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

Brink, Elsabe

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Dulcie Hartwell also recalled having to leave her child in the care of a domestic servant to attend trade union conferences. Mrs V., a widow with three small children whose family still resided in the Pietersburg district, used to leave her children in the care of a neighbour and later in the care of her landlady when she went to work.[44]

A child's illness created especially stressful times. Mrs Nel, who as a widow, had to leave her child ill in bed, gave insight into the situation,

> ...dan vat ek vanmore 'n fles met melk en ek sit dit voor die bed en ek sit toebroodjies en goed, kos (neer) ...ek het 'n dierbare ou buurvrou en as hulle siek is, stuur sy sop.
> (.....then I took a bottle of milk in the morning, sandwiches and things, food and put it next to the bed .....I had a sweet old neighbour and when they are sick, she sends soup.)[45]

Anna Scheepers, addressing the GWU Commission of Inquiry, indicated that this was a relatively common problem in the lives of women garment workers,

> ...the women are worried.....there is nobody to care for the children when they are ill and it disorganises production in the factories.[46]

In the case of death, divorce or desertion, some informants who had no one else to care for their children were forced to commit their children to an orphanage temporarily so that they could earn a living. Mrs Fitch, for example, after her separation, temporarily put her child in the St. Mary's Orphanage and found accommodation for herself in the Lionel Leveson Hostel for low-paid girls so that she could take up employment at the Alba Clothing Factory. She was accepted as inmate because her child's boarding fee of 10/- per week and divorce expenses brought her net income below the maximum wage limit of some two pounds per week im-

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[44] Interviews 34 and 32.

[45] Interview 19.

[46] GWU, Bca 4. GWU Commission of Inquiry, Evidence A. Scheepers, 1948, p.2291.

posed by the hostel.[47] During the thirties Peggy Sachs, a middle-aged prostitute, put her only child into the Jewish Orphanage in Johannesburg. She received no support from the child's father and had to make arrangements regarding the care of her child in order to pursue her rather insalubrious profession.[48] One informant who was interviewed for this study, was also committed to the Langlaagte Orphanage, at the age of eight, when her father died and her mother could no longer care for the children. She remained there until she could find employment at the age of sixteen.[49]

It is therefore evident that the garment workers as married women were faced with the persistent problem of poverty. In most cases they were married to men who could not support their families adequately. Garment workers who had married young mostly had to avail themselves of mothers, mothers-in-law and at times domestic servants to enable them to find employment themselves in order to contribute to the family income. When they did not have kin or friends to fall back on, and could not afford hired help, they were forced to use the various orphanages in the city as centres of child care. In extreme cases they would make use not only of formal, but also informal channels of adoption as well to solve their problems of child care.[50]

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[47] CAD, VWN 480. Report of the Matron, Lionel Leveson Hostel, 8.3.1940.

[48] CAD, VWN 2017. V.P. Steyn, Senior Probation Officer, 'Prostitution and Houses of Ill Fame in Johannesburg', 1939?.

[49] Interview 23. See also R. Krut, 'Maria Botha and her Sons: The Making of a White South African Family in the 20th Century', paper presented to the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, 1.11.1983.

[50] Interview 19. Mrs Nel was once instrumental in affecting the informal adoption of the child of an unmarried mother in the neighbourhood.

The Garment Workers as Daughters

Until such time as dependent children reached an age when they could begin to earn a living, impoverished white families in the city found themselves in very straitened circumstances. However, once children could begin to work, officially at the age of sixteen, but mostly at the age of fourteen or even younger, the family became better equipped to combat the poverty it experienced in the city. Sons and daughters, especially the latter, became key factors in the economic survival of the family.[51] This was the case in the Jurich family. In 1927 Mrs C. Jurich of Norwood appealed to the WTA for work for her daughters,

> I would like that both girls Johanna and Julia (16) get a start .... she Julia is very good with the needle ... I am very hard up .... I cannot afford to have the girls at home .... and people tell her Julia she is too young .... how many years is it since 1911?[52]

Single garment workers still residing with their families in the city, carried a burden comparable to that of the mothers in their families. The Carnegie Commission elaborated on the role of the daughter in the poor white family,

> The daughter's earnings in the Poor White family are of great importance; particularly in the cities the family forms a wage-earning unit. Hence there is a natural supply of female labour. Although factory work still sometimes takes place under undesirable conditions it offers a steadily improving field of employment to the Poor White girl, and the excess of womenfolk in the cities is directly connected with the attraction exerted by the opportunities so offered.[53]

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[51] Riley found that during the first half of the century, in areas of high unemployment in the South of Wales, miners often were out of work while their daughters were employed. D. Riley, 'Free Mothers: Pronatalism and Working Mothers in Industry at the End of the Last War', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 11, Spring 1981, p.71.

[52] GWU, Aab 1.96. Letters, Mrs C Jurich, Norwood Johannesburg, to Secretary WTA, 22.2.1927 and 10.3.1927.

[53] Carnegie Commission, *Poor White*, Recommendation no. 84, vol.II, p.xxiii.

These opportunities, although offered under appalling conditions of overcrowding, poor ventilation, filth, noise and heat, provided incomes with which a large number of women supported their families.[54]

These young girls contributed extensively to the family budget, even though it meant hardship for them.[55] According to Miss O'Reilley,

> We all had to contribute - we had to live - I gave all my wages, all of it and then my mother used to give me money back again.[56]

Mrs du Toit also gave all her money to her mother who was a widow and when she ventured to buy a few books with her wages, she was often scolded by her mother.[57] Mrs Labuschagne did not receive any pocket money, solely because,

> Jy weet daar is nie - dis die groot ding - jy weet daar is nie. (You know there is none -- this is the big thing -- you know there is none.)[58]

In her evidence before the 1932 Conciliation Board, Anna Maria Swanepoel (albeit motivating for higher wages and echoing Solly Sachs), maintained that about three-quarters of the young girls in the clothing industry supported their families and had a hard time making ends meet.[59] Johanna Petersen, also present at this investigation, testified that she gave her father, who was too ill to work, a pound per week to support himself and her little sister.[60] Of her weekly wages of £10.0 Maria Johanna du Plessis contributed five pounds per month to the family budget. Her father, at a monthly wage of nine pounds, earned less than she did and

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[54] H. Pollak, *Women*, pp.102-111, 171, 176.

[55] Ibid., Addendum, pp.49, 53.

[56] Interview 20.

[57] Interview 9.

[58] Interview 16.

[59] CAD, ARB. 559. Department of Labour, Conciliation Board, Evidence of A.M. Swanepoel, 22.9.1932.

[60] Ibid. Evidence of Johanna Petersen.

had to keep a family of eight of whom only four were employed. Nellie Murray's father earned a pound per week whereas her sister, a dressmaker, earned six pounds per week and she earned £2.10.0 per week. Together they had to support a family of seven in Brixton.[61] In 1931 Ivy Rebock, an 18-year-old machinist, helped her father, a telephone exchange worker, to support their family of fourteen.[62]

Further evidence is provided in Hansi Pollak's study. Of the sixteen case histories she used to illustrate the economic responsibility of the women she investigated, five showed how young girls between seventeen and twenty years of age, were the sole support of large families ranging from six to thirteen members. One girl (18), the eldest of a family of eight which she was supporting on £1.2.6. per week, remarked,

> We have to struggle very hard to keep the home going. My father is an invalid and unable to work... Often when I get home from work I feel as if I'm too tired even to lift anything.[63]

When her father became too ill to work, Mrs Britten also contributed her weekly wages to the upkeep of her family. Usually two or more of the twelve children in the Britten family worked to support their parents and the younger children who were still at school. The older brothers and sisters who had left home, in most cases to get married, were no longer able to contribute.[64] This trend was also observed during the Depression, in the United States of America, where married daughters no longer helped their parents financially, although some wished that they could have done so.[65]

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[61] Ibid. Evidence of Maria du Plessis and Nellie Murray.

[62] GWU, Bbc 1.23. Statement, I. Rebock to GWU, 1931. In June 1932, just prior to the general strike in the clothing industry she lost her job. GWU, Bbc 16.1. Notice for termination of employment, I. Rebock, June 1932.

[63] H. Pollak, *Women*, Addendum, p.56.

[64] Interview 4.

[65] R. Cavan and K. Ranck, *The Family and the Depression*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938, p.166.

In the absence of a father the daughters had to shoulder the burden alone. They had to care for widowed mothers, young brothers and sisters and sometimes their own illegitimate children. Ivy Mitchell (23) of Greymont, one of a family of five, was the only support of her widowed mother, although her sister was employed in a shirt factory and her brother was attending the School of Mines. When she lost her work at £2.19.6 per week she was destitute and appealed to the GWU for a grant of two pounds per week whilst she was unemployed.[66] She had begun work in the clothing industry in 1921 at the age of twelve and had been in the industry for nine years when in 1930 she earned three pounds per week as an all-round tailoress.

Miss A. Cronje of Vrededorp, like Ivy Mitchell, was the sole support of her family. However, she fell ill and lost her job, an occurrence which increased the destitution of her family. In her appeal to the union to find her a job she maintained that,

> It is impossible for me to stay at home without work because my father did not work and we are a big family.[67]

A month later she again appealed for a job as the situation at home with her father still unemployed, had become impossible. With the aid of the union she did find employment and in October, wise to industrial ways, requested the union for help her get the raise due to her after her first six months in the industry.[68] Paula Beukes was equally desperate to find employment which would help to support her family. She appealed to the union for help,

> My parents are turning on me because I have no work. You must know that poorness breaks up love in a home.[69]

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[66] GWU, Bbc 16.1. Affidavit, I. Mitchell, 14.3.1930. GWU, Bbc 1.38. Letter, Ivy Mitchell to GWU, 1933.

[67] GWU, Bbc 16.1. Letter, A. Cronje to Solly Sachs, received 2.6.1930.

[68] Ibid. Correspondence, A. Cronje and GWU, October 1930.

[69] GWU, Bbc 1.54. Letter, P. Beukes to S. Sachs, 23.5.1934.

The fathers of Elizabeth Anderson and Maria van Rensburg of First Avenue, George Town and Second Street, Germiston respectively, had no occupations. The daughters' jobs as a machinist and factory worker respectively, probably were of great importance to their families' economic survival. The fathers of Maria Bewick, Frederika de Kock and Doris Edwards were all retired men in Germiston, most probably dependent on their daughters' wages, for Maria and Doris had no brothers and sisters over 21 living at home. However, Frederika's sister, a shop assistant, most probably helped as well. Hester de Wet helped her brother, a laundry worker, to support their widowed mother and three brothers and sisters on their wages of respectively 10/- and 30/- per week.[70]

These women supported their families at considerable cost to themselves, for,

> .....many young women who earn wages upon which they themselves could live in fairly good circumstances, actually live under very poor circumstances owing to the necessity of assisting ailing, unemployed or casually employed parents, or numerous younger brothers and sisters.[71]

Both Mrs Pennells and Mrs B. had to help to support the family when their fathers, who had been prosperous farmers, lost everything when they stood guarantee for a friend. Mrs Pennells, who felt that she had to contribute to the family income, began working in a Fordsburg tailoring factory in 1919.[72] On arrival in Johannesburg, Mrs B.'s father found employment as a lift operator and his daughters found employment in a clothing and sweet factory respectively to contribute to the survival of the family. However, her father's job was "maar 'n hartseer saak" (a sad business), while both sisters felt it to be a humiliation to be employed in a factory.

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[70] JPL, Voters' Rolls 1931, Germiston. GWU, Bca 3. Commission of Inquiry, Preliminary Statement prepared by H. de Wet, 1948.

[71] CAD, VWN 468. Letter, C. Division to Under-Secretary. Investigation into housing conditions of female factory workers in Germiston, 18 4.1936.

[72] Interview 21. Mrs Pennells was the only woman interviewed for this study to commence working before the mid-twenties.

Their education had continued after standard 6 and as a result they soon moved into better jobs.[73]

Miss Margaret Martle, an unmarried mother of Village Main, also appealed to the GWU for assistance when she had to stop working and lost her weekly wage of £2.10.0 which had contributed to the support of her family of nine. She and her sister Doreen were both employed at S. Malk's and had to support their family on their combined wages. Their father had been unemployed for the previous eight years. As a result of the birth of her illegitimate child, Margaret (21) had lost her job. Although she had no hope of receiving maintenance from the father of the child, Martin Schanell, a labourer in Newclare, who earned 5/6 per day, their combined wages disqualified her for a state confinement allowance. In 1934 Margaret fell pregnant again. Although she had in the interim moved to Selby, she had to return to her parents' home as she did not have any income for the six months after her child was born in December 1933. Although their father, a painter handyman, did earn some money after the Depression, Margaret and Doreen remained the main supporters of the family, which during the thirties had increased to ten members. In the mid-forties, after being employed at S. Malk's for sixteen and fifteen years respectively, they approached the union to help them to buy outfits for mourning, which they could not afford, for their father was expected to die shortly. They based their appeal on the fact that they had as yet not received aid from the union.[74]

It was not uncommon for some garment workers to have illegitimate children.[75] In the case of a garment worker, Christina Gouws, the father of

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[73] Interview 27.

[74] GWU, Bbc 1.138. General Secretary, GWU to Factory Inspector, Department of Labour, Pretoria, 28.1.32. GWU, Bcd 4.1.1. Letter Inspector of Factories, Johannesburg to M. Martle, 14.12.1931 and statement M. Martle, 1931. Affidavit, M. Martle, 21.11.1934. GWU, Bcd 1.2. Minutes Complaints Committee GWU, 26.7.1945.

[75] This was also the case in early twentieth century German

the illegitimate child was in the police force. He had borrowed ten pounds from her to buy his discharge from the force in order to marry her on the 31st of August 1932. The date for the wedding had been set, but "then he absconded", it was tersely remarked in the union's description of the case.[76] Similarly, Johanna Stockenstrom did not receive support from the baby's father, a lorry driver, and had to find lodgings with an aunt.[77] Anna Scheepers recalled many young unmarried women coming to the union for help,

> ...partykeer is 'n meisie swanger en sy weet nie wat om te doen nie. Dan het ons probeer, jy weet ouers kry vir die kind... dit het heelwat gebeur.
> (...sometimes a girl is pregnant and she does not know what to do. Then we tried, you know, to find parents for the child...this often happened.)[78]

Dulcie Hartwell explained these measures taken by garment workers to survive,

> They had no choice. They couldn't afford to pay servants. Unless they were lucky enough to live with family then it wasn't necessary. Much the same as what happens amongst the black people today, who send their children home to the country. They didn't, couldn't send their children home to the country.[79]

The living conditions of those garment workers without family or friends to support and succour them, were appalling. As has been shown in

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working-class communities. cf. S. Bajohr, 'Illegitimacy and the Working Class: Illegitimate Mothers in Brunswick 1900-1933', in R.J. Evans, *The German Working Class, 1888-1933*, London: Croom Helm, 1982.

[76] (...) Bcd 4.1.1. Applications of Distressing Cases Refused during ... re Confinement Allowances Granted according to the Factories Act, sec. 18.

[77] Ibid. Affidavit, J. Stockenstrom, 25.7.1938.

[78] Interview 35.

[79] Interview 34. This suggests something in line with the situation sketched by Newman in his analysis of Southern textile workers in the United States of America. "To leave the farm for the factory was to sink so low in social status that often families were severed by the transition". D. Newman, 'Work and Community Life in a Southern Textile Town', in D.J. Leab ed., *Labour History Reader*, p.436. Alternatively, relatives in the rural areas perhaps did not have the resources to cope with the offspring of kin working in the city.

chapter one, their housing conditions were of the worst to be found. In 1936, an investigation done by Department of Labour officials, Misses S.M. van den Berg and H.J.L. Verwoerd, into the housing and living conditions of young girls working in the clothing factories in Germiston

> revealed that the George Town area was a very congested one and in almost every house, factory girls can be found living either with parents or in lodgings.[80]

Girls paid between 7/6 and 12/6, and 12/6 and 20/6 per week for lodgings, depending upon their quality. At this price the girls preferred to prepare their own food in their rooms because food they received was "te sleg" (too poor). Miss Van den Berg explained,

> When asked what "te sleg" (too poor) really meant, they said "rice and potatoes".[81]

Deprivation suffered by garment workers on such a poor diet and under such bad conditions had significant consequences for their health. During the late thirties numerous garment workers fell terminally ill with tuberculosis. This gave rise to considerable concern with the GWU executive, who contributed the prevalence of TB to,

> .....die kondisie waarin ons werkers moet werk.....Iets sal moet gedoen word om hierdie ongelukkige werksters tot hulp te kom..... (....the conditions under which our workers must labour..... something will have to be done to come to the aid of these unhappy workers.....)[82]

In 1940 the Medical Officer of Health of Germiston remarked,

> It is known that many girls applying for employment in the clothing factories suffer from the effect of malnutrition, in consequence of which their resistance to disease is poor.[83]

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[80] CAD, VWN 468. *Rand Daily Mail*, 'Germiston Factory Girls', 22.4.1936. Hansi Pollak, whose thesis on white women in Witwatersrand industries had been completed some years previously, assisted in the investigation.

[81] Ibid. She also maintained that on such a poor diet the girls often lacked the energy to participate in any physical outdoor recreation and activity.

[82] *KW/GW*, 'Tuberkulose in Germiston', April 1939, p.11.

[83] CAD, ARB 2017. *The Star*, 'Safeguarding the Health of Factory Work-

Information on the prevalence of tuberculosis amongst garment workers in particular and women in general in South Africa is scanty. However, in Great Britain during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was found that women were especially susceptible to TB,

> Contrary to common assumptions during the 19th and 20th centuries, TB, rather than occupational diseases or childbearing was the primary killer of women.[84]

Johansson maintains that a possible reason for the high prevalence of TB amongst women and especially young women was the fact that they were thought of as being 'unproductive' females, and with their mothers, were therefore last in line for food in the home.[85] It would seem that the long-term effects of malnutrition which surfaced as TB in these young garment workers in their early twenties, point towards a long history of deprivation and hardship both of the garment worker residing with her family and of the garment worker as single migrant.

In many families where the fathers' wages were either insufficient or totally absent, their daughters carried a considerable financial burden. As a result these young women suffered much deprivation. Single garment workers living on rice and potatoes under these appalling circumstances had to fend for themselves on wages earned in industrial employment and found themselves in a more uncertain and perilous position than girls who still resided with their families. Although the latter were also

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ers', 16.1.1940. Once daughters began to contribute to the family income, they were better treated.

[84] M. Vicinus, Introduction, 'New Trends in the Study of Victorian Women', in M. Vicinus, *A Widening Sphere. Changing Roles of European Women,* , London: Methuen, 1977, p. xv.

[85] S. Johansson, 'Sex and Death in Victorian England: An Examination of Age and Sex-Specific Death Rates, 1840-1910', in M. Vicinus, *A Widening Sphere*, pp.169-173. This argument is substantiated by M. Mitchell, 'The Effects of Unemployment on the Social Condition of Women and Children in the 1930's', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 19, Spring 1985; A. Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', p.40; A. Whitehead, '"I'm Hungry, Mum": The Politics of Domestic Budgeting', in K. Young, C. Walkowitz and R. McCullag eds., *Of Marriage and the Market: Women's Subordination Internationally and its Lessons*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p.111.

exposed to considerable poverty which necessitated no mean sacrifices in order to ensure the survival of their families, their existence was more secure. Girls without families, however, would sometimes be forced to resort to other alternatives to escape destitution.

Prostitution - From 'Frenchfontein' to the 'Game Reserve'

Often unemployment spelt destitution for single garment workers in the city. The appeal of Miss G. Green to the WTA after she had been unemployed for three weeks, highlighted an aspect of the plight of single garment workers, "I have no people here and have to pay boarding".[86] During the following decade the conditions of single garment workers who had to earn their own keep did not improve much. Their wages remained low, especially in the first and second years of employment, starting at some 17/- to 20/- per week. Board and lodging was expensive, ranging from 12/- to 15/- per week for the cheapest but worst accommodation.[87] In 1935 a Germiston magistrate described the living conditions of some five hundred young female factory workers as wretched in the extreme. Many were accommodated by the families of local relief work labourers and were often not given sufficient food to subsist.[88]

Sometimes the poverty experienced by single girls forced them to resort to socially unacceptable means of supplementing their meagre wages.[89]

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[86] GWU, Aab 1.96. Miss G. Green, c/o Mrs Van Onselen, Mayfair, 19.3.1926.

[87] Carnegie Commission, *Poor White*, vol.I, p.221 (A). See also CAL, VWN 468. Information and correspondence on the investigation by H.J.L. Verwoerd and S.M. van den Berg on the housing and living conditions of young female factory workers in Germiston, April 1936. See Illustration 6 for a general picture of maximum and minimum wages for females employed in the clothing industry, 1932-1944.

[88] CAD, ARB 1023. Letter, Magistrate's Office, Germiston to Secretary for Labour, Pretoria, 8.3.1935.

[89] Often the alternative to a marginalised existence and destitution was prostitution. Lewenhak found it to be the case in nineteenth century Britain, where girls from large families were often faced with the choice of 'sweated' work as seamstresses, or prostitution. S. Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions: An Outline History of Women*

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Hester Cornelius described her plight and that of fellow garment workers after they had been on slack time for several days per week,

> Honger het ons gedryf om te doen wat ons nooit tevore gedoen het nie, naamlik steel. Ons gaan al vier in 'n winkel, die een koop iets vir 'n paar pennies en die ander neem hulle kans waar.
> (Hunger drove us to do what we never did before, that is,to steal. We would all four go into a shop, the one buys something for a few pence and the other three take advantage.)[90]

These four girls, in order 'om nie te versleg' (not to be corrupted), eventually gave up their independence to find accommodation with families who allowed them to do housework in return for their lodgings. Cornelius's account hints at another publicly frowned-upon way of making ends meet. A garment worker who had taken in two young girls as lodgers, was more explicit when responding to Hansi Pollak in 1931,

> What are they to do if someone does not take them in cheaply? They will only go wrong and go through the same as I have had to do (i.e. to have an illegitimate child).[91]

'Going wrong' was a very real alternative for some destitute garment workers with no friends or relatives in the urban areas. Both the garment workers and the union realised the dangers. As early as 1920, albeit for propaganda purposes, the WTA, forerunner of the GWU, declared,

> We ask you to imagine *your sisters* in this struggle. We ask you to declare that the conditions of labour on the Rand for young girls shall be such as to safeguard them from the *terrors of prostitution* (their italics).[92]

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in the British Trade Union Movement, London: Ernest Benn, 1977, p.59. Likewise, J. Walkowitz in an analysis of prostitutes and working women in nineteenth century Plymouth and Southampton, found that occupational dislocation was an important factor for the move into prostitution. J. Walkowitz, 'The Making of an Outcast Group: Prostitutes and Working Women in Nineteenth Century Plymouth and Southampton', in M. Vicinus, *A Widening Sphere*, p.75.

90 *KW/GW*, H. Cornelius, 'Die Lewe van 'n Klerewerkster,' November 1936.

91 H. Pollak, *Women*, Addendum, p.58. 'Case histories illustrating the living and home conditions in the form of investigator's notes'.

92 GWU, Aab 1.157. Pamphlet WTA, 'The Tailors' Strike', 24.1.1920. See also CAD, JUS 288. Industrial Unrest, Johannesburg tailors' strike 22/23.1.1920. Letter of A.E. Tigger to Secretary South African Police.

In 1929 Mr H. Lee, then president of the GWU, saw the women as the charges of the union, for they "would be walking about the streets if not for the union."[93] At least the GWU was aware of the danger of garment workers going onto the streets,

> ...such wages lead to girls employed in tailoring being driven in many instances onto the streets to become prostitutes to the deterioration of their health as they are not paid enough to provide ever the most elementary necessities of life for themselves and in many cases their dependants.[94]

The forms and incidence of prostitution among white women and more significantly among white Afrikaner women migrants to the city, are difficult to assess.[95] Observers, politicians and historians alike seem to have drawn a discreet veil over this discomforting subject which, from a middle-class perspective, has been occasionally condemned but never explored. For example, Stals says little more than,

> Die verskynsel dat jong meisies, wat los van hulle ouerhuis in die stad kom werk het en met armoede en swak werks- en verblyfsomstandighede moes worstel, in onsedelikheid verval het, was vir die morele gewete van die Afrikaner, soos uitgedruk deur kerkorganisasies, politici en ander leiersfigure sorgwekkend en onaanvaarbaar.
> (The phenomenon that young girls, who had come to work in the city severed from their parents' home and had to struggle with poverty and poor working and living conditions, fell into immorality, was for the moral consciousness of the Afrikaner as expressed by church organisations, politicians and other leading figures, alarming as well as unacceptable.)[96]

Van Onselen is one of the few who has attempted to lift the topic from its bed of obscurity. As he shows, since the early days, prostitution has been endemic to Johannesburg. Prior to the First World War the main

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[93] GWU, Aaa 1. Minutes meeting CEC GWU, 22.7.1929.

[94] GWU, Aab 1.24. 'Sweating Conditions in the Tailoring Industry', 6.8.1929.

[95] At the recent Association for Sociology in South Africa Annual Congress, Durban 30.6.-4.7.1986, Ros Posel presented a paper, 'A Modern Babylon: White Prostitut[illegible] Durban at the Turn of the Century' in which she shed ligh[illegible] revalence of white prostitution in Durban. She deals [illegible] ith white middle-class perceptions and reactions to pro[illegible] Possibly due to a lack of sources, she does not say much [illegible] women who made up this work force.

[96] E.J.P. Stals, *Afrikaners*, vol. II, p.31.

body of prostitutes was composed of women who had migrated from Europe and America to Johannesburg in the wake of the gold rush and established themselves in what was then called 'Frenchfontein', in the centre of the city. After the War they were gradually replaced by young Afrikaner women, originally from the local countryside, who plied their trade in an area known during the thirties as the 'Game Reserve'. This change in name captures the change in composition of the women plying their trade in the red-light district of Johannesburg, as well as the attitude of the men whom they encountered there. It was maintained that this area "on certain nights literally swarms with men who are looking for women".[97]

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to get a full picture of the background to prostitution. Studies of prostitution in America and Britain have found that,

> For young farm women who came to these towns, their isolation, low pay and vulnerability to unemployment easily led to prostitution.[100]

In South Africa similar factors which pushed young females into prostitution can be identified. Firstly, the seduction of the city in its various guises was considered the downfall of some young girls. Miss Van den Berg, investigator for the Department of Labour, alluded to the spectre of prostitution and the 'blink-bedrog van die stad' (seductive swindle of the city),

> Moreover, the crowded and sordid conditions of the environment to which they return, combined with the craving of a number of girls for new and excitable experience, tend to make these girls suggestible to any type of diversion which offers.[101]

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> ...die meisies buitendien aan allerlei versoekinge blootgestel word om hulle inkomste te vermeerder.
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A garment worker living in a rented room at two pounds per month without any help highlighted these issues during an interview with Hansi Pollak in 1930,

> I don't blame the girls who go on the street. Life's too hard. Many a night I've gone to bed hungry and cried my heart out, because I wanted a new pair of stockings or wanted to go to the bioscope.[103]

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[100] M. Vicinus, *A Widening Sphere*, Introduction, p. xv.

[101] CAD, VVN 468. *Rand Daily Mail*, 'Germiston Girls live on Rice and Potatoes', 22.4.1935.

[102] Ibid., letter, J.D. van Niekerk to M.P., Mr A. Fourie, 5.2.1935.

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The garment workers were not only socially, but also economically vulnerable. On their meagre wages they could hardly keep body and soul together and when they were unemployed and had no one to turn to they had to resort to socially unacceptable ways of keeping alive. In addition, at times their growing dependence on wages and the accompanying rise in living standards and expectations would also serve to propel them into prostitution.

Finally, as Stals has argued, the disintegration of family life in the city also played a part. As he suggests,

> Daarby was gesinsverbrokkeling in Johannesburg ook aan die eenkant die gevolg van ouers wat aan mekaar ontrou geword het en aan die ander kant weer die oorsaak dat daar sedelike verval by die kinders ingetree het.
> (The disintegration of the family in Johannesburg was on the one hand the result of the infidelity of the parents and on the other the cause of the moral decline which manifested itself in the children.)[104]

Although stoutly condemned, the presence and practice of prostitution in Johannesburg during the twenties and thirties was not thoroughly investigated or researched.[105] Information on prostitution during this period is therefore sparse. The situation is remedied to some degree by a lengthy report written towards the end of the thirties by a Johannesburg probation officer Mr V.P. Steyn, on 'Prostitution and Houses of Ill Fame in Johannesburg.'[106]

The total number of prostitutes in Johannesburg during the 1930's is difficult to estimate, but according to Steyn's calculations, an average of some 90 prostitutes were arrested for soliciting per year, totalling

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[104] E.J.P. Stals, *Afrikaners*, vol. II, p.32.

[105] Freed's sociological investigation of the matter published in 1949 does, however, shed some light on the problem during the late forties. cf. L. Freed, *The Problem of European Prostitution in Johannesburg*, Cape Town: Juta, 1949.

[106] CAD, VWN 2017. V.P. Steyn, 'Prostitution'. (This box dealt mainly with general welfare correspondence.) Much more investigation into this topic is needed, though.

357 women from 1932 to 1937.[107] It was estimated by the police that at the time of Steyn's investigation some 300 to 400 prostitutes were operating on the streets, to him a relatively small number, given the history of Johannesburg as a mining camp.[108] In this report he identified four kinds of prostitutes. Besides the part-time and full-time prostitutes he also identified the mistress and 'fille de joie', or woman of easy virtue. The latter, he maintained, was not "averse to spending a weekend with a man if he had a car and can provide the necessary entertainment". These girls usually had the reputation of being very good company and having the habit of borrowing money but not repaying it after having "granted intimacy".[109] Some garment workers fell into this category because they were forced to take a "gentleman friend", for, as one admitted, "it's better being with one man than being dependent on many".[110]

Steyn found that some 65% of all prostitutes operating in Johannesburg were part-time prostitutes. They were mainly 'filles de joie' who had drifted into prostitution or girls who, due to a sudden economic crisis, had resorted to prostitution to survive. Having later found employment again they did not give up this source of additional income. Steyn was of the opinion that,

> ...actually these girls gradually adopt a mode of living that demands greater expenditure than they can afford and that the temptation of securing additional income in this way is too great for them to withstand, especially when one considers the general moral tone of the environment in which they live.[111]

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[107] Ibid., p.9.

[108] Ibid., p.7.

[109] Ibid., p.5.

[110] H. Pollak, *Women*, p.210. Pollak observed that when they could not find accommodation they could afford or lodgings with friends or relatives, some garment workers were, therefore, *forced* into immorality (Pollak's emphasis). Ibid., p.189.

[111] CAD, VWN 2017. V.P. Steyn, 'Prostitution', p.7.

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The reservations against factory work voiced by a prostitute, Peggy Sachs, echoed this point. According to Steyn, she stated she would have to resort to the other life to provide properly for herself. So too did Dora Pretorius (25), originally from Lichtenburg, who, when she was repeatedly visited by the probation officer, eventually told him "to go to hell as she would please herself". He observed, alluding to the observations made above,

> I fear she took to this life because she was not prepared to live on the small wage earned in a factory.[112]

Steyn also found married women in the category of part-timers who resorted to prostitution as a result of a sudden emergency, as a result of illness, unemployment of the breadwinner or some similar cause, as was experienced by Mrs Catherine Higgens (29), a mother of three children. When she or her husband at intervals lost their jobs, she resorted to prostitution to keep the family from destitution.[113] In Germiston, a Mrs Nieuwenhuizen of President Street, probably into part-time prostitution as well, profited from her 'immoral life'. She was unemployed, received a five pound grant for her children per month and paid four pounds per month for the two rooms she rented. Although her husband was midway through a six-year prison sentence and she had only a pound a month to live on, she was in possession of a new bicycle, a kitchen dresser and a "fairly extensive wardrobe", a social worker observed.[114]

As Van Onselen remarked, part-time prostitutes were often forced to solicit men as a result of economic circumstances and the adoption of a standard of living which demanded ever-increasing expenditures. This increase in the standard of living and expectations of young single women seemed to have played an important role in their entry into prostitution.

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[112] Ibid., p.11.

[113] Ibid., p.12.

[114] CAD, VWN 679. Letter, Senior Probation Officer to Germiston Magistrate, 5.10.1936.

Freed also found in his study of prostitution in Johannesburg that the majority of prostitutes he investigated, had originally been employed at the lowest wage rates in the most labour-intensive industries, such as clothing, chemical, box and trunk factories, and in tearooms and milk bars.[115]

Women who first took up prostitution as part-timers, would eventually drift into full-time prostitution. They were usually very poorly educated, in many cases originally from rural families, not interested in steady employment, and took up casual work in cafés or worked as caterers at the dog races. Peggy Sachs again serves as a good example. She was not prepared to work at the then current low factory wages. Moreover, she was also disabled by a crippled foot which prevented her from standing as long as was required in a factory. Winnie Kenny (42) became a full-time prostitute because she was too old to take up other employment and, in addition, her appearance militated against her entering domestic service. By contrast Joey Cloete (22), a "very well-known prostitute", was excluded from socially acceptable work in a tearoom or similar occupation where she would have been able to earn enough to maintain her standard of living, because she was too well-known in her profession as a prostitute.[116]

Poverty therefore propelled a minority of garment workers into socially unacceptable ways of earning a living, of which prostitution was the most significant and the most frowned upon by middle-class observers. 'Frenchfontein' became the 'Game Reserve' when, after the First World War, Afrikaner girls replaced their foreign counterparts as the local constituents of the profession. Here women who were not mistresses or

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[115] L. Freed, *Prostitution*, pp.179-180, 195.

[116] Ibid. It would seem that waitressing and prostitution at times went hand in hand. It was thought that unless there is "a state-aided hostel for low-paid girls, they would have had to look to undesirable methods of augmenting their incomes in order to be able to live". CAD, UOD 92. Memo, Training at Housecraft Schools, 22.10.1937.

'filles de joie', operated as part-time or full-time prostitutes, much to the horror and censure of Afrikaner clergy, politicians and community leaders. However, in this condemnation the individual women who made up the profession as well as their specific motivations for doing so often were lost sight of. Hence a one-sided picture emerged which, while conveniently focusing on its symptoms, facilitated an avoidance of the causes of the problem.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to determine the extent to which the poverty experienced by garment workers on the Witwatersrand during the 1920's and early 1930's shaped and influenced their lives and experience both at home and at work. Firstly, I attempted to show how these women firstly as mothers, often had marital problems to cope with. In addition, they had difficulties in providing for their families when their husbands could not earn enough to support them, especially when they still had young dependent children at home. Secondly, the contribution of the garment workers as daughters within the economic structure of the family once they attained a wage-earning age, was analysed. Girls with families in the city found themselves in a vulnerable and precarious position. They earned a very low wage which was barely enough to keep themselves. Nevertheless, this wage constituted a considerable percentage of the total income of the family wage-earning unit and was used to keep not only the person who earned it, but also all the other dependent members of the family unit. The plight of single garment workers lodging with strangers in the city was looked at to see how, and at what price, they strove to combat the poverty they experienced. Finally, prostitution in Johannesburg during the thirties, a threat which confronted a minority of garment workers, mostly single but including some married women, was examined to ascertain its causes, extent amongst and influence on the lives of the garment workers.

CHAPTER 4

NEITHER PROSTITUTE NOR DESTITUTE - YET IN NEED OF ASSISTANCE

The Economic Marginality of the Garment Workers.

Introduction

Conditions of general economic well-being did not always signal prosperity and progress to working-class families. A recent analysis of the share of working-class American families in the prosperity of the twenties in the United States of America established that,

> Even at the best of times, economic insecurity clouded the hopes of working-class families ..the burden of unemployment, whether from slack work, sickness or old age was heavy, even when industrial conditions are considered as merely normal.[1]

Especially during the twenties and thirties, assistance for people in need was not readily forthcoming from state, church or welfare organisations, and when it was, it was usually available only to those people who were totally devoid of resources. In 1933 at a meeting of the Federation of Ratepayers Associations, Councillor Lionel Leveson underlined this trend when he accused the government of only being concerned with poor whites and not with the partly-employed artisan.[2]

During the twenties and thirties on the Witwatersrand, garment workers faced conditions of economic insecurity and marginality. As first generation migrants to the city, a whole range of problems confronted them in their daily lives. However, they were not utterly destitute, helpless

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1 F. Strickler, 'Affluence for Whom?: Another Look at Prosperity and the Working Class in the 1920's', in D. Leab ed., *Labour History Reader*, p.303.

2 *Rand Daily Mail*, 'Houses for Working Men', 4.10.1933.

and in need of rescue facilities and this debarred them from most state or charitable assistance. These institutions offered very limited facilities for the provision of relief to garment workers who lived and worked in very marginalised situations.

To begin with, the state did not even have the necessary administrative machinery which could deal effectively with the problems of destitute workers. A separate department which dealt with social welfare did not exist prior to 1937 and these functions were at first dealt with by other departments such as the Department of Mines and Labour. In addition, rescue homes such as the Cottesloe Hostel for European girls which was run by the Anglican Church admitted, for example, girls released on licence from the Standerton Industrial School. Likewise, the Legion of Mary Home offered succour solely to completely destitute women.[3] Private welfare organisations, of which there were many on the Reef, also paid comparatively little attention to people who were not destitute, but precariously employed and vulnerable to the slightest fluctuation in their economic fortunes.[4] Finally, up to the late 1930's, the church, especially the Afrikaans-speaking churches, did not appreciate the needs of recently urbanised, impoverished, working Afrikaners. According to Stals, the church, the only anchor of the Afrikaner, had,

> eers mettertyd die stad se behoeftes werklik begryp en 'n helpende hand uitgesteek.
> (..only in the course of time truly understood the requirements of the city and extended a helping hand.)[5]

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[3] CPSA. Girls Diocesan Association, *Annual Report*, 1918-1937. Training in domestic skills and a wide range of recreational facilities such as sports and dancing classes were provided for these girls. Re Legion of Mary Home, cf. CAD, VWN 481. Letter, Johannesburg City Council to J. de Kock, snr. Probation Officer, 7.3.1940.

[4] CAD, VWN 3003. In 1940 a total of some 6 000 families in Johannesburg were receiving aid from some 10 welfare organisations in the city. See e.g. the annual reports of the Germiston Benevolent and Aid Society, 3.3.1933 and January 1940 and *Rand Daily Mail*, 4.12.1940. Also CAD, GMA, Box 260, 98/1, vol. I, 1928-1948. Germiston Children's Aid and Benevolent Society, first Report, January 1919-20.

[5] E.J.P. Stals, *Afrikaners*, vol. II, p.13.

Author Brink Elsab├⌐
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