these meetings could prove exhausting, for the women who had to attend them would not have had anything to eat beforehand.[107] This proved to be a very successful policy, as 200 of the 503 members who attended a meeting on 20 February 1939 stayed to dance in the union hall, which turned out to be too small for the unexpected crowd of women.[108]

Dances were organised on a more formal basis as well, not only for recreation, but as a means of fund raising.[109] Entrance fees usually ranged from 2/6 and 3/6 to 4/- and 5/-. The GWU allowed for the cost of

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[106] GWU, Bbc 9.2.1. 4th meeting Germiston Branch GWU, 30.1.1939.

[107] GWU, Bbc 9.5. Germiston Branch GWU, Secretary's Report, for week 1-14.2.1939.

[108] Ibid. Secretary's Report, for week 15-20.2.1939.

[109] GWU, Baa 1. E.g. 22nd meeting CEC GWU, 22.6.1936. Other unions often held dances as well and invited representatives of the GWU to attend.

organising dances in their annual budgets and dances regularly showed profits which varied from ten to a record eighty pounds, as was the case with a dance held by the milliners in 1943.[110] Profits such as these suggest that these dances were well attended, as is evident from the 'Verslag van ons Uniedans' of 1938, which recorded that some 600 people attended the dance in the Selborne Hall in Johannesburg.

[illegible]e dances were well advertised amongst the garment workers, [illegible]n section of garment workers usually attended. They were mostly s[illegible] or newly-wed women who were often actively involved in union affairs as shop stewards or trade union officials. Mrs V., Mrs Vosloo, Mrs A. and Mrs Pa., who were all married women with small children at the time, maintained that they were too busy at home to attend dances or other social functions of the union. Mrs Lategan and Mrs Spangenberg, both GWU executives, remembered attending these dances as newly-weds. Mrs Spangenberg also recalled the splendour of the home-made evening gowns on display.[111] Miss O'Reilley's remark that the "whole crowd used to go down" also indicates that these dances were attended by a certain group of garment workers.[112] Dulcie Hartwell recalled that below shop steward level not many women attended these dances, for,

> Most of them were married women with families and family responsibilities and the people who went would be people who were probably young married women without children or unmarried women.[113]

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[110] Ibid. E.g. 15th meeting CEC WTA, 17.6.1929. GWU, Bbc 14.4.1. Meeting CEC Milliners Branch, 18.7.1940. GWU, Bab 1.1. Also Minutes Financial Committee GWU, 9.8.1943, 24.10.1941. In 1938 fifty pounds were budgeted for the organisation of dances during that year. Budget 1938, meeting 7.1.1938. In July 1941 a GWU dance made a profit of £29, and in 1943 they made a record profit of £79.6.5.

[111] See illustration 11.

[112] GWU, Bbc 9.2.1. 3rd meeting Germiston Branch GWU, 13.3.1939. See Interviews 32, 33, 1, 22, 17, 26 and 20.

[113] Interview 34. At these dances, in an effort to reduce costs, catering for several hundreds of people was usually shared by CEC members. E.g. at one dance Mrs Malan and Mrs Holder of New York Clothing attended to the kitchen, Mr E. Runkel sold cold drinks and Misses James and C. van Wyk sold novelties. Cloak room attendants and doormen were also appointed for the evening. GWU, Bbc 9.2.1. See e.g. meetings Germiston Branch GWU, 13.3.1939 and 5.6.1940.

Dancing formed an integral part of May Day celebrations as well. The GWU usually participated in considerable numbers in the general trade union rallies held on that day. Although May Day rallies were not very well attended during the twenties,[114] they became more successful during the thirties. Workers were given a paid holiday on that day and more seemed to attend the organised activities. By 1938 floats were being built each year for the May Day procession, the size of the attendance at the picnics necessitated the expenditure of some forty pounds on food, and the dance made a profit of some £30-40 on the sale of tickets.[115] In 1939 celebrations were held at both the Victoria Lake in Germiston and Murray Park in Belgravia, Johannesburg.[116] In 1940 the union donated three floats to the May Day procession, representing the GWU Head Quarters, the Germiston and Potchefstroom and the Milliner branches.[117] In 1941 Johanna Cornelius urged shop stewards to tell married women to bring their children to the celebrations so that they could be taught "that May Day is a workers' day". During the 1941 celebrations an added attraction was the two plays to be staged in the Trades Hall.[118] Mrs Viljoen, too, referred to the importance of May Day to the garment workers, for,

> ....dit het maar nou net gewys hoe sterk die werkers vir die unie was, omdat hulle vir ons so baie beteken het.
> (.....it only showed how strong the workers were for the union, because they meant so much to us.)[119]

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[114] GWU, Aab 1.109. C.F. Glass, Notice of May Day Meeting, 1926. GWU, Dac 1.2. 1927 Annual Report to South African Trade Union Congress. In 1919 the WTA showed a profit of £6.10.2. on their May Day celebrations. GWU, Aaa 1. 15th meeting CEC WTA, 17.6.1929.

[115] GWU, Bch 6. Financial Statements May Day Committee, October 1938, 1939 and 1940.

[116] Interview 17. That year Miss Corrie Gatzke (Mrs Lategan), dressed in a white gown decorated with red carnations and escorted by the Union Guard, was crowned as the May Day Queen in Germiston. GWU, Bch 6. Pamphlet May Day. See Illustration 9.

[117] GWU, Baa 1. Special meetings CEC GWU, April 1940.

[118] GWU, Bcf 2.1. Minutes Conference of Shop Stewards, 22.4.1941.

[119] Interview 31.

Consequently, the CEC made special efforts to attract workers to May Day celebrations. In 1940 Johanna Cornelius wrote to parents of several young girls to ask permission for their daughters to attend and help with preparations for the May Day celebrations.[120]

Even during the twenties, besides the picnics held on May Day, picnics and hikes formed part of the union's social activities. In 1926 a picnic was held at the Germiston Lake under the auspices of the WTA.[121] In December 1933, a hike which included a program of sports and the provision of refreshments was advertised by a short poem,

> The machine, the boss, the noise and trouble,
> We will all forget that day.
> We will hike together to Aasvogelkop, there a
> A beetje om te vry. (to smooch a little).[122]

In 1937 some workers of the Star Shirt, Rand Shirt and Johannesburg Shirt and Clothing Manufacturers even refused to pay their contributions, "because they were not notified about the picnic".[123]

The library service instituted by the union during the late thirties was equally popular, for not long after its establishment, the CEC was informed that the library needed money to buy more books, as the present supply had been read to tatters. On a cultural level the union worked hard to produce plays which would portray the real life of the workers. At times these were relatively well attended by audiences of some 400 people.[124]

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[120] GWU, Bch 6. E.g. letters, J. Cornelius to Mrs Thesener, Mrs Springfield, Mrs Delport and Mrs Homan, May 1940.

[121] GWU, Cba 1.72. Letter, C.F. Glass to M. Weiss, 9.3.1925.

[122] GWU, Bbc 1.74. GWU circular, 23.11.1933. GWU, Bbc 1.162. Notice of hike, 7.12.1933. The poem clearly appealed to the garment workers as young girls, which at the time most of them were.

[123] GWU, Bab 1.1. 12th meeting Financial Committee GWU, 3.12.1937.

[124] For a more detailed discussion see, E. Brink, 'Plays'.

During the forties the social life of the union was further stimulated by the regular presentation of Christmas presents to all committee members, whether long-standing or new. From 1937 onwards cash presentations of one to two pounds were given to new members, old members received three pounds and some executive members five pounds.[125]

With the provision of a wide range of leisure activities, the union therefore strove to relieve the strain of the economically constrained circumstances in which the garment workers often found themselves. It organised dances on a regular basis, took an active part in trade union activities on May Day, instituted trade union libraries in those areas most heavily populated by garment workers and during the following decade produced numerous working-class plays for the enjoyment and education of its membership.

## Conclusion

Garment workers, like working people elsewhere, did not have the resources to withstand unexpected onslaughts of economic misfortune, which could propel them to the brink of destitution. Under these circumstances they were obliged to seek assistance. However, such assistance was not readily forthcoming from the state, church or welfare organisations, which concentrated on that segment of society which was completely destitute. Hence, many garment workers turned to the GWU for help and during the thirties the union became increasingly sensitive to the needs of its members.

During the labour unrest of the late twenties and early thirties a bond was forged between rank and file garment workers and the GWU. The union

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[125] Money voted for Christmas presents. Minutes Financial Committee GWU, 27.11.1943. GWU, Bab 1.1. Expenses on Christmas presents during the forties ranged between 200 and 300 pounds. Gifts account, Report of the Commission of Inquiry, Annexure I C4, 1948.

increasingly came to appreciate and respond to the demands of its membership. The altered composition of the CEC from an exclusively male to a female majority with a female president and female national organiser ensured that the demands of female members were considered sympathetically. At all levels the formal trade union structure was adapted to respond to the needs of its female constituents. Young girls fresh from the countryside were found employment and accommodation. The equitable distribution of confinement allowances to female workers and financial aid to young women suffering from tuberculosis received much attention. In addition, garment workers received assistance from the union when personal circumstances at home forced them to seek succour. Finally, a gender-conscious approach to leisure activities was also clearly evident; dances received high priority, and sports and physical training classes were organised to interest young factory workers. Johanna Cornelius succinctly explained what she considered to be the interaction between Afrikaner women who had risen to positions of power within the trade union framework and fellow women workers newly arrived in the urban areas,

> What can we Afrikaner women do to better conditions on the land by remaining there? Nothing! In the towns we can help our fellow women workers who stream into the factories for a better life.[126]

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[126] GWU, Bch 1. H. or J. Cornelius, 'Why I Left my Home'.

# CHAPTER 5

# "n PERSOON VAN DIE WERKENDEKLAS' - FACTORY GIRLS OR FACTORY 'MEIDE'?

## The Social Marginality of the Garment Workers

### Introduction

During the inter-war years the garment workers faced a denigrating and at times very hostile public. At times they were known as factory girls and when the general strike in which they participated in 1932 failed, they were abusively referred to as factory 'meide'. One of the major achievements of the GWU was that, confronted with these circumstances, it instilled a measure of dignity, self-respect and pride into Afrikaner female garment workers which allowed these women to regard themselves as worthy women or persons of the 'werkendeklas'.[1]

The low social standing of these women depicted as factory girls is not a phenomenon restricted to the garment workers. Pollert, in an investigation of contemporary British female factory workers, remarked that,

> Sexually the label 'factory girl' did not give them as high a price in men's eyes and they were forced to accept that they were at the bottom of the labour market both in class and in sexual terms.[2]

Studies elsewhere in the world tell a similar tale. Lambertz, who looked at sexual harassment in the British cotton industry in the nineteenth century, maintained that,

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1 'Werkendeklas' in Afrikaans is an uncommon word - 'the class which is working'. The usual translation for working class is either 'werkersklas' or 'arbeidersklas'.

2 A. Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives,* London: Macmillan, 1981, p.99.

> ....sexual access to women and girls was illegitimate because it was not based on mutual consent, but firmly lodged in situations of entrapment and economic coercion. [3]

Elson and Pearson mention this aspect of women's industrial labour in a contemporary context as well, and Alexander in her analysis 'Women, Class and Sexual Differences' also refers to the connection between female labour as cheap labour and the sexual antagonism between men and women in the workplace and in trade unions.[4] Likewise, Bird in her investigation of women in contemporary South African trade unions was told that sexual harassment "goes on all the time".[5]

In this chapter an attempt will be made to explore the hidden dimensions of the social marginality of these women. First, the consequences of the loss of parental authority over these women and young girls and fear for their moral safekeeping will be analysed. Second, the anxiety articulated by the press, state, church and welfare organisations will be traced through to the then proposed formal programs and campaigns, allegedly to reform and to protect the virtue of the garment workers. One outcome of these intentions, the provision of hostels for low-paid female workers, will be discussed and assessed in terms of the measure of success it achieved. Third, the extension of the precarious position of the garment workers and of the belief in their vulnerability into the factory, will be examined. Here prior attitudes towards single and unprotected females led to abuse and sexual harassment that in turn helped to reinforce the image of garment workers as fallen and depraved. These factors contributed to a growing attitudinal ambiguity towards garment

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[3] J. Lambertz, 'Sexual Harassment in the Nineteenth Century English Cotton Industry', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 19, Spring 1985, p.40.

[4] D. Elson and D. Pearson, 'Subordination' in K. Young et al., *Of Marriage and the Market*, p.33. S. Alexander, 'Women, Class and Sexual Differences', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 17, Spring 1984, p. 45.

[5] A. Bird, 'Organising Women Workers', *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 10, no. 8, July/August 1985, p.89.

workers in their own communities. This was clearly evident from the views held by parents and other members of the community of garment workers engaged in the strikes of the late twenties and early thirties. Against this background it will be shown how the GWU stepped in to provide and reinforce a sense of worth, dignity and respectability in the rank and file members of the union. The union re-appropriated the image of 'Afrikaner dogters', utilised the Great Trek and the symbol of the Voortrekker women, underlined the nobility of a working-class calling and finally strove to implement a code of conduct and civil behaviour in the work place which would focus on decency, respectability and virtue.

## Family Relations

The socialisation of the garment workers was ambiguous. First, altered conditions at home led to the loss of parental control over offspring and consequently the development of parental anxiety for their safety in the new industrial environment.[6] This alarm of parents over their offspring to a large extent hinged upon fears for the loss of moral integrity of their children. Mary Ryan found in her investigation of nineteenth century female moral reform movements in Oneida county, USA, that urbanisation in Utica during the mid-nineteenth century caused anxiety as to the moral well-being of offspring once they migrated to the city,

> They (mothers) feared for their sons as well as their daughters, whom they envisioned leaving home only to be enticed into brothels and descend therewith into the almshouse, prison or the gallows.[7]

Parents felt insecure, for once their children had migrated beyond their circle of control, other measures of control would be needed since,

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[6] Roberts, in his investigation of English working-class families, argues that industrialisation was seen as stripping the family of former functions. K. Roberts, *The Working Class: The Social Structure of Modern Britain,* Longman: London, 1978, p.72. Walker puts forward a similar argument. C. Walker, *Women and Resistance*, p.3

[7] M. Ryan, 'The Power of Women's Networks', p.174.

> ...parents' ability to restrict the sexual activity of their daughters and sons was being undermined by the extreme geographical mobility of the era.[8]

Ryan maintained that rather than increasing promiscuity, this lack of parental control over offspring who had migrated to the urban areas helped inspire the moral reform action which eventually culminated in the restrictive Victorian code of behaviour in Oneida County. In her study of American mill workers at Amoskeag, New England, Hareven found that,

> Once removed from the land, fathers in Manchester lost the bargaining power and control they had by virtue of their estates; thus the move to industrial cities may have weakened the patriarchal authority of traditional rural families.[9]

The hold parents had over their children was further weakened by the measure of financial independence experienced by the young wage earners, when they went to work, for,

> ....the mill did confer a degree of independence, particularly to younger women....It also gave them a sense of managing their own lives, albeit a limited one.[10]

However, Hareven argues that although the young men and women working in the mills gained some independence by becoming wage earners, they were still expected to behave as 'obedient children' in their parents' households.[11]

Hints of a similar pattern of behaviour can be discerned in the family relations of Afrikaner migrants in general and garment workers in par-

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8 Ibid., p.173.

9 T. Hareven, *Family Time*, p.117. Hopkins further argues that the role of the father is changed when he has to surrender authority to e.g. teachers in a compulsory education system, as well as medical and welfare officers. E. Hopkins, *A Social History*, p.205.

10 Interview 18. T. Hareven, *Family Time*, p.75.

11 Ibid., p.187. Gaitskell refers to similar patterns of obedient behaviour expected from young African girls during the early twentieth century. D. Gaitskell, '"Wailing for Purity": Prayer Unions, African Mothers and Adolescent Daughters, 1912-1940', in S. Marks and R. Rathbone, *Industrialisation and Social Change*.

ticular. In the rural areas prior to migration to the city, the Afrikaner father was considered to be the patriarchal head of the family, with his wife and children existing in dependent and subordinate relationships to him.[12]

> The father was the head of the family, he transacted all business, even for his married children living with him or near him. His will was law and never disputed.[13]

The sons, married and unmarried, mostly worked with and for their fathers and remained under his authority. Daughters were equally under his control. This relationship of dominance and dependence, however, could not survive in the changed economic climate of the urban areas.

In the case of Johanna Cornelius and Mrs Deysel, the Depression and resultant rural hardship propelled them into the city to find employment. This relieved the burden on their families.[14] However, the reluctance with which parents sent their daughters to Johannesburg, suggests that parents allowed their daughters to migrate to the city only when there was no other way for the family to feed themselves. This attitude was poignantly outlined in the short story 'Pure Goud', published in a 1944 edition of the *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*. In this short story a prospective garment worker, Nellie, seeks permission from her father to leave the farm to go to Johannesburg, considered to be a second Sodom and Gomorrah, in search of employment. He responds,

> Indien ek 'n rykman was, sou ek onder geen omstandighede toegelaat het dat jy uit my huis gaan nie. Maar vandag is ek nie in die posisie om jou te gee wat jy nodig het nie... as jy vasbrand moet jy nie hu'p verwag nie, want soos jy self weet is ons arm.

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12 B Bozzoli, 'Feminism, Marxism and South African Studies', *Journal for Southern African Studies,* vol. 9, no. 2, April 1983. Hopkins also found that in the structuring of the family as a work unit the father was the main organising force and that his wife and children had to adjust to the routine as laid down by him. E. Hopkins, *A Social History*, p.202.

13 Carnegie Commission, *Poor White,* vol. V, pp.31-32.

14 GWU, Bch 1. H. or J. Cornelius, 'Why I left my home on the land', and Interview 7.

> (Had I been a rich man, under no circumstances would I have allowed you to leave my house. But today I am not in the position to give you what you need....if you run into trouble, you cannot expect assistance, because as you yourself know, we are poor.)[15]

Katie Viljoen provides a real-life example of the plight of single garment workers as is implicit in this short story. She remarked: "My parents never knew the hardship I had to endure."[16]

After the Depression, when conditions had improved to some extent, Mrs Deysel, one of the women interviewed for this study, refused to heed her father and return to the family farm in the Bushveld. By then she had settled in the city and most probably treasured her new freedom and independence which resulted from her employment and relationships in the city.

Obedience to their parents was expected from garment workers in Johannesburg who still resided at home. They were closely controlled, not only in terms of their freedom of movement, but also financially. For example, Mrs Lingenfelder recounted that "My ma en my pa het gesê ons moet elke week ons deel gee" (My mother and my father said that we should give our share every week.)[17] All the children in the family contributed their earnings, increasing the contribution as their wages increased. They were each given 6d. per week pocket money in return.

Whereas garment workers were expected to and did contribute financially towards the upkeep of the family, their earnings also gave them some measure of freedom and the means to question the authority structure

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15 *KW/GW*, 'Pure Goud' (Pure Gold), Nov./Dec. 1944, p.4. This has been found to be the case with parents who send daughters to work in contemporary world market factories. D. Elson and R. Pearson, 'Nimble Fingers', p.97.

16 GWU, Bcc 2.2.1. Katie Viljoen, Life Story, p.18.

17 Interview 18. In a similar fashion, Mrs Britten contributed financially to the family income. Interview 2.

within the family. Mrs Harmse, for example, was strictly controlled in her leisure activities and was not allowed "om rond te loop" (to go out). Mrs Lingenfelder, on the contrary, evaded parental supervision, for she and her siblings used to escape through their bedroom window to go dancing in the city. It would seem that her employment made this measure of independence possible.[18]

When parents could not control their children in person, older married brothers and sisters would sometimes exert control over young working siblings *in loco parentis*. Miss Van der Merwe recounted that while employed as a social worker for the 'Fabriekwerksters Welvaart Vereniging' (hereafter FWV), she arrived home late one night. Her older sister with whom she lodged, then proceeded to scold her "like a little girl".[19] Similarly, when Mrs Ae. found work in Johannesburg her parents placed her under the supervision of an elder sister as well,

> ...maar ek is in goeie sorg, want my suster het my, jy weet, 'n oog oor my gehou....dat die lewe met my reg gaan.
> (....but I am in good care, because my sister, you know, kept an eye on me, that my life went right.)[20]

This was done because Johannesburg had the reputation of being a 'terrible place', a second Sodom and Gomorrah. Pauw also maintained that decent parents were hesitant to send their children to Johannesburg, a place they considered an abomination.[21] Mrs Pa. recalled,

> Mens het so baie dinge gehoor van Johannesburg. Jy het gedink jy kan nie hier in Johannesbrug in die straat loop nie, dan molesteer hulle jou. (One heard so many things about Johannesburg. You thought you could not walk in the street here in Johannesburg, without being molested.)[22]

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18 Interview 28. cf. Interviews 11 and 20.

19 Interview 28.

20 Interview 1.

21 S. Pauw, *Beroepsarbeid*, p.73.

22 Interview 24.

Changed economic conditions thus had far-reaching consequences within the ambit of family relations. Economic hardship forced parents to allow their children to find employment in the urban industrial areas. Although many were still expected to behave as obedient children in the home, this brought in its wake new measures of economic independence for the younger generation. Where offspring had to leave their parental home to find employment, their departure generated fears as to their moral well-being in the city. These fears were not confined to the parents of the new generation of workers, but were shared by the state, church and welfare organisations.

## Virtue is a Grace

The maxim that the morality of young, single working girls was suspect, was widely held by the South African press, state, church and welfare organisations. It was felt that young and unprotected females had to be protected against the evils of the city. Therefore, during the mid-thirties, alongside the emergence of Afrikaner nationalism, a growing public awareness of the very real poverty of the garment workers and their social conditions elicited a wide range of responses from these bodies. Efforts were accordingly made to provide hostel accommodation for these women,[23] which would not only provide for their protection, but would also save them for the volk, win support for the cause of Afrikaner nationalism and provide a docile labour force.

From the mid-twenties, state and welfare organisations began to express concern about the moral safekeeping and well-being of the increasing numbers of young, white, male and female workers streaming into the cities. In 1927 state concern crystallised in a committee which was

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[23] Gaitskell analyses a similar development in the provision of hostel accommodation for young black women on the Rand during this period. D. Gaitskell, 'Christian Compounds for Girls: Church Hostels for African Women in Johannesburg', *Journal for Southern African Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, October 1979.

appointed by the then recently established Department of Labour to investigate the desirability of hostels for rural children employed in town industries. The Committee was struck by the large influx of people from the rural districts, as well as by the appalling housing conditions of those who had drifted to the towns. The Committee remarked that,

> The undesirable and unsavoury environment into which economic forces pushed many of these rural indigents do not tend to make their children an asset as a prospective source of labour.[24]

The committee estimated the number of indigent rural children residing in poor white boarding-houses in the urban areas of South Africa at 7 000 to 8 000, whilst thousands more resided at rural settlements such as Kakamas, De Lagersdrift and various forestry settlements.

The committee saw the establishment of hostels for girls as more imperative than those for boys, because,

> ...there are smaller prospects for girls in rural areas than for boys, and in addition the discipline, supervision and friendly companionship of hostels is even more desirable in the case of girls than of boys.[25]

The report envisaged that the hostels would accommodate young boys and girls aged 16-22, selected by local rural committees as being "of good conduct and character and having a bright and intelligent appearance".[26] These select few (initially only limited accommodation would be available) would be allowed to remain in the hostel for a minimum of two years, contributing a weekly sum of 5/- plus a third of the balance of their wages, on condition that they had found employment or become apprenticed or indentured in a trade.[27] At first the department granted

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[24] CAD, VWN 479. Report of the Committee into Hostels for Rural Children in Town Industries, Bulletin no. 1, 1927, p.6.

[25] Ibid., p.9.

[26] Ibid., p.18.

[27] Ibid., p.19. A recommendation for the implementation of this policy included the purchase of property in the factory area of Cape Town

subsidies to these hostels on condition that social services were rendered to the inmates by local welfare organisations to better equip them for life and aid their moral and spiritual development.[28]

The Depression precluded any state action towards the implementation of the recommendations of this report. However, in 1930 the Johannesburg branch of the SAVF began to collect funds for the establishment of a hostel for low-paid young girls in the city. In November 1934 they admitted the first three lodgers to a hostel,[29] which was established in a house at 113 Wolmerans Street and rented from the Irene DRC parish (Johannesburg East) at £26 per month. It rapidly expanded.[30]

The management of the hostel had a clear notion of an ultimate goal of moral reform which they wished to realise in the hostel, which was called 'Harmonie' (Harmony). The rules and regulations of the hostel were discussed with the inmates in order that the girls would not feel that,

> ...hulle met onnodige strengheid van buite oorheers word nie, maar lê hulle gewillig neer om die orde en geluk te help bevorder.

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where a hostel for 40 girls could be erected, as well as the expansion of the existing Louis Botha hostel for boys in Observatory, Cape Town.

[28] Initially, the SAVF instituted 'bekwaammaking' (training) classes, but this policy was later discontinued after criticism was voiced against these classes. CAD, VWN 465. Secretary of Education to Secretary of Labour and Social Welfare, 11.8.1936.

[29] CAD, VWN 465. Report of the Hostel Committee to the Annual Congress of the SAVF, Heidelberg (Tvl), 25-26.4.1935. In conjunction with the Department of Education and later the Department of Labour and Social Welfare the SAVF established their own hostels in Johannesburg and in Germiston, in 1934 and 1949 respectively.

[30] CAD, VWN 465. Report C.N. Kempf, 26.11.1935. The hostel proved to be very successful. By November 23, 1934 , 15 of the 23 vacancies had been filled and by April 1935 another house next door was rented to accommodate 16 more applicants. By October 1935 two more houses were rented to accommodate about 50 girls. Mrs Niesewand to Secretary of Education, 19.3.1935 and 2.10.1935. By the middle of 1938 the hostel had been so well established that 72 girls were housed in six houses and the SAVF could begin negotiating with the Utility Housing Co. of The Johannesburg City Council for a sub-economic loan of £ 33 000 for the erection of a hostel to accommodate 100 girls on a site acquired by the SAVF in Saratoga Avenue, Doornfontein. Mrs M. Niesewand to Secretary of Social Welfare, 20.8.1938. See also UG 11-1936, Department of Labour, *Annual Report* 1934, p.38.

> (...they were being controlled with unnecessary discipline from the outside, by willingly abiding by the rules of the hostel to further order and happiness.)[31]

The managing Committee saw their work, which was always voluntary, as a 'groot kans (wat) ons het om 'n pragtige werk vir ons volk te doen' (a great opportunity that we have to perform a noble task for our volk).[47] Only by means of effort and sacrifice could these girls, "kostelike volksmateriaal" (precious potential of the volk), be saved,

> Hulle is dit werd dat daar groot opoffering vir hulle behoud gemaak word....ander kerke en sektes is besig om vir hierdie meisies voorsiening te maak. As ons terugstaan, gaan baie van hulle só seker vir die volk en die kerk verlore. (They are worthy of great sacrifices being made for their salvation... other churches and sects are busy providing for these girls. If we stand back, many of them will surely be lost to the volk and the church.)[33]

The threat did not only lie with other churches and sects, for these girls were equally imperilled by bad housing conditions in unsavoury areas. A real danger existed, "om sedelik verlore (te) gaan in die stad en 'n las en vloek vir die volk (te) word, instede van 'n bate" (of them perishing morally in the city and becoming a burden and a curse on the volk, instead of an asset).[34]

Once the Depression had sufficiently abated, the state expressed itself vocally on the plight of the younger generation of urban industrial workers. Mr P. du Toit, Commissioner of Social Welfare, voiced concern for unprotected young people on behalf of the state. Young girls needed sanctuary in the city lest they become,

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31 CAD, VWN 465. Report Committee Harmonie Hostel to Annual Congress SAVF, April 1935.

32 Ibid. Mrs M. Niesewand to Secretary of Education 7.6.1935, The hostel committee consisted of Mrs Ds. Nicol, Mrs M. Niesewand (treasurer) Mrs M.E. Viljoen as secretary and Mrs ds. Pauw. Interview Mrs M.E. Viljoen, 3.5.1985. (The first matron was Mrs Schoeman, who was in charge of the hostel with the assistance of two black men.)

33 CAD, VWN 465. Report, Committee Harmonie Hostel to Annual Congress SAVF, April 1935.

34 Ibid.

> ....'n prooi van onafrikaanse strominge wat hulle uiteindelik beland in die moeras van agterbuurt lewenswyse, en andere klim oor hulle liggame en siele na posisies van mag en rykdom en dan moet die staat weer duisende ponde spandeer as dit te laat is.
> (...the prey of currents foreign to Afrikaner ways, which ultimately will land them in the swamp of slum living and others will climb over their bodies and souls to positions of power and riches and then the state once more will have to to spend thousands of pounds when it is too late.)[35]

In 1939 the recently established Department of Social Welfare formulated the purpose which hostels for young girls needed to fulfil, that they,

> ...soos 'n vuurtoring oor die platteland sal skyn, omdat dit bekend is dat werksoekende dogters daar welkom is, tuisgemaak sal word vir 'n tydlank en werk vir hulle gesoek sal word.
> (...will shine like a lighthouse across the countryside, because it is known that young girls (daughters) are welcome there, will be made to feel at home for a while and employment will be found for them.)[36]

The Afrikaans press shared these fears about the evils of the city. In 1936 *Die Burger* reported,

> ...en so baie meisies onskuldig in the moeilikheid gesleep word eenvoudig omdat hulle nooit seker kan wees van die goeie naam van die goedkoop kamertjie wat hulle genoodsaak word om te betrek nie.
> (and so many girls innocently dragged into trouble simply because they could never be sure of the good name of the cheap little room they were forced to take.)[37]

*Die Vaderland* echoed this view,

> ...onvertroud met die lewe en gedoe in die grootstad, staan hulle omring van faktore wat hulle kan vervreem en laat losraak van die volksgroep waaruit hulle spruit. (unfamiliar with the life and business of the big city, they stand surrounded by factors which can estrange and divorce them from the 'volksgroep' from which they stem.)[38]

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[35] CAD, VWN 454. Letter, P. du Toit to Secretary of Social Welfare, 27.6.1936.

[36] CAD, VWN 2199. Memorandum, Secretary of Social Welfare to Under-Secretary, 29.7.1939.

[37] CAD, VWN 454. *Die Burger*, 'Losies van die Arm Meisie', 8.9.1936.

[38] Ibid. *Die Vaderland*, 'Die Afrikaanse Fabrieksmeisie', Editorial, 17.11.1936.

However, despite everything which was said on the matter, these efforts resulted in the provision of very limited facilities, long after the initial need had abated. In Johannesburg towards the end of the Second World War, accommodation for some 300 women only was provided by the SAVF and the City Council. In Germiston, where the matter was hotly debated for more than a decade, 'Die Anker', a hostel accommodating about 100 young women, was erected by the SAVF in 1949.[39] However, by the time resources were becoming available for such institutions, the need was beginning to fade away. During the following decade, this hostel and those erected in Johannesburg were converted into old age homes, with the exception of the Lionel Leveson Hostel, which became the Johanna Raath Tehuis for young girls.

## Abuse and Sexual Harassment in the Factories

The preoccupation with the virtue and vulnerability of these young Afrikaner women and their social marginality in the community did not end with the press, state and the church, but was extended into the factories. Here the vulnerability of garment workers to economic exploitation and the ambiguous relationship between male owners or overseers and female employees served only to cast further doubt on their respectability and virtue. This often led to physical and verbal abuse and sexual harassment in the factories, malpractices which in turn helped to reinforce the image of garment workers as fallen and corrupt.

Young women no longer under the direct control of their fathers or male kin, were easy prey for verbal and physical abuse. Males in authority over these women would appropriate paternal roles and liberties towards these women without the restraint of a kin relationship typical of rural

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[39] For a more detailed discussion of the issue see E. Brink, 'Virtue is a Grace', paper presented to the Association for Sociology in South Africa Annual Congress, Cape Town, July 1985.

society. Elson and Pearson, in their study of women in contemporary world market factories, proffer a reason for this phenomenon,

> An important feature is that the sexual element in the relation between female employee and male boss is not contained and shaped by kin relations. This is one of the reasons why factory girls are often regarded as not quite 'respectable'.[40]

In her study of contemporary working-class girls in Great Britain, McRobbie found that it was suspect to be a single and independent working girl, for,

> ...there is not much place for a single working-class woman in society. This is not simply a question of economics....though it will mean a life lived on the low wages of women in working-class jobs...but of being forced to live as a marginal person in working-class society.[41]

Such marginality and vulnerability of the women contributed to a relationship between female factory workers and their male overseers and employers which was often coloured by fear. Hoel found this to be the case amongst Indian female garment workers employed in contemporary clothing factories in Great Britain. Here they,

> do in fact leave due to the abuse from many of the employers, but they never reveal their real reason for leaving..(for)... the fear the female workers had for the employer was universal and they would rarely speak up about their grievances.[42]

Jan Lambertz likewise found that during the 1880's and early twentieth century in Manchester cotton textile towns, similar fears of dismissal often prevented women from complaining about abuse and sexual harassment.[43]

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[40] D. Elson and R. Pearson, 'The Subordination', p.33. World market factories are usually established by international companies in third world countries where labour is cheap.

[41] A. McRobbie, 'Working Class Girls and the Culture of Femininity', in Women's Study Group, *Women take Issue, Aspects of Women's Subordination*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1978, p.107.

[42] B. Hoel, 'Contemporary clothing "sweatshops"', in J. West, *Work, Women*, p.83.

[43] J. Lambertz, 'Sexual Harassment', pp.32-33, 37.

These fears were equally present amongst female garment workers in the Witwatersrand clothing industry. For example, once during the early thirties Miss Bruyns, an employee at a small garment factory, vented her anger at the abuse levelled at her in a letter to the union. However, her two postscripts gave a clear indication of her fear of actually having voiced her protest against this treatment by her overseer. First she reaffirmed that she was a good worker and added,

> If any trouble is going to be caused rather drop the m[illegible]r and let him keep his week's notice. I'm not fussy but I wi[illegible] be at his workshop Monday morning 8 o'clock to hear what is what and wait for your orders.[44]

Male employers and overseers in the factories thus often felt at liberty to exploit the vulnerability of these workers. Physical and verbal abuse were common occurrences in clothing factories during the twenties and thirties.[45] In 1929 Miss J. Hattingh complained to the union that when she had told her boss, Mr Taylor, that something was wrong with her machine, she was sworn at and given notice.[46] In 1930 Mrs Elsie Pretorius (32), employed at the President Shirt Factory, testified that the forewoman of the set used to abuse and swear at them when something went wrong with production.[47] Miss Bruyns's letter to the union complaining about her employer, one Van Schalkwyk, also serves as a very good example of the abuse suffered by garment workers at the hands of their employers and foremen. She recounted,

> I could stand that constant swearing no longer and the grumbling went on my nerves.[48]

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[44] GWU, Bbc 16.1. Letter, Miss Bruyns to S. Sachs, 17.3.1934.

[45] GWU, Dac 2.7.10 and Dac 2.8.1. Letter, S. Sachs to Secretary Witwatersrand Trades and Labour Council, 1.10.1931.

[46] GWU, Aab 1.17. Complaint, J. Hattingh, 28.10.1929.

[47] GWU, Cca 2.2 and Abb 2. Affidavit, E. Pretorius 14.7.1930. Equally abusive language was used against Miss H. Schneider of Judith's Paarl.

[48] GWU, Bbc 16.1. Letter, Miss Bruyns to S. Sachs, 17.3.1934.

When finally she was again abused for giving notice she retorted,

> ...well listen I'm not going to let you swear at me. I am going home and if your temper had calmed down next week I'll come and work my notice week.[49]

By contrast, in 1932 Mrs Booysens, the shop steward at Tiger Clothing Manufacturers, did not passively retreat in the face of abuse levelled at her by the foreman, Mr Gershman. She promptly slapped his face "for the insulting statements he is alleged to have made about her".[50] Miss E. Maartens under similar circumstances only lodged a complaint with the GWU for the abuse she had suffered at the hands of a foreman, a certain Mr Shiller.[51] In 1939 a Mr Bobrow, the foreman at the New York Clothing Factory, became the target of the women working there. They accused him of being a "hateful slave driver" who,

> used such vulgar language that the workers could not mention it even among their own sex.[52]

This was not an isolated occurrence, for already in 1937 the women at the factory had been prepared to sit in on a strike to protest against such treatment.

Not only were the women exposed to abusive language on the part of the foremen, but they were also exposed to sexual harassment, a familiar phenomenon in factories employing women. In her study of British female factory employees in Britain during the eighties, Pollert comments,

> Supervision was sexually oppressive, the manner usually cajoling, laced with intimate innuendo, and provocative jokes, hands placed

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[49] Ibid.

[50] GWU, Cca 2.2. Letter, S. Sachs to Secretary Industrial Council, 4.1.1934.

[51] GWU, Cca 2.1.1. Affidavit, E.M. Maartens, Germiston, 9.6.1936. It would seem that in 1928 a similar complaint had reached the GWU with regard to [illegible]er's abusive language towards the women under his control. [illegible].2. Letter, S.Sachs to Secretary Industrial Council, 2[illegible]

[52] GWU, Bbc 9.5. h[illegible]lius, Report on the dispute at New York Clothing Manufacturers, 19.10.1939.

> on girls' shoulders as they worked, imposition mixed with flattery.[53]

Lambertz found more aggressive sexual harassment taking place in a Yorkshire town in the late 1910's. At the mill women were molested and in a dark passage "an arm has been placed round their waist, and worse things have followed".[54] Freed came to similar conclusions in his study on prostitution in Johannesburg,

> We were informed by several girls in a large clothing factory that male employees had made a habit of touching the female workers on different parts of the body in an accidental sort of way..... the language used in some of the factories and workshops visited can only be described as unprintable.[55]

The scarcity of evidence of such harassment in the Witwatersrand clothing factories, even today, could be due to the taboo which surrounds the subject, and the reluctance of young girls to confront the men involved. Very often the women themselves did not air their grievances or publicise the sexual harassment to which they were subjected. On one rare occasion Jeanette van der Walt (19) in an affidavit to the union on working conditions in the factory, was more explicit in her accusations,

> Krut used to put his arms around me against my will when I worked for Levin, the third day he tried to kiss me but I shook him off.[56]

Mrs B. recalled two instances when factory owners invited their young female employees to accompany them under false pretences. In the one case the factory owner, instead of taking the girl to the bioscope as promised, went to a private house in the suburbs under pretence of checking if everything was in order there. Continued Mrs B.,

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[53] A. Pollert, *Girls*, p.143.

[54] J. Lambertz, 'Sexual Harassment', p.37.

[55] L. Freed, *Prostitution*, p.93.

[56] GWU, Bbc 16.1. Affidavit, J. van der Walt, 15.9.1933.

> ...toe ers besef sy wat sy planne is. Net daar val sy op haar knieë en bid, 'Ag, Here, beskerm my asseblief'. En dit was nie net 'n skietgebedjie nie.
> (....then only she realised what his plans were. Right there she fell to her knees and prayed, 'Please God, protect me'. And it was not merely a brief little prayer.)[57]

The factory owner took her home in disgust, most probably having presumed that the girl in question was aware of the 'hidden' agenda for the evening. Another equally inexperienced girl was 'saved' when her suspicious landlord and friends saw her being escorted by an employer. They followed the couple and subsequently beat up the employer when he stopped with the girl in a desolate spot.[58]

In the factories, garment workers were therefore considered easy prey and pursued. In a relationship with men not controlled or overseen by kin or family relations, these women were regarded as being unprotected and not quite respectable. Moreover, relationships between men and women in the industrial environment were often not based on mutual consent, but firmly lodged in situations of entrapment and economic coercion.[59] In addition, this abuse and harassment garment workers were exposed to in turn also helped to reinforce the image of these women as fallen and corrupt.

## Factory Girls or Factory 'Meide'?

The social marginality of the garment workers was reinforced by the abuse and sexual harassment they were exposed to in the factories, as well as by the general practice of the exploitative remuneration of the young female labour force. Wages which were insufficient for an independent existence were often justified by employers who also maintained that

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[57] Mrs B. ''n Terugblik oor die Ontstaan van die Randse Armsorgraad vanaf 1939-1963', 1985. (In possession of the author.)

[58] Ibid.

[59] J. Lambertz, 'Sexual Harassment', p.40.

their female labour force, especially young beginners, were or should be receiving the aid and support of their parents and should be residing with parents or relatives. Hence they were often referred to as 'factory girls', regardless of their age. A girl is by definition young, immature, subject to parental and other authority, obedient, inexperienced and not fully responsible for her actions - all in all, a 'non-adult'.

The term 'factory girls' was often used by employers, trade union officials, the press and garment workers alike when referring to garment worker women. According to Solly Sachs, the old guard CEC of the GWU during the twenties referred to the garment workers as those *girls* (his italics).[60] Sachs himself also referred to the women as girls[61] and during the strikes frequently even referred to the garment workers as 'girl strikers'. This portrayal of the garment workers was intended to enhance an image of vulnerability and defencelessness and to garner support for their cause, and could be used with great effect against the background of police brutality exercised on the strikers during the 1932 strike.[62]

The general usage of the term 'factory girl' is also clearly evident from newspaper reports on the clothing strikes in the late twenties and early thirties. Often these were headed by phrases such as 'Striking Girl Workers', '200 Indignant Girls','Girls Back at Work' and 'Singing Girl Strikers'.[63] Finally, the name 'factory girls' was also internalised and

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[60] S. Sachs, *Garment Workers*, p.62. Lewis also refers to this practice. J. Lewis, 'Solly Sachs', p.184.

[61] GWU, Bad 1. Annual General Meeting GWU, 27.1.1931. For example, a speech in 1931 "....the 2000 odd Afrikaner girls, real slaves in the factories...", Ibid., Bcf 1. In the 1929 *Quarterly Bulletin*, no. 1 of the GWU, presumably written entirely by Sachs, the garment workers who went on strike were also consistently referred to as girl strikers.

[62] GWU, Bch 7.2. Letter, General Secretary GWU to Mr Axel, 18.9.1932, Appeal for funds, General Secretary GWU to Cape Explosives Industrial Workers Union, 14.9.1932, and 'Facts about the present strike in the Clothing Industry, Witwatersrand', 1.9.1932.

[63] *Rand Daily Mail*, 21.5.1928, *The Star*, 2.9.1932, *Rand Daily Mail*, 9.3.1929, *The Star*, 18.8.1932.

used by the women themselves, as is evident in writings and speeches of Johanna Cornelius, and in her and Mrs Swanepoel's accounts of their lives.[64]

However flattering the epithet of eternal youth might have been, the description of a female factory worker as a 'girl' had important implications. It reduced her to the position of a legal minor, and implicitly ascribed many of the characteristics of a 'girl' to mature women.[65] In 1952, in a review of his secretaryship, Sachs tersely summarised the social marginality of the garment workers,

> U was slegs 'n fabrieksmeisie oor wie niemand bekommerd hoef te wees nie.
> (You were merely a factory girl about whom no one needs to be concerned.)[66]

During the late twenties and early thirties the label of 'mere factory girls' underwent a number of changes. The measure of success or failure of the strikes undertaken by the garment workers, was linked closely with the degree of economic hardship their families experienced at the time. Moreover, to a large extent this determined the way in which garment workers were perceived by society. During the earlier, more successful strikes the garment workers elicited positive responses from the general public, but during the 1932 strike commendation turned into condemnation.

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[64] S.Sachs, *Garment Workers* pp.64-66 and GWU, Bad 1. p.7. General meeting GWU, 16.3.1944.

[65] The use of the term 'girl' is also noted in other urban industrial contexts. E.g. see B. Garson, *A Lifelong Day: The Meaning and Demeaning of Work*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, pp.26-27 and H. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working Class and Social History*, New York: Vintage Books, 1977, pp.26-27. A similar phenomenon is evident in the labelling of grown black men as 'boys'. Charles van Onselen examined the use of the concept 'Sambo' in the context of the use of black male labour on the mines in Rhodesia. C. van Onselen, 'Black Workers in Central African Industry: A Critical Essay on the Historiography and Sociology of Rhodesia', *Journal for Southern African Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, April 1975, pp.234-238.

[66] *KW/GW*, S. Sachs, 'Heil Volksmoeder, Werkster!', May/June 1952.

In 1928 living conditions had not yet been affected by adverse economic trends which came to a head in the Depression of the following year. During that year the successful strike of the garment workers positively influenced perceptions and attitudes towards them, as is clearly evident from the editorial in the *Rand Daily Mail* on the 1928 strike. Seemingly contrary to expectation, the newspaper found that several of the striking women interviewed were refined and apparently educated.[67]

However, in 1931, at the height of the Depression, when the garment workers had brought the clothing industry to a virtual standstill, *The Star* put forward the opinion that the women were being deluded and led astray. They did not appreciate the benefits of their existing situation and could end up worse off than ever before, because "...many of the girls apparently did not seem to know exactly what they are (sic) striking for".[68] During the 1932 strike which was forcibly crushed, the garment workers were not only regarded as factory 'girls', but were accused of being factory 'meide' of dubious moral standing. An argument between Bettie Rosslee, a striker, and two policemen epitomised the lack of esteem with which society came to regard these women,

> ...toe was daar 'n ruiling van woorde tussen Bettie Rosslee en serjant Naudé, die sê "julle is maar 'n klomp 'factory' meide", waarop Steyn sê, "julle is maar 'n klomp 'lousy factory girls". Naudé sê toe, "ek het al baja van julle soort gevang, en baja van julle het al by die polisie geslaap".
> (....then there was an exchange of words between Bettie Roslee and Sergeant Naudé, who said, "you are only a lot of factory maids", to which Steyn added, "you are only a lot of lousy factory girls". Naudé then said, "I have often apprehended many of your kind, and many of you have slept with the police.")[69]

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[67] *Rand Daily Mail*, '200 Indignant Girls', 21.5.1928. See also E. Brink, '"Maar 'n Klomp Factory 'Meide'": Afrikaner Family and Community on the Witwatersrand during the Twenties', in B. Bozzoli ed., *Class, Community and Conflict*, Johannesburg: Ravan, in press.

[68] *The Star*, 'Clothing Industry Deadlock', 30.10.1931.

[69] CAD, JUS 593. Affidavit, Anna Mynhardt before S.P.R. Fourie, Justice of Peace, Germiston, 13 September 1932, in connection with the trouble at the New York Clothing Factory, Germiston on 20 and 22 August, 1932.

While pinning a girl striker against a wall during the demonstration at the African Clothing Factory in Germiston on August 22, 1932, Sergeant Naudé and a another striker again had a similar argument:

> .....het jy nie respek vir jou nie? (don't you have any self-respect?), to which he replied; Jy praat van respek, baie van die poliesie (sic) het al by die fabriek meisies geslaap. (You talk of respect, many policemen have already slept with factory girls).[70]

The policeman in charge of the demonstration in August 1932, sub-Inspector Fourie, was concerned that the striking women in his area were not behaving as was expected of 'decent' girls and that they refused to be admonished,

> I personally warned them on various occasions to behave them (sic) like 'decent girls', which however had very little effect.[71]

In addition, a Germiston magistrate also took it on himself to take the garment workers to task on the question of decency. Mr Douglas Mearnes, when sentencing Dora Erasmus (21) and Cornelia Myburgh (19) on charges of public violence at the Germiston clothing Factory, reprimanded the girls,

> Strike if you must, but don't stop other girls from working. Many of them (the scabs) have their parents to support and want to work *decently*. The strike is of no earthly use to any of you girls. You have good employment and I should strongly advise you to keep it... This sort of nonsense has to stop... Leave the other girls alone, they appear to be satisfied with their conditions and are *behaving in a proper manner*. Now go away and *behave yourself* (my emphasis).[72]

The 1931 and 1932 strikes resulted not only in economic defeat for the GWU, but also in a great loss of respectability and dignity in the eyes of the community. Garment workers were no longer "refined and apparently

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[70] Ibid. Affidavit, E. Rosslee before S.P.R. Fourie, Justice of Peace, 13.9.1932. GWU, Bca 4. She was still at work in the clothing industry in 1945. Commission of Inquiry, Evidence B. Rosslee, 1948, p.1569.

[71] CAD, JUS 593. Letter, S.P.R. Fourie to District Commandant, September 1932.

[72] *The Star*, 'Two Strikers in Court', 1.9.1932.

educated", but "factory girls" and worse, they were factory "meide" who allegedly "slept with the police" and who did not know how to behave themselves "decently".

## Respectability, Decency and Virtue

The garment workers themselves were extremely sensitive to any supposed slur on their decency and respectability.[73] During her investigation Hansi Pollak recorded that the women she had interviewed regarded government notices put up in the factories detailing the benefits for unmarried mothers under the law, as a reflection on their respectability and regularly tore down such notices from the walls in the factory.

> Does the government think we're the class of girl who gets illegitimate children? It's a disgrace to put up such a notice when only decent girls are employed.[74]

The predominantly female GWU executive which came to power during the mid-thirties used a number of devices to reinforce the dignity and worth of fellow female rank and file members.[75] It did so by various means. First it vigorously defended garment workers against public assaults. During the late thirties after the 1938 Voortrekker centenary celebrations, the union utilised the Great Trek and the image of the Voortrekker Woman to accentuate the dignity and worth of the Afrikaner women who were garment workers. It also re-appropriated the image of the Afrikaner 'dogter' (daughter) in terms of these working women. Finally, it tried to generate the ideal of a working-class calling and

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[73] This development would seem to run contrary to Shapiro's argument that "Notions of respectability were of little use to these young women earning starvation wages, working long hours, desperately needing jobs in the face of a world depression". J. Shapiro, 'Political and Economic Organisation of Women in South Africa: The Limitations of a Notion of 'Sisterhood' as a Basis of Solidarity', *Africa Perspective*, no. 15, Autumn 1980, p.5.

[74] H. Pollak, *Women*, p.181.

[75] In this regard the extent of the role and contribution of S. Sachs in his capacity as general secretary of the union to this aspect of the union's activities, still needs to be ascertained.

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**Name of thesis** The Afrikaner Women Of The Garment Workers Union, 1918-1939. 1986

***PUBLISHER:***
**University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg**
**©2013**

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