

https://dspace.org/

Women commuter workers of the Thusanang sewing project: their group identity, households and consciousness

Jaffee, Georgina

1987-02-09T13:28:45Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/7820

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

JAFFEE

HWS 192

JAFFEE

AFRICANA LIBRARY

WOMEN COMMUTER WORKERS OF THE THUSANANG SEWING PROJECT: Their Group Identity, Households and Consciousness.

Georgina Jaffee

Presented to the History Workshop, University of Witwatersrand, February 1987.

This research was partially funded by the Senate Research Committee of the University of the Witwatersrand.

1987

INTRODUCTION

This paper was inspired by my involvement in the development of worker co-operative projects situated at the Catholic Mission in Brits, 90 kilometres from Johannesburg. The co-operatives which are part of an organisation known as Thusanang ('self-help' in Setswana) Project were set up by a committee of unemployed workers all of whom had lost their jobs in the Brits decentralised industrial area between 1982 and 1984. During this period, there was a great increase in unemployment - massive retrenchments occured as a result of the recession, and workers who had joined trade unions were frequently victimised by management through dismissal (1).

The sewing co-operative, which is the focus of this research, makes a variety clothes sold on the local market. It has been operating since September 1984 and provides work for 14 women. Ten of its members were dismissed from a cable company for illegal strike action and the remaining four were retrenched from a furniture company during the first half of 1984. At this time a spirit of militancy prevailed amongst the newly-organised workers in the Brits area. This was assisted by a number of industrial court actions which were resolved in favour of the workers, and consequently leant increasing credibility to the unions which had began organising plants in 1982.

The co-operatives evolved out of the worker organisation which spread during the industrial action waged by the Metal and Allied Workers Union against B & S Engineering in 1982 (2). Re-instatement for 275 workers was finally won a year later with the company being exposed for its union-bashing techniques. This victory was short-lived. Five months later B & S Engineering closed down one of its plants and as a result many of the workers found themselves unemployed. These workers came into contact with those dismissed from the cable company as both groups used the Catholic Mission hall for their meetings. The Unemployed Workers Committee, which began organising the co-operative projects, emerged a few months later out of this assortment of dismissed and retrenched workers.

The idea of setting up worker-controlled co-operative projects was very appealing to these workers who were reluctant to enter similar working conditions after experiencing hard-line management tactics and police brutality. The women who finally came together to form the sewing co-operative had in particular suffered severe physical injuries inflicted by the local Brits police. A day after the workers downed tools in protest against the dismissal of a shop-steward, police were brought in and all the strikers were arrested. Some of the women were very badly beaten-up and most of them spent up to four days in jail before bail was paid.

The overall scarcity of jobs in the area also contributed to the attraction of forming co-operatives. And when the local labour bureau black-listed trade union members (3), the women who had been dismissed - all Metal and Allied Workers Union members since 1983 - were even more attracted to the idea of co-operatives.

A year later the sewing the co-operative, which had only been granted money to buy necessary capital equipment, was still operating with its original members. In the initial stages production was very slow as most were still learning how to sew. This meant that they received very little payment for their work (4). Despite this, there emerged a very strong group identity which

expressed itself as commitment to the further development of the project. The possibility of returning to formal work was met with great resistance.

This paper aims to explain the basis of this group identity and the emergence of a collective consciousness.

It firstly shows how these women's common experiences on the factory floor, of dismissal and jail were important in developing the solidarity and sisterhood which led to the initial stability of the project. This solidarity was further cemented by organisational experiences learnt through the unions. On-going commitment of the project members to the union and broader workers struggle contributed to its cohesion and maintained the high level of militancy amongst its members.

Secondly, it is shown how the women's reproductive responsibilies in the household determined the way in which they understood their exploitation in the factory and conditioned their attitude towards and organisation of co-operative work. The ability to reduce the conflict between work-time and domestic labour-time in the project partially explaines the members on-going commitment to it.

Finally,the paper attempts to conceptualise the particular world-view and consciousness of those working in the sewing co-operative.

This paper is not concerned with the history of the co-operative or its internal organisation which has enabled the establishment of an alternative working environment but seeks to analyse and explain the underlying structures which made possible its formation.

A year after the establishment of the co-operative, extensive collective and individual interviews were carried out with the women. These aimed to obtain both factual and qualitative material. Factual or quantative material concerned information on biogaphical details including family and work history, and daily routine, while the qualitative material aimed for details on subjective life experiences. I employed questions such as "Can you tell me what it was like working in the factory?" and "What is the difference between factory work and working in the co-operative?"
(See Appendix for research procedure and notes).

THE BACKGROUND

Brits began developing as an industrial zone in the early 1970s and by 1984 employed a commuter workforce of 11,000 (5). Since the onset of recession, employment opportunities have declined and over the last two years the workforce has been cut by approximately 20% (6). The majority of factories in the area produce components for the motor industry, while other production includes furniture, small engineering equipment and chemicals. In a survey I conducted in 1985, it was revealed that two-thirds of the workforce in the components and electronical component industries were women (7).

Commuter workers employed in Brits live in crowded, landless and impoverished settlements in Bophuthatswana situated between 30 and 90 kilometeres away from Brits. They spend up to four hours a day commuting to work depending on the distance of their homes from the factory.

The 14 women in this study all speak Setswana and live in the

districts Odi 1 and Odi 2 in Bophuthatswana. Nine grew up in rural areas - five on white farms in the Rustenburg district and the other four in rural villages in Bophuthatswana. Two were born in Alexandra township in Johannesburg and the other three in the Brits Old Location. All had historical links to the Odi areas.

The lives of these women have always been determined by hardship and poverty. Memories of their youth recalled aspects of this deprivation:

(Can you tell me something about your life when you were a young girl?)
"When I was young we really suffered. We did not have enough food and clothes. I had to go and work at the fields (means white farms) picking potatoes and tomatoes and got 10c a day."

"I was 12 or 13 and I had to go and pick peanuts on the farms and got 12c a day. We never had enough to eat at home and my parents were always away at work."

"My father worked in Johannesburg. He never sent us money and my mother had to work for the farmers. There was no money for school clothes."

Others expressed a desire to move away from their families and avoid traditional social pressures. By doing this they hoped to find a better life.

"The main thing I remember is that I did not want to get married. I was 16 and I wanted to stay at school and learn more. I refused and left the house and went to work in Johannesburg as a domestic."

"I just left the house one day after an argument with my father. He wanted me to meet and marry my cousin."

The women came from both peasant and working-class origins. Mothers of five of the 14 interviewed were domestic servants, two were factory workers and the other seven never had formal jobs but worked the tribal lands surrounding the villages where they lived in Bophuthatswana. Ten of the women's fathers were migrant industrial workers working mainly in Johannesburg, two were share-croppers, one was a policeman and another a priest.

All the women were educationally disadvantaged. Nine reached Standard 6, three Standard 4, and two Form 2. As they look back on their lives they have clear memories of being held back from what they would have liked to become:
(What did you want to be when you grew up?)
"I wanted to be a nurse but my grandfather prevented me as he said that nurses have to spend too much time at school."

"I wanted to be a traffic cop or dentist but I had to go and find another job because there was no money."

"When I was a child I wanted to be a sister in the church but the priest said that my parents could not afford it. I went to school until Standard 5 and then I had to leave it to help my family."

"I thought that I wanted to be a mistress or a nurse but we did not have enough money. That is why I am so stupid. I did not learn much."

A striking aspect of this material is the clear understanding of economic causes as being at the root of their disadvantaged position. These women did not describe conditions in a way which indicated self-blame, as found in so many studies of the European and American working class (9).

FROM GIRLS TO "HANDYMEN": Entering the Industrial Workforce

"The black female is a natural machinest, handy-man and stitcher" - Alfa Romeo's Brits personnel manager, interviewed in 1985.

All the women in this study entered factory work between 1976 and 1980 at at average age of 43. Two of the older women (47 and 52 years) entered factory work in the early 1970s when the factories in Rosslyn, an industrial zone outside Pretoria, opened up. Of the 14 women interviewed ten had moved from various jobs as domestic workers in white homes both in Brits and in Johannesburg, three came from the service sector (shop-assistant, building cleaner, tea "girl" in hair saloon), while the two others who were the youngest entered factory work straight from school - one at the age of 15 and the other at 23. These women began work at an average age of 19.

How and why women entered the workforce in such great numbers needs to be explained. It is likely that the incorporation of women into decentralised industrial points or border industries is similar to the incorporation of women in the Third World into "world market factories" because they are cheaper and believed to be more productive (9).

In questioning factory workers themselves on the reasons they entered industrial labour, other factors are revealed in the South African context which encourage women to move into industrial employment. Factory work appears to have provided better financial opportunities for women in domestic work and more control over their time. As factory workers they preferred knowing their working hours compared to the unpredictability of domestic labour. Women also expressed a preference for factory work because of its relative proximity to their homes. Domestic work in Johannesburg did not allow them to visit their families and in Brits they usually lived on the property of their employees. For many of the women, entering factory work gave them the opportunity to be closer to their families and take more control over the upbringing of their children.

The transition from domestic to factory work was described in the following ways:

(Why did you go and work in the factories?)
"When I was a domestic in 1977, I earned R55 per month and in the factories women were getting about R35 per week. In 1980, I left my job and went to the labour bureau in Brits and a day later I got a job at the cable factory at R35 per week."

"Domestic work was very hard on us. We never knew when it would finish. At least in the factories the end of the day is the end of the day... Domestic work was always overtime work."

"When I did domestic work it was in Johannesburg and I had to leave my home here in Bapong (a villaget 25km from Brits) only see my kids once a month. If you work in the factories you can stay at home - go to work in the morning and return at night."

This study reveals that the average salaries earned for domestic labour in the late 1970s was R46 per month. Women entering the factories at this time earned R32 per week. In 1984 when these women were dismissed they were earning an average of R63 per week. They were employed in similar jobs in the process of assembling wire cables and occupied the lowest grades. None of them had ever been promoted in any job which they performed during their working lives. In the 1970s men were being hired at almost double the rate paid to women and the average wage of some of these women's husbands who occupied higher grades was R405 per month.

Those interviewed are accustomed to moving from job to job. The six aged between 37 and 43 had held an average of eight jobs since they began formal work. The four between 27 and 36 had held an average of three jobs, and those younger that 27 had either held up to two jobs or had not previously worked. All of these jobs had been in domestic work. From the work histories collected, 70% of these job changes were related to childbirth. The women stopped work for between four months and a year after childbirth and of the ten interviewed here only one went back to the same job after the birth of her second child.

THE FACTORY AND THE CO-OPERATIVE

Experiences of factory work was one of the topics discussed at length during the collective interviews. The question "what was it like working in the factory?" always elicited answers which referred to a range of grievances. These related to control and discipline of the working environment. The foreman emerged as the figure most resented in this respect. He not only asserted full control over them as "units of labour" by controlling their bodily functions but also asserted full authority over the work process by instilling fear.

Painful and unhealthy work conditions were also recalled with revulsion. Other grievances concerned issues of specific concern to women such as finding adequate child-care, and the dilemma of becoming pregnant on the job. In this discussion low wages were not mentioned although this was raised in some of the individual interviews. Of note is the awareness of women's subordinate positions and the remarks which refer to the discomfort they experienced as women workers.

Shortly after I asked what factory work was like they all began talking in Tswana. Voices were raised and hands gesticulated. I thought that two women were having argument but it was just the memories of the factory which still provoked enormous anger and emotion. After a while they turned to me and one by one began to speak in English as if to translate the previous discussion:

"The main problem was the foreman. Always pushing us - shouting at us. He was constantly on our backs, looking over our shoulders. It was terrible having a sense of fear as we worked."

"Sometimes the foreman was rude and rough to the point where we thought he would hit us".

"The work I was doing was too heavy for me. My legs used to swell up because I had to pick up a drill so I used to go into the toilets to rest."

"I worked in the paint shop of a factory and the conditions were so dusty. I sometimes had to vomit and dust and paint came from my throat and nose."

"We were given five minutes per shift to go to the toilet and the supervisor would wait outside and knock if we were longer. Also there were no change rooms and six of us had to share a locker. We were always pushing each other around..."

"And if we were sick or had our periods we could not take extra time. I hated being a women then - it made life so bad."

"When somebody was pregnant they hid it for as long as possible by putting a tight band around themselves. If another women asked there would be an enormous fight because women were always scared of being fired. There were no maternity benefits. A woman knew that her job would not be there when she returned so she tried to stay as long as she could."

"When the kids were sick at home we were forced to leave them and worry the whole day at work and then if we had to take them to the hospital we got a warning at work (for being absent)."

"This is why we do not want to go back to the factory. In the project it is different."

The common experience of factory work is one factor in explaining the collective identity which emerged in the sewing project. Factory work presented a common reference point as there were so many incidents to recall. The working environment of the co-operative is flexible and relaxed, and easily compared and contrasted to the brutal, corrosive and disciplined environment of the factory.

Working in the Co-operative

The machine room which used to be part of a church hall is dark, enveloped in a heavy heat. If one walks in from the bright sunlight outside it takes a moment for one's eyes to adjust and recognise the faces of the women sitting at the eight machines. There is a cutting room at the back where four women stand around a square table. One continually hears a chatter, sometimes a giggle, a call. There is often a smell of over-brewed tea and at lunch-time of porrige. Lunch is cooked each day in a huge iron pot - donated mielie meal eaten with a tomato sauce or atchar. "We eat a lot here so when we go home we just cook for the family and have a little ourselves."

After the discussion about factory work, I invited them to answer questions on the difference between working in the factory and working in the co-operative. A striking proportion of the discussion referred to the fact that they now had control over their own work and also celebrated the fact that there was no-one exercising authority over them. Being able to work at their own pace was regarded as the central attraction of the new working enviroment.

(Is working at the co-operative different from the factory?)
"Thusanang is our factory. We are not controlled. In the factory we had no say."

"We work here for ourselves and we make the rules. There are no foremen here."

Another theme to emerge from these discussions was the way in which a freer working environment led to the development of closer working and personal relationships. A vital comraderie replaced the individual misery of factory work.

"Here if we feel like singing, we sing."

"If there is a problem we talk nicely and if we do fight it is the fighting of children. When it is over we are friends again."

"We share ideas and help each other... Some of the older women advise the younger women about their boyfriends and other problems."

For most of the first year very little money was earned. In spite of this, it appeared that the more congenial working environment, flexible working hours and a belief that the co-operative would eventually succeed financially enabled the women to make this financial sacrifice. A tension between fulfilling work and the need for money was always present. Factory work was largely seen as work only necessary for a wage. The project provided a different form of work which had other advantages in its practicabilty. In this respect some of the women expressed the desire for useful labour:

"The problem here is that we get very little money. The work is fine but we need money."

"Here I am learning more. I did not know how to make dresses, but now I can. I can make things for the kids and repair my husband's trousers. At the factory, I just worked for the money."

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CO-OPERATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

The ability to continue working in a freer environment and maintain control over their own work was dependent upon the formation of group solidarity. There were no clearly formulated ideas of an alternative and the project was not set up according to pre-given ideological principles. It was the common experience of dismissal and jail which enabled the formation of this co-operative spirit and sisterhood.

Furthermore, the trade union had introduced them to a new world which brought a more positive vision of the future. Prior to the dismissal, they had developed a very strong commitment to and identification with their union. Though now formally unemployed, they still perceived themselves as part of the union which they see as being partially responsible for assisting in setting up the project. The union in fact played a very minor role in the project but project members continued to identify with the union as they felt part of the broader workers' struggle.

The formation of this collective consciousness is intimately related to conscientisation about worker rights which developed with the unionising process in Brits after 1982. The repression metered out to unions both from management and from Bophuthatswana (10) created a militant and defiant working class in the Brits area. The suspicion of unions by non-unionised workers and the unemployed in the Bophuthatswana villages reinforced this militant solidarity which had developed between people who were involved in the same disputes.

One of the collective interviews was spent on discussing the dismissal. When I asked them to tell me the story the machines slowed down and then stopped. After a moment's total silence, Christina in the far corner of the room began talking in English. As she finished another person took up the story:

"The company was anti-union and wanted to get rid of the members. So they first dismissed the shop steward and when we all went on strike, they called in the police."

"When the shop steward was fired we all decided to go on strike and went to the canteen at 7 am. Management came and asked us whether we want to work and we said not until Peter (the shop steward) was re-instated. At 10.30, three policemen came from the Brits police station and asked us who our bosses were. We replied that we are all bosses."

"At 11 am, 30 young boys in blue uniforms and carrying knobkerries and long sjamboks charged and hit us. Then they took us outside the factory and shoved us into vans. We first went to Brits police station and then at 5 pm they took about 170 women to Pretoria Central. Some of us remained there for three days. We were charged for trespassing and had to pay bail of R100."

"We talk a lot about this - how the police beat us, how we went to jail".

The high level of militancy and worker solidarity is clearly evident in the reply, "we are all bosses." The story was narrated with great involvement and clarity, expressing the importance of this incident. The dismissal and the experience of jail led to closer bonds between the women which were so important in establishing the project. Trust and knowledge of each other's conditions had already being established before the project materialised. The memories of this bonding experience were often brought up at work and continued to be a point of reference for the women enabling them to "work well together."

(How did you feel about going to jail?)
"I do not know why, but I was not worried. It was nice for me, really, because all of us were together: over a hundred women in jail. We were a group and not alone and we learnt a lot about one another. The one thing which was terrible was the way those white women treated us. Those who had their periods had to lift their dress in front of her to get towels. I could not believe that people treat each other like this."

"I could not believe it when I realised that we were in jail. To me it was something exciting. I never thought that I would see such a thing. Some of the women were crying but I was not. Sannie and I were so naughty (meaning insubordinate). Those ladies who run the jail shouted at us and I just laughed at them . It was as if they were mad ..they shouted at us so much. I could not believe that at their age! We talk about this now at work - how we became like sisters getting to know each other..."

"It was a terrible day. We did not think that they would keep us and I was so worried about my husband and the kids. I had never been in jail before and could not eat the food - cold black coffee and bread. I felt terrible. I got out after a day but some stayed for three days. We now feel stronger when we talk about this. It makes us work well together. Everyone here has been in the struggle... We

are all part of the union."

(Why did you join the trade union?)
"The organiser told me that trade unions would help us with our troubles with management - the poor wages and unhealthy work."

"We wanted our rights. We were tired of working so much overtime and also on weekends."

"I joined because I was told that the union would help with our grievances. If united they said we would be strong and get what we wanted."

"We needed to fight for maternity leave and for our jobs to be kept for us."

Since the recession and clamp down on union activists, the unions have become less popular. People accuse the union of causing the loss of jobs. In their villages the women face degrees of ostracism for being associated with the union. This contributes to the support which they give one another in the working environment.

"Some people now say that the union makes us loose jobs. The year after we joined the union we were arrested and now these people see that it has made us leave work."

"The workers in the village call us strikers. Even some of the women who we worked with, who were our friends, no longer talk to us."

The women themselves know that it was not because of the union that they were dismissed.

"I tell people about the unions. My sister and brother-in-law were working at Alfa and when the company closed down they would not have got anything if the union was not strong."

"If it was not for the union we would not have been in the project."

STRUCTURING THE CO-OPERATIVE: Domestic Work and Household Types

Discussions of households and domestic work took place during interviews with the women in their homes. Some interviewed were clearly better off than others. Those who appeared to be living in easier circumstances inhabited small brick houses which were usually furnished. The poorer households were those made of corrugated iron and looked like squatter shacks. These had very rudimentary furniture and occupants possessed fewer household items.

None the houses have running water, electricity or sewage. Cooking is done on paraffin stoves, and water heated on an outside wood-fire. The land around is dry and stark peppered with thorn bushes. Some people attempt to grow mielies if they have enough space in their yards, others keep chickens or goats. A few have cows. I was always offered tea and introduced to anyone in the family who was home. I was often shown a prize possession. These ranged from a television set which had broken down, a small car used to store hardware, the goats or cows or the family photo album .

These women's lives are structured by a rigorous domestic division of labour. They are responsible for all domestic work in the

household. On average they admitted spending up to five hours a day doing domestic chores. Most of one day each weekend was spent washing and ironing or undertaking a major clean of the house. All had school-going children and did not have to worry about childcare during the working day.

The extensive household responsibilities had a bearing on the structure and organisation of the co-operative. Control over their own work and the development of closer friendships in the co-operative, manifested themselves as flexibility in the work process. This enabled them to work and to fulfil more easily their family responsibilities and domestic duties.
In order to achieve this the organisation of working time in the project is very different from that of factory work. They begin at 8 am and end by 3 pm to allow time to get home and do the domestic chores. As factory workers these women had to leave home between 5 am and 6 am returning at about 6.30 pm or 7 pm depending on the distance of their homes from Brits. There was a constant pressure of time in order to complete the "double shift." This pressure, which left them permanently exhausted, was most clearly understood when analysing the typical daily routine of women factory workers.

Case Study - Sarah.

"When I worked in the factory, I got up before 5am and started the stove to make tea and wash. I then had to prepare breakfast for the children and food when they came back from school. I got the bus at 5.30 and started work at 7 am and worked until 5pm and then got home at 6.30. When I got back I fed the dogs and the chickens and swept ouside. When I am finished I make a fire, wash the pots and cook - we eat porrige and moroko, sometimes meat. In the morning it is bread and tea. We eat by 8 and then go to sleep. Sometimes I would wake up at 4am to make fat cakes to sell at the factory for 30c but the oil got too expensive so I stopped."

This tight schedule, similar for all the women when they worked in the factory, was avoided when they set up the co-operative. The co-operative has enabled them to reduce the conflict between work and the reproduction of the household. This was expressed in several ways:

"If our family needs us here we go and we know that the other women will understand - most of us have children."

"We have time to take our children to the doctor."

"It is better here for our time. We get here later than in the factory and leave by 3pm so that we can go home to cook and clean. When we were in the factory we got home so late. Now there is more time."

"Now that I am working in the project I do not have to leave home when the children are asleep and I get home in time to cook."

The flexibility of working time was also important in enabling the women to shop. Lack of freezer facilities and storage space and the distance of the large shops from their homes requires that the shopping for the household be done on a weekly basis. The project closes early on Fridays to enable the women to shop at one of the large supermarkets in Brits.

This re-organisation of time amongst women workers has been documented in other parts of the world. The closest paralled to this is to be found in the Seamstress Association in France at the beginning of the 19th century. During this period women formed co-operatives to organised work independently of employers. According to H. Grubitzsch (11), "the Seamstress Association found it quite self- evident that a women after a 10 hour working day should then look after her husband and children. They even emphasised it as a positive aspect in their Statutes, that they had deliberately laid down the working hours so as to allow women time for household duties."

Amongst the 14 women interviewed, five household types emerged at the time of the interview. Five women lived with their husbands in a nuclear family structure. All these husbands worked in either Brits or Rosslyn although two had recently being laid-off. Four women lived in migrant labour households where their husbands would visit monthly or bi-monthly. Two of the younger women lived with their old parents whom they used to support with the help of other siblings. All three remaining housholds were headed by women. Two of the women lived only with their children and one household was a female-headed household comprising two sisters and their respective children. The amount of domestic work and the way in which it was distributed varied according to the type of household structure.

In the households based on nuclear family structures the women admitted doing all domestic work. Their husbands only performed these tasks when they are sick. Men did take care of some of the tasks outdoors such as fixing fences, feeding animals, or ploughing fields (usually a small piece of land). It was generally accepted that women have to do all work in the house while the men work outside. There was no of indication that this was felt to be unfair even when the women were in full-time wage employment:

"When I come back from work I make the fire and I prepare food and then I bath and when my husband comes back from the factory I make tea for him. He just relaxes and then I give him water to wash and then he eats and the I go and wash the dishes and then wash and go to bed. Now in the project I get home a little earlier and things are better prepared."

In the households where there was an absent migrant, the women not only performed the traditional domestic tasks but were forced to be less reliant on men to perform some of the duties which they would most likely fulfill if they were permanent residents of the households.

"When my husband comes back on twice a month he is so tired. He sits with friends while I carry on with cleaning."

" We wanted to build a room but my husband does not feel like it when he comes home. He only relaxes here."

Households which were based on extended families where the younger women supported their elderly parents, domestic work was carried out mainly by their mothers who were pensioners. In the three households structured in this way, the younger women were not responsible for domestic work during the week and even had their meals cooked by their mothers. This household structure presented far fewer pressures on these younger women when they were in factory work.

In the two female-headed households, the women did not appear to have any stable relationship with a man and brought up their children entirely on their own. The women in these households relied more on help from their children for domestic work.

In the household shared by two sisters, domestic labour was shared by the two adults and it was only here that I came across anger and resistance to the traditional role of women:

"When we bere both working in the factory, we used to decide at the beginning of each week who would do the housework - the cooking and cleaning. But now that Mary is in the project she has more time and I do it on the weekend." (Mary's sister, Florence).

Neither Mary nor Florence have husbands or ongoing relationships with the fathers of their children. The resistance of these women to men was quite striking. It appeared that they were deliberately making a choice not to develop ongoing relationships with men. This is suggested in the following discussion:

(Do you want to get married?)
"When you get married there are lots of problems. They treat you like an animal. The black husbands are very difficult. As soon as they marry you the problems are on your shoulders. Inside the house there are many problems."

In all of the households the older female children helped their mothers with domestic duties. Daughters are socialised into accepting the inevitability of many hours of domestic work:

"When Louisa came back from her granny at 15 to live with me and her father she was not happy. When you live with your granny you just run around the house and do nothing. With me she has to learn housework because she is a little girl. I teach her to cook and clean and iron."

After this I asked what she would teach a little boy. She replied: "I would also teach him all of this in case he marries a lazy woman. Just like my husband, who knows everything and when he is alone he does these things for himself."

Working life and the reproduction of the domestic environment provides little time for anything else. The only leisure activity was church which all the women interviewed attended on weekends. There is no sense of ever reaching completion of chores in order to do something pleasurable. Any free time is used to relax, to regain strength, to move on to the next duty.

(If everything is done what do you do?)
"If I finish everything, I just go and lie down on my bed."

"There is never time during the week. Sometimes on a Sunday afternoon there is time to relax. I take a book - perhaps a love comic - and read, or I read the bible but I have not done this for a long time."

"If I finished everything I would try and do more sewing."

At home on a weekend they seldom went visiting or received visitors. Only the women with migrant husbands went away from time to time to visit them. Only two of the women belonged to an organisation: the

one a burial society, the other the Bophuthatswana Women's League. Both attended meetings once a month.

"There is no time for long talks. Sometimes we talk to the neighbours over the fence or in the street for five minutes if a friend greets you but it is not like the life of the men who can sit and drink and talk until it is dark."

HOUSEHOLD SKILLS AND THE PROJECT

Women project members revealed that one of the reasons they can run a project of their own is because they are used to dealing with money, being responsible for the maintenance of their households.

All five married women received their husbands' full pay cheque and distributed the necessary money to each member of the household, including their husbands. When also earning, they kept their own money but received only a portion of their husbands' income. The women in migrant households were given part of their husbands' salary each month - approximately R100. In the household shared by the two sisters, they each controlled their own income.

"We do all the budgeting at home. When we get money we budget. We know what is needed and what to buy and where the prices are high."

"We know how to organise things. We have to do the work at home and look after the children."

"In the project we have to keep books and record all the money. It is very much like budgeting at home."

CONCLUSION

The formation of the co-operative developed out of a particular form of consciousness and group identity. This evolved through a process of common work and domestic life experiences. The project embodies a form of constructive collective action and a developed class consciousness, with an alternative organisation of work being perceived.

The implementation of this alternative was made possible by the common past experiences, which created a homogeneous working group. This homogeneity has its origins in the common life and work experiences which were continuously built upon, thus enabling the emergence of a collective consciousness. The project members' previous status in the workforce as proletarians, with similar occupations and concerns, was essential in the formation of this cohesion. The past experience of struggle allows these women to continue identifying with the interests of the organised working class in the area although they are no longer directly part of the union movement.

Their experience as workers and union members has made them aware of belonging to a class. More that this, they see the link between class exploitation and gender oppression:

"Bophuthatswana takes advantage of us. Factories come here because they pay less especially to the women. Now they do not want unions in Bophuthatswana. There is going to be a terrible fight here ..."

In many of their interpretations of their conditions as workers, the women displayed a high level of gender consciousness. Their factory experiences enabled them to gain an awareness of themselves as workers with particular needs.

They entered the world of industrial employment with very specific preoccupations. In this world of work, their social identity as wives and mothers defined the perceptions of their exploitation. Remarks about differences in the project's working environment compared to the factory referred to their involvement in the domestic sphere.

This gender consciousness developed with their introduction into wage labour. Once they were no longer involved in full-time reproductive responsibilities, their preoccupation with identity as mothers was increased.

The conflict expressed here between household work and wage work has consequences for the development of class consciousness. Further investigation is needed on the different experience of male and female workers, and how this differentially affects their consciousness.

This study has established a potentially deep-seated conflict between employment and domestic responsibility. Where women workers are part of a commuter workforce, this places very specific pressures on them. The differential experiences of male and female workers in this context suggest that they will respond very differently to organisation and struggle in the factories. This has important, and as yet largely-unexplored, implications for working-class organisation.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

I have been involved with the project since its inception, in the capacity of advisor forming part of an advisory committee. This committee was set up to assist the project with outside funds and necessary technical expertise. I attended all the general meetings and through these became familar with the issues which dominate people's lives in a commuter region as well as the problems of organising the co-operative. My involvement with this aspect enabled me to develop a relationship with these women and inspired questions about their lives.

The research took place in three phases. A structured questionnaire was administered to ten women who spoke English with some fluency while the other four women were only asked factual questions. The questionnaire attempted to obtain information on the life-history of these women as well as qualitative responses to questions such as "What was it like when you grew up? What did you want to be?" The questionnaire was built around questions which were formulated over the year of working with organisational aspects of the project.

The women were interviewed in the church hall over a period of several weeks in September and October of 1985. These interviews were conducted over lunch breaks and when there was free time.

I discovered from the questionnaire that I had over-estimated the possibility of extracting both qualitative and quantative information from a single interview. Obtaining so much factual information at one time left little opportunity to pursue some of the qualitative questions.

I tried another technique in order to pursue the questions which dealt with their images and perceptions of work, family and life experiences - the open-ended interview. Each week I took one of the women home after work and spent up to two hours in discussion. Being out of a working environment and in the intimacy of their homes made it much easier to develop a rapport and ask more detailed information about their lives.

The factual information from the questionnaire made it possible for me to achieve deeper levels of communication and richer material. These interviews seemed the most appropriate technique for documenting the women's own account of their lives; the initial information from the questionnaire was essential in alerting me to specific issues as well as in developing a focus for the interviews. The questionnaire made me too much into the scientific researcher and the women into sources of data. The interviews in their homes reduced the formality and changed my role. I felt as if they were just sharing their experiences with another woman. They seemed keen to show me their homes, bringing me into a part of their lives and introducing me to other members of their families. The discussions were less hierarchical and more intimate giving them the opportunity to respond to the questions and ask me questions about my community.

I also conducted three collective interviews with the women while they were working. In these I asked questions related to themes which were appropriate for discussion and debate. This was done in order to get collective responses to issues as well as observe the women interacting with one another.

I have yet to grasp fully these women's perceptions of me. The inevitable distance created by language , different life experiences

as well as the effects of racial domination in the wider society increases the inequality between interviewer and interviewee. However, I felt that it was an advantage being a women researcher as there were many common areas of concern and understanding and this worked against the other constraints.

My participatory role in the project was also essential in developing the trust required for this type of research. The rationale behind the research was fully discussed with the women and they appeared to have no objections to the work. Untimately, it must be recognised that although the women interviewed spoke English relatively well, the fact that it is their second language places limitations on the relibility and depth of some of the information.

During the collective discussions and the individual interviews I felt that I was intrusive; when I asked if this was so they insisted I continue to ask questions and the most common response was: "We always talk when we work that is why this is different from the factory". At times they were disrupted, for example when the discussions became intense the chatter of the hand-machines would stop and their arms would remain frozen in position; they never went back to work until the discussion was completed.

Notes

1. G. Jaffee, 'The retrenchment process and some social implications', South African Review Two, Ravan Press, 1984;
J. Keenan, 'The recession and its effects on the African working class, South African Review Two, Ravan Press, 1984

2. J. Keenan, 'The B&S Closure', South African Labour Bulletin, 10(1), 1984

3. G. Jaffee, 'The social implications of the recession', unpublished paper, University of the Witwatersrand, 1983.

4. The women learnt how to sew through a number of courses run by Self-Help Action for Developing Economies (SHADE) based at the Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre, Roodepoort, Transvaal.

5. Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, SA Institute of Race Relations, 1984, 236.

6. Personal communication with secretary of the Brits Industrial Association, 1986.

7. This survey was conducted in the second half of 1985 and obtained numbers of employed from the majority of factories in the Brits industrial complex.

8. See for example, L. Rubin, Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working Class Family, Basic Books, New York.

9. D. Elson and R. Pearson, 'The subordination of women and the internationlsation of factory production',in (ed) Young, Wolkowitz and McCullagh, Of Marriage and the Market, CSE Books, 1981.

10. In 1984 the Bophuthatswana administration passed legislation which outlawed South African trade unions from operating in Bophuthatswana. There have subsequently been numerous atrocities perpetrated against members of trade unions by Bophuthatswanan police.

11. H. Grubitzsch, 'Women's projects and co-operatives at the beginning of the 19th century', Women's Studies International Forum, 8(4), 1985, 279-286.