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THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN WORKERS IN  
SOUTH AFRICA, 1973-1980**

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The theme of incomplete proletarianization weaves through many studies of women workers. Although differing in emphasis according to the time period and the social formation, this theory seeks to explain the low level of women's participation in workers' struggles by reference to their involvement in reproductive as well as productive activities. Even as full-time wage-earners women continue to assume responsibility for household tasks and, more broadly, for the care and socialization of the next generation of workers. This division of time and concern, the theory goes, leaves them less prone to identify themselves solely as workers and therefore less liable to commit themselves to working class activism. But their incomplete proletarianization is economic as well as psychological, for these arguments also suggest that women can, if necessary, rely on male incomes for their support and are, therefore, not entirely dependent on their own labor power.

Shelia Rowbotham takes this position in her discussion of European women workers in the 19th century. She suggests that "the particular relationship of the woman to reproduction and consumption within the family mediated her relationship to commodity production," thereby making women "less liable to organize."<sup>1</sup> She explains in greater detail:

Women continued to work in the home, maintaining the needs

of the family, but working for wages became the predominant activity external to family production. The wife's work outside the home was therefore an economic supplement to the family income. Women retained certain features of a pre-capitalist labour force. They never fully learned the rules of the new economic game.<sup>2</sup>

Recent studies of women workers in contemporary Third World countries have stressed a similar theme. Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson, writing on women employed in "world market factories," those that produce solely for export to the centers of capitalist production, found a low level of female participation in trade union activities and a lack of workers' or trade union consciousness. Their explanation, based on the idea of women's "secondary status" in the labor market, is similar to that of Rowbotham.<sup>3</sup> A major study of working-class consciousness among Latin American women argues along the same lines that because of the centrality of their family roles and their sexual subordination at home, labor force participation alone may be insufficient to foster class consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

Women workers in South Africa also bear heavy reproductive responsibilities, not only for domestic labor, but also for family support. Interviews conducted with female textile workers in Durban in the middle 1970s reported the women's insistence that they assumed the full burden of domestic labor and child-rearing. In the words of one of them, "The woman sees to it that everyone in the family gets food despite that there may be no money available; the man will demand food. This leads the woman to secretly lend money from others. With a small child the mother has to see to it that he is provided with food and clothing." Typically they rose at 4:30 a.m. in order to catch a 5:15 bus and returned home between 5:30 and 7 p.m., depending on overtime work and the availability of transport. Cooking, child, care, and washing and ironing occupied the evening hours, with heavier household work, sewing, and knitting saved for the weekends. The majority of women relied on

family members for child care, although some employed unrelated young girls. Migrant workers usually left their children with relatives in the rural areas.<sup>5</sup>

Despite their heavy family involvement, women workers in South Africa, like those in many other historical settings, have displayed a degree of working-class consciousness that is inconsistent with the idea of semi-Proletarianization and suggests a number of problems with the concept. First of all, it fails to distinguish adequately between the economic and the psychological aspects of women's roles. Secondly, it seems to assume that all women workers are married women with children, failing to take into account the differences in women's ages and family responsibilities. Finally, it ignores features of both the work situation and the social formation in general that may foster or hinder the development of resistance and class consciousness. By analyzing a case in which women have been active in workers' struggles, the necessity for considering all of these factors becomes clear. The South African material suggests that, although women workers are strongly tied to their families, both emotionally and through the demands of domestic labor, the enforced self-sufficiency of many women, combined with the overlap between workers' protest and nationalist resistance, has helped to create a militant and self-conscious female component within the black working class.

The concept of incomplete proletarianization draws on Marx's definition of free wage labor, which he depicts as "free" in the following double sense, "that as a free individual he can dispose [of] his labour-power as his own commodity and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale".<sup>6</sup> Elson and Pearson, citing this definition to explain women's "secondary status" in the labor market, argue that women are never "free" wage laborers in this classic sense of having no other commodity for sale because they

always have the option of obtaining subsistence outside the capitalist labor process in exchange for services "of a sexual or nurturing kind."<sup>7</sup> In South Africa, however, I would contend that this is not the case. Since male wages have been kept deliberately at a level sufficient to support only a single wage-earner, most working class women are unable to rely on male "breadwinners" to satisfy their economic needs and those of their families. Furthermore, the inability of all South African blacks to dispose freely of their own labor power may create a stronger basis for solidarity between men and women than exists elsewhere. The limited possibility for economic dependence may, therefore, be an important factor in explaining the proletarianized behavior of South African women.

The implication that a relationship exists between economic independence and proletarianization gains support from Helen Safa's study of Latin American women. Although she found, in general, a very low degree of working-class identification, she did discover a strong element of class consciousness among women who were household heads. Her analysis stresses, in particular, the high degree of identification with work roles among these women and the importance of the relationships they formed with their co-workers. She writes:

Women who are heads of households are more prone to develop a stronger commitment to their work role because they become the principal breadwinners for their family. They cannot afford to regard their work roles as temporary or secondary as do most of the married women in the shantytown. This lack of commitment to a work role plays a crucial role in the absence of class consciousness among women in the shantytown, since women never identify with their work role nor stay on one job long enough to develop a relationship with their peers. . . . The reason is clear: women must rush home after work to care for children and other household chores, whereas men are free to join their friends, and, as the survey demonstrated, often meet their best friends through work.

Women who are the sole support of their families are more likely to develop class consciousness than women who are still primarily dependent on men to support them.

In South Africa women have a history of participation in working-class struggles that dates back, on a small scale, to their involvement in the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union and the Women Workers' General Union of the 1920s, and, on a larger scale, to the garment and textile organizing of the 1930s. In the early part of the latter decade, thousands of white and Coloured women in these newly expanded industries came out on strike in an effort to stave off wage cuts resulting from the Depression and to gain some control over their wages and working conditions. During the following year the Garment Workers' Union, particularly in the Transvaal, became a strong and stable organization, led by the union's male general secretary, Solly Sachs, but increasingly under the joint leadership of a strong cadre recruited from the ranks of the workers. Notable among these women were Johanna and Hester Cornelius, Anna Scheepers, and Dulcie Hartwell. Bettie du Toit, another activist of the period, gained her experiences in the textile industry.

From the late 1930s onwards, women leaders of the garment workers, joined by middle-class activists with Communist Party affiliations, succeeded in unionizing large numbers of semi-skilled and unskilled workers, among them female sweet and tobacco workers, milliners, and food and canning workers. The Food and Canning Workers' Union at the Cape, formed and led by the maverick organizer Ray Alexander, became a model radical union that combined action on both economic and political issues with campaigns on community-oriented concerns such as workers' housing and living conditions. Through its ranks black and "Coloured" leaders like Mary Mafeking and Liz Abrahams rose to responsible positions not only in the union, but also in the Federation of South African women, the organization that led the massive women's anti-pass demonstrations of the 1950s.

From World War II on, the garment and textile industries began to change. The latter expanded enormously and came to rely primarily on black labor,

while in the garment factories the gradual replacement of white women by black and Coloured women was underway. Aided by a legal loophole that union officials discovered, black women in the Transvaal gained admission to the registered Garment Workers' Union in 1944 and quickly became staunch union members. By the late 1960s, under the leadership of Lucy Mvubelo and Sarah Chitja, two of the first African women to become shop stewards, the primarily female National Union of Clothing Workers (NUCW) had become largest black union in the country.

Unlike the Food and Canning Workers, weakened progressively by the banning and banishment of its leaders, the NUCW has remained intact by deliberately eschewing politics. Only from the middle 1960s, when the textile manufacturers began a campaign to introduce a male-female wage differential, did women begin to re-enter the textile mills in large numbers. Both the rapidly expanding textile industry and the new wave of garment factories that began to spring up in rural areas in the 1950s were unregulated and frequently located either in the "homelands" or in adjacent "border areas." In both cases the industries drew on destitute, proletarianized rural women from whom even the sub-poverty datum line wages represented an advance over their meager earning potential in the countryside. In one resettlement township of the Ciskei, for example, residents explained that the two factories employed mostly women because "the wages are so low . . . that only they will work there."<sup>9</sup> Throughout this period, however, the vast majority of black women continued to work either in agriculture or domestic service.

The labor activity of the 1970s followed a relatively quiet period born of severe repression during the previous decade. But, despite the small number of major work stoppages between 1960 and 1970, strike activity did persist, especially among migrant workers in the expanding low-wage textile industry. The resumption of workers' protest during the 1970s occurred within a context

of continued low wages and steep price increases, especially in the cost of such essential items as food, clothing, and transportation.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, at the time of the 1973 strikes Africans were legally allowed neither to strike nor to belong to the registered trade unions that alone possessed the right to bargain with their employers. The small numbers of "works committees" and "liaison committees," designed to voice African grievances, had little power and were limited to single factories; employers found it easy to victimize outspoken critics.

The entire period from 1973 onward was marked by a steadily heightened level of industrial protest,<sup>11</sup> although the largest concentrated strikes clustered during the years 1973 and 1980. In between came the three massive stay-at-homes following the Soweto uprising of 1976, an indication of the close connection that workers perceived between their economic and their political grievances. Increasing acceptance of wildcat strikes and organizational efforts that led to a mushrooming of factory committees and unregistered trade unions became characteristic of the decade's struggles. The period also witnessed an increasingly high level of communication and support between striking workers and their surrounding communities, leading the author of a major study of class struggle in the 1970s to reflect, "It could only be a matter of time and changing conditions before the weapons developed by the workers in their struggle would be turned to political ends."<sup>12</sup>

Women took full part in this revival of militant protest, as strikes swept through garment, textile, and food processing factories. Organizing efforts even spread into the ranks of domestic workers, normally notoriously difficult to unionize.<sup>13</sup> And male trade unionists willingly acknowledged the commitment of their female comrades. A former official of the Textile Workers Industrial Union, writing on the events of the period, noted the "advanced

political consciousness" of African women,<sup>14</sup> while during the 1980 textile strike a male shop steward praised the women for having "fought like men."<sup>15</sup>

The typical protests of the decade focused primarily on the issues of wages, working conditions, and grievance procedures--particularly the ineffectiveness of management-supported works committees and liaison committees. Differential pay increases were a major issue in the strike of 160 women at Transkei Hillmond Weavers in 1978,<sup>16</sup> while the 850 African women engaged in a wildcat strike at the Langeberg canning factory in East London complained of the uncertainty of the amounts of overtime pay to which they were entitled.<sup>17</sup> Pay increases they never had received motivated the January 1980 strike of 1500 textile workers at Butterworth in the Transkei, whereas the need to meet higher transport costs led the 70 women working for a packaging firm in Johannesburg to demand a raise.<sup>18</sup> In almost all of these cases workers also voiced dissatisfaction over the way in which works or liaison committees were handling their grievances. One woman in the Langeberg canning strike, speaking of the liaison committee, explained, " they are now 'ja baas' instead of putting things right." In the Eveready Electrical Company strike in Port Elizabeth in 1978, which led to an international boycott of the company, the dispute centered on the company's refusal to negotiate with the registered union on behalf of some 200 Coloured women workers.<sup>19</sup> Most strikes were relatively brief and were based on democratic methods of decision-making that prevented employers from singling out leaders for victimization.

A strike in Johannesburg in 1974 offers a typical example of an incident in which a minor dispute led rapidly, and seemingly spontaneously, to an expression of more fundamental grievances. The major issues centered on wages, working conditons, and the kinds of controls exercised over the labor force. At the Turnwright Street Factory 300 workers, mainly women, walked out

during a dispute over working conditions on August 21, 1974. They had arrived at work at the usual hour of 6:30 a.m., only to find the factory gates shut since the management had decided to open at 6:50 in the future as a security measure. The women first complained that this late opening left them too little time to change clothes and eat before work began at 7:10. But they soon began to shout for wage increases and to complain about their long working hours--7:10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. with only a 10 minute break and 25 minutes for lunch--and about the need to clock in and out when they went to the bathroom.<sup>20</sup>

These examples verify the fact of women's participation in the labor unrest of the past decade, but they offer little insight into either the nature or the sources of their class consciousness. Much of the information necessary to understand their position more fully comes from the two areas of the industrial economy with the highest concentration of women workers, garments and textiles.

During March and April of 1973, immediately following the Durban strikes, clothing workers staged a number of stoppages. The first two strikes occurred in a "border" area in which the employees were unorganized and received substantially lower wages than their counterparts in the major urban centers. On March 26, undoubtedly spurred by events in nearby Durban, 1,000 workers at the Veka Clothing Co. in Charlestown went on strike for increased wages, leading police to impose a curfew on the nearby township and to prohibit meetings of more than five people. Four days afterward 700 fellow workers at Trump Clothing, also in Charlestown, struck for higher wages in support of the Veka strike. Both groups returned to work without promise of an increase.<sup>21</sup> The stoppages of garment workers in and around Johannesburg in March and April of 1973 achieved greater success. Fueled by an expected cost of living increase, 4,608 black garment workers took part in some 21 work

stoppages during a three-week period. With quick intervention by the registered Garments Workers' Union and/or the parallel African body, the National Union of Clothing Workers, the employers usually announced concessions and the workers returned to their jobs; only two of the incidents lasted more than five hours.<sup>22</sup>

Garment workers in the largest cities also were involved in other forms of protest variously more anarchistic and more militant than the 1973 stoppages. During a strike in the early 1970s at a clothing factory in Johannesburg, large numbers of finished garments were slashed, while in another Johannesburg factory an experienced worker took down a fire extinguisher and emptied it onto imported material worth thousands of rands.<sup>23</sup> Garment workers also numbered among the most active supporters of the stay-at-homes that followed the Soweto uprisings in 1976. The clothing industry came to a complete halt during the August protest in the Transvaal, despite the fact that trade union leaders appealed to their members not to withdraw their labor. The 300 African shop stewards, mainly women, probably were responsible for organizing the workers.<sup>24</sup> Women reportedly led the September stay-at-home in the Cape during which the clothing industry, whose workforce of 50,000 was 90 percent female, lost two days of production.<sup>25</sup>

Although the individual and family lives of garment workers remain undocumented, the ample knowledge of their working lives helps to clarify the forms their resistance has taken during the past decade. By comparison with the textile industry, garment industry work stoppages were infrequent and extremely brief, unquestionably a result of the well-established procedures for handling disputes that were tacitly accepted by the employers, the unregistered African union (the National Union of Clothing Workers), and the registered Garment Workers' Union. In the 1973 stoppages, officials of one or both unions intervened immediately. "The existence of an established union

such as the NUCW enjoying the confidence of the workers was undoubtedly one reason for the speed in which the disputes were settled."<sup>26</sup> At the same time the activities of the NUCW, in helping members to find work, in administering a burial fund, and in assisting them in such tasks as applying for unemployment and maternity benefits have helped to create a sense of collective identity that favors industrial action when necessary. The union structure itself also has served an important unifying function in an industry built on large numbers of relatively small factories.

Nonetheless, the signs of suppressed anger evident in the instances of industrial sabotage and in the widespread support for the 1976 stay-at-home, against the expressed wishes of union officials, also are explicable. Extremely low wages continue in the industry,<sup>27</sup> despite the union's nominal acceptance, and the inferior position of the NUCW gives African garment workers less than full representation. In several instances after the 1973 strikes Department of Labor officials deliberately excluded the spokesperson of the NUCW from negotiations. On a structural level, the inability to negotiate for its members, except through the representatives of the GWU, has created a dependent relationship between the NUCW and the GWU the details of which were revealed in a series of allegations and denials published in the Financial Mail in 1976. The original article, drawn from sources within the union, described the ways in which Anna Scheepers, president of the registered union, allegedly dominated the "sister" African body in various ways, such as threatening to evict the NUCW from the building they shared in a technically "white" area of Johannesburg when they refused to follow her wishes and vetoing decisions of which she did not approve. The article reported, "She calls the executive in and lectures them like grade school children and then tells them to go back and reconsider. Usually they do."<sup>28</sup>

This "mother-daughter" relationship between the two unions has resulted

both from the "understandable caution" of the GWU leaders and from the continuing dependence of the NUCW leadership.<sup>29</sup> Yet the independent action of the shop stewards in 1976 suggests a growing resentment of "maternalism," particularly on the part of younger workers who have entered the industry since the late 1960s. As second- or third-generation urban dwellers, these women are politically sophisticated and skeptical about supporting a moderate trade union.<sup>30</sup>

The economic pressures on garment workers, combined with a racially and sexually biased division of labor, have created yet another source of discontent among black women. As urban wages in the industry have risen, capital has tended to expand into rural areas in order to draw on the large reserves of ultra-cheap non-unionized labor. The threat of job loss to urban workers has been continual. And in the urban factories the labor process has operated to the detriment of black women. Despite their long history of organization and despite the shortage of white garment workers, they still occupy the least-skilled jobs in disproportionate numbers. In the Transvaal in 1973 European men continued to hold the vast majority of the highest paid supervisory positions. Although a surprisingly high percentage of the 120 European women employees (62 percent) earned only R 10 to R 20 a week, 98 percent of the Coloured women and 99 percent of the African women fell into this category. Furthermore, black women, 79 percent African and 20 percent Coloured, held virtually all of the unskilled positions.<sup>31</sup>

On one level, then, the activism of the garment workers has drawn on the organizational strength generated by membership in an informally recognized trade union that operates through hundreds of shop stewards and provides a variety of material benefits to its members. Yet the protests of the 1970s came from the rank and file workers, not from union officials, and the spirit that animated them emerged not as much through the unions as from opposition

to a leadership that seems to have accommodated to an industrial system that forbids the emergence of strong, independent African unions and that continues to rely on the exploitation of cheap black labor power.

Information available on the textile industry clarifies aspects both of workers' domestic lives and of their work situation and helps to verify the proposed connection between economic responsibility and political activity. The industry, concentrated around Durban though scattered throughout the low-paying border areas and "homelands," was among the economic sectors hardest hit during the protests of the 1970s. It operated on a capital-intensive basis that brought together thousands of workers in each mill. Roughly half of the textile workers in Durban were migrants, whose housing in company dormitories enhanced the possibility of mass action, as did the heavy concentration of ownership by the Frame Company, a vast industrial empire that in 1973 employed over 22,000 people in factories operating in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi.<sup>32</sup> Women formed a large part of the workforce throughout the decade; but their numbers increased dramatically between 1973 and 1980 under circumstances that undoubtedly contributed to their willingness to protest, particularly in 1973.

Up until the mid-1960s, strong pressure from the textile workers' union had ensured the unusual policy of paying men and women equal wages. During the middle 1960s, however, the National Textile Manufacturers' Association, under continual pressure from lower priced imports,<sup>33</sup> began an offensive to force employers to accept a male-female wage differential.<sup>34</sup> In 1965 and 1966 the unions resisted their effort to grant women only 75 percent of the wages to be paid after a proposed increase and the NTMA position won only partial and conditional acceptance by an arbitrator: he agreed to lower wages in certain restricted classes of work provided that the categories in question be "suitably diluted" and the work assigned to women be clearly

specified.<sup>35</sup> By the early 1970s, only 452 of the 3,747 women in the industry were receiving the lower wage -- fixed at 20 percent of the male wage.<sup>36</sup> But in 1972 the manufacturers finally won the approval of the Industrial Tribunal for a uniform policy of paying women a wage 20 percent lower than that of men.<sup>37</sup> This ruling undoubtedly accounts for the rising percentage of women in the industry which, in the Frame factories, zoomed from 40 percent to 70 percent during the next eight years.

In addition to receiving lower pay, black women, particularly Africans, have been employed in the lowest-paid, least skilled occupations. Although little information is available on the specific sexual division of labor in the industry, which undoubtedly has changed with the recent increase in the number of female employees, most supervisors are male and women have little chance for advancement. There also seem to be more men than women employed as weavers, a position that offers both a higher wage and a greater degree of control over one's working conditions than is possible for spinners, the other main category of semi-skilled workers.

Despite the large numbers of women textile workers, the most detailed study of the 1973 strikes, published by the Institute for Industrial Education,<sup>38</sup> leaves many gaps in its information about women. A list of the percentages of workers in each grade of employment contains no breakdown by sex and, more important, the sample of workers interviewed gives information on Indian women, but not on their African counterparts who formed a far greater proportion of the labor force. The main section devoted to women in this discussion concerns the fears about African men that Indian women expressed, thereby conveying the impression that women workers were a main threat to interracial solidarity. Helping to fill this gap in the available information on women workers is a series of interviews conducted with women textile workers in Durban following the strike. Although offering important

insights into their concerns, the imprecision of the study, and particularly its lack of reference to the total number of women interviewed, makes it less useful than it might have been.

On January 19, ten days after the strikes began, the first stoppages occurred in the textile industry. The wages throughout the industry were roughly 20 percent lower than those in manufacturing as a whole. At the Frame Cotton Mills in New Germany, male wages apparently had risen by only R 1,00 per week, from R 6,00 to R 7,00, between 1964 and 1972 (not including a R 1,00 attendance bonus). Women at the later date earned R 5,00 with a R 1,00 bonus. But a survey conducted at the Nortex and Seltex Mills in July 1972 revealed that some women were earning only R 3,50 in basic salary.<sup>39</sup> Textile workers came out first not in Durban, but in East London, as work ceased at Consolidated Fine Spinners and Weavers. By January 25 and 26 strikes had spread to the Frame Group, as over 7,000 cotton workers came out on strike at their mill in New Germany. The other adjacent cotton mills followed in quick succession. In at least one of the textile industry stoppages, it was African women, working for D. Pegler and Co. in New Germany, who were first to down their tools.<sup>40</sup> On January 29 the workers at Consolidated Woolwashing and Processing Mills in Pinetown, mainly women rag sorters, came out on strike after the management had ignored a written statement of their grievances presented through a union representative. By that day not a single Frame factory in Natal remained in operation.<sup>41</sup> The strikes in the industry lasted from one to seven days, ending with concessions of R 1 to R 2,50 per week from employers.

These settlements did not end the unrest in the textile industry, however. In April 1973, 300 Indian and African women working as sorters in a woolwashing and processing firm in the Durban suburb of Pinetown were locked out after striking and then refusing an unspecified pay offer.<sup>42</sup> In July

the stoppages spread to women weavers in Umtata, the capital of the Transkei in the eastern Cape.<sup>43</sup> Again, on August 8, some 1,000 workers struck at the Frame Group's Wentex Factory in Durban after 600 workers had lost their jobs in the wake of wage demands.<sup>44</sup> And, by January 1974, 10,000 Durban textile workers in eleven mills were again on strike demanding that the government-ordered increases for new workers in the cotton mills also be extended to employees with seniority.<sup>45</sup>

The textile strikes are interesting from the perspective of women workers because of the degree to which their complaints became submerged in the wake of other grievances. Although as recently as July 1972 the textile union had included in its demands the removal of wage discrimination against women, this provision rarely was a stated issue in the negotiations that occurred during the strikes. In the IIE report, the issue of a sexual wage differential comes out only once, in the description of negotiations at the relatively progressive firm of Smith and Nephew where the workers demanded a basic wage of R 18 "even if it meant that all workers irrespective of sex and skill be paid that amount."<sup>46</sup> That they settled eventually for a male minimum of R 18 and a female minimum of R 12 was not unconnected with the intimidating presence of carloads of plainclothes police at the meeting during which the offer was accepted. By not raising the issue of the recently instituted wage differential, the strikers were implying a tacit acceptance of it.

In 1980 another massive strike broke out in the Frame-owned factories in Durban. Beginning among weavers in the Frametex plant and lasting for twelve days, the stoppage was triggered by continuing anger at low wages, the manipulation of the bonus system and the unwillingness of the manager to consult with the liaison committee. Women, who by then comprised 70 percent of the workforce, were involved from the beginning and took an active part in meetings, demonstrations at the bus terminal, and organization at Kranzkloof,

the hostel where most of the workers, as migrants, were forced to live. The only grouping of strikers from which they seem to have been excluded was the impi or "regiment," which acted as the main strikers' defense force. The following description, based on interviews with participants, summarizes women's activities most succinctly.

Within 24 hours of its beginning the women workers at Krantskloof had organized themselves into two groups, one of which was stationed at the main gate, the other at the opposite end of section D. Here they waited for those women workers who were defying the strike, to return from the factories. The latter were then prevented from entering the premises, and only later that night (Friday) after the police dispersed the women strikers with tear gas, were they able to steal back into the hostel. Thereafter the women decided to visit each room which was occupied by one or more strikebreakers. This resulted in violent confrontation, with some of the strikebreakers leaving the Hostel for fear of being attacked. Throughout the strike, the women continued to meet regularly in the Hostel corridors, as well as in the grounds near the bus rank where most of the action took place. Their gatherings were coloured by much discussion, militant chanting and singing.<sup>47</sup>

The militancy of women in these protests undoubtedly draws on the same factors that have fueled and shaped the resistance of their male co-workers --extraordinarily low wages in a time of rapid inflation, rigidly controlled working conditions and a lack of adequate procedures for communicating their grievances. The vast scale of production, with several thousand workers in a single factory, the densely packed hostels in which they reside and the "packed and gregarious" buses on which they ride to and from work have undoubtedly fostered communication and class consciousness among textile workers, male and female alike. The homogeneity of the largely Zulu workforce also figures into discussions of the unrest in Durban.

In addition to their generally disadvantageous position in the labor process, women also have been exploited by management reliance on sexual relations of dominance as a means of enforcing industrial discipline. Male

supervisors are given the "marginal capacity" to permit small favors such as permission to go to the bathroom or the "privilege" of sitting down during a bout of menstrual cramps in exchange for sexual favors. Women interviewed after the 1973 strike also complained of more general sexual harrassment at work.

The women reported that the men workers in their factories have no respect for them. On the factory floor, men ill-treat the women make fools of them, and become vulgar by 'touching the women in embarassing parts.' Others mentioned that the men assault the women that they work with, one noting that if this is reported to the authorities, the latter take the part of the men.<sup>48</sup>

Women are further pressured and manipulated by policies related to pregnancy. In the Frame factories, prospective female employees who survive a mandatory pregnancy test are then subjected to the continual watchful eye of factory doctors instructed to watch for signs of impending motherhood. Until early 1980 the Frame factories terminated the services of pregnant women, but since then an altered policy ostensibly provides for reemployment eight weeks after confinement. Women workers allege, however, that supervisors retain the arbitrary power to determine whether a woman will be reinstated. Those allowed to return are required to undergo a "retraining" period (which the industry claims to be six weeks and the women claim is actually three months) during which they are excluded from bonuses and overtime work.<sup>49</sup> Instances of coercive intrusion by capital into workers' personal lives appear to be not uncommon in South Africa. In one engineering factory it was discovered in 1970 that African women were being forced to take the pill daily under a nurse's supervision.

Other arbitrary and sometimes humiliating regulations dominate the lives of women textile workers, both in the factories and at the hostel where a majority of them live. Company policy, for example, forbids them from using any company toilet paper or cotton scraps to supplement the single sanitary

napkin they are issued. And, while men are frisked for company property at the end of each day, women must go through a special "searching room" where they are more thoroughly scrutinized. Possession of trade union material found during these searches may provide grounds for dismissal.<sup>50</sup>

In Kranzkloof hostel a high degree of paternalism regulates women's daily lives. Whereas men have greater mobility within the area of the hostel, women are largely confined to a fenced-in area that is permanently under guard. The rules are applied more strictly to them than to men and they are also prohibited from smoking or drinking in their rooms. Control of their visitors includes a prohibition on having their babies or young children in the hostel. But the threat of arbitrary expulsion by the superintendent is the aspect of control that has generated the most bitterness. The women complained of facing expulsion for questioning unreasonable demands by the superintendent -- such as being selected at random to collect litter in the corridors, a job others are paid to do. Individuals are also arbitrarily victimized, with neither investigation nor recourse to a hearing, for misusing communal facilities. The researcher concluded: "Because women live in constant fear of arbitrary expulsion, they have tended to unite in mutual self-defence against the capricious actions of the authorities. The solidarity and steadfastness of these women were certainly evident during the strike."<sup>51</sup>

In time of disorder, women's sexual vulnerability may become a political issue. In 1980 female strikers became the target of both youth gangs or tsotsi, whose motivation may have been unrelated to the labor dispute, and of police violence. Since the security and regulation system at the hostel broke down, non-residents had freer access, including not only male friends of women residents, but also groups of youth gangs; numerous incidents of theft and rape were reported. Other women were raped by non-strikers who then

instructed them to return to work. In one area, women successfully organized themselves to prevent such attacks, but in another part of the hostel they were less successful. Women were, therefore, often forced to flee the hostel to seek accommodation in the nearby African township of Clermont, frequently in the safest place available -- other men's beds. "Once again," according to the 1980 study, "women found themselves having to choose between the lesser of two abuses -- rape by, or involuntary submission to male co-workers."<sup>52</sup>

Few recent documents from South Africa spell out the ideology supporting the exploitation of female laborers more fully than the report that the National Association of Textile Manufacturers addressed to the Industrial Arbitrator in 1966 as the organization sought to justify its request for a 25 percent wage differential between men and women.<sup>53</sup> The authors relied on arguments so standard and stereotyped that they probably felt little need to substantiate them -- women's alleged physical weakness, their lower educational attainments, and their minimal financial needs. Yet the only recent factual study of women textile workers belies these easy conclusions and supplies data that strongly support the hypothesis positing a correlation between the level of women's economic responsibility and the degree to which they identify themselves as and act as proletarianized workers.

The study in question, conducted by the National Institute of Personnel Research and published in 1973, found a high degree of financial responsibility among women textile workers. Shattering the myth of the dependent working woman, the survey found that nearly half (47percent) were single, 32 percent were formerly married (including widows, divorcees and women deserted by their husbands) and only 21 percent were married -- a very low percentage considering that 64 percent of the women were between 21 and 35 years old. Although most of these women had no "male breadwinner" on which to rely, they did not lack dependents. According to the report, "Many of these

women occupied a key role in the households to which they belonged, for one-quarter of them were household heads and over one half (52 percent) were the main breadwinners of their families." Not only were most of the women self-supporting, but they were, as a group, much better educated than the men employed in the factory. Furthermore, although the women's absenteeism and turnover rates were slightly higher than those of men (another contention of the textile manufacturers), the report judged both figures to be low, adding that women's high degree of family responsibility as household heads and as main breadwinners "apparently caused them to be stable."<sup>54</sup> Significantly, those who were household heads and those who were married were absent from work more frequently than those women whose mothers were the household heads. Without direct evidence the report concludes the obvious: "This could well be caused by the fact that in the latter case the subject's mother was able to assume domestic responsibilities that otherwise had to be discharged by wives or female household heads."<sup>55</sup>

The Westmore and Townsend interviews with women workers in Durban verify the results of this NIPR study. They found a clear consensus that women worked out of economic necessity. Many of those interviewed were the sole source of family income -- either as widows, divorcees, single women with or without children, or as women living with men who were unemployed or who worked intermittently.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps not atypical were two other cases reported at the time of the 1973 strikes: that of Annie Msomi, a 60 year old textile worker who supported a pensioner husband and five grandchildren on R 7,25 a week; R 2 of her wage had to pay for her bus trip of 32 km each way. Kistanah Naidoo, also a textile worker, provided for herself and three small children on 7,55 a week.<sup>57</sup> Although such economic burdens might, in some instances, dictate caution, that seems not to have been the case for countless women during the past decade of South African history.

Whether the stereotypical working class wife whose husband earned a steady, dependable wage ever existed in Europe is debateable. She certainly is rare in South Africa where continual threats to the family unit, intense economic insecurity, and a large migrant working class whose members are forced to live in single-sex hostels have led women in the factories to respond as fully proletarianized workers. Furthermore, despite the desperate struggle for survival, strong family networks, often extending to the provision of child-care in the rural areas, may create groups of women workers with fewer domestic responsibilities than might be assumed.

In addition to underestimating the variation in women's lives and thereby failing to account for the impact of economic self-sufficiency, the idea of semi-proletarianization also may be criticized for its tendency to explain the behavior of women workers solely by reference to their family situations, failing to consider varying aspects of particular social formations that might lead women to greater militancy as workers. In South Africa, as in many colonial settings, the close connection between class consciousness and nationalist consciousness undoubtedly influences women as profoundly as it does men. Although the expressed grievances of the strikers originated in their position as workers in a capitalist economy, their struggles also reflected black discontent in a white-dominated society. One study of the 1973 strikes in Durban concluded that the enormous wage increases the strikers demanded, much higher than those to which they eventually agreed, "must be interpreted as a statement of rejection, an affirmation of the desire for a quite different society."<sup>58</sup> Sechaba, the magazine of the African National Congress, reported on the political overtones of the strikes.

At one [factory] the workers on strike gathered at the gates of the factory singing 'Nkosi Sikelele', the African National Congress national anthem. At another, . . . demonstrating strikers were lead, [sic] in a march through the streets, by one worker carrying a red flag. In yet

another cries of "Amandla!" [Power] the A.N.C.'s clenched-first [sic] salute were raised at the end of a meeting called by the strikers.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, black women in South Africa share the grievances of the entire working class over incredibly low wages and an inability to affect their working conditions and the discontent of all blacks with a system that designates them as either "labor units" or "suberfluous appendages" rather than as human beings. Under these circumstances, this paper has shown the way in which women industrial workers, particularly in the garment and textile industries, have participated fully in the economic and political struggles of recent years, although their specific grievances as women rarely were voiced. Two conclusions are possible. Either South Africa is an exception to the theory of women's semi-proletarianization or the theory itself is flawed. I have argued that while South Africa may possess special features as a colonial country heavily dependent on low-wage migrant labor, conditions likely to foster working-class consciousness among men are just as apt to operate among women. This conclusion is not meant to imply that women's relationship to family is unimportant in shaping their political behavior, but rather that the relationship requires much more precise analysis than most studies to date have done. The South African case, for example, verifies the suggested connection between economic responsibility and political militancy for women. In fact, it may suggest that in the absence of male "breadwinners," where working is a necessity not a choice, the very commitment to family that the theory postulates may demand the political stance of the proletarianized worker. This material also demonstrates a tendency on the part of women to participate actively and readily in sporadic and relatively short-term forms of protest such as strikes and stay-at-homes; but the extent to which their family commitments might interfere with longer term, relatively time-consuming activities such as the day-to-day running of trade unions remains uncertain.

Finally, the data suggest that family cannot be viewed simply as a force antithetical to class consciousness, for extended family members in particular, through their assistance with child care and other reproductive tasks, often provide women with the very support network that enable them to engage in political activism.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Sheila Rowbotham, Women, Resistance and Revolution: A History of the Modern World (New York, 1972), p. 113.

<sup>2</sup>Rowbotham, Women, p. 113.

<sup>3</sup>Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson, "'Nimble Fingers Make Cheap Workers': An Analysis of Women's Employment in Third World Export Manufacturing," Feminist Review, VII (Spring 1981), p. 102-103, citing a paper by Jane Cardoso-Khoo and Kay Jin Khoo: "Work and Consciousness: the Case of Electronics 'Runaways' in Malaysia," paper presented to the Conference on the Continuing Subordination of Women in the Development Process, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, 1978.

<sup>4</sup>Helen Icken Safa, "Class Consciousness among Working Class Women in Latin America: A Case Study in Puerto Rico," in Robin Cohen, Peter Gutkind and Phyllis Brazier, eds., Peasants and Proletarians: The Struggles of Third World Workers (New York and London, 1979), pp. 442-443.

<sup>5</sup>Jean Westmore and Pat Townsend, "The African Women Workers in the Textile Industry in Durban," South African Labour Bulletin, II, 4 (1975), pp. 27-28, 30.

<sup>6</sup>Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. I (Harmondsworth, 1976), 237, cited in Elson and Pearson, "Nimble Fingers," p. 96.

<sup>7</sup>Elson and Pearson, "Nimble Fingers," p. 96.

<sup>8</sup>Safa, "Class Consciousness," pp. 447-448.

<sup>9</sup>Inquiry, II (October 1979), p. 21.

<sup>10</sup>David Hemson, "Trade Unionism and the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa," Capital and Class, VI (Autumn 1978), p. 19.

<sup>11</sup>According to Government figures, from 1959-1969 there were about 70 work stoppages per year by Africans; in 1973 the Government admitted to 160 in the first three months of the year.

<sup>12</sup>D. du Toit, Capital and Labour in South Africa: Class Struggle in the 1970s (London and Boston), 1981.

<sup>13</sup>See Interview, "Maggie Oewies Talks About the Domestic Workers Association," South African Labour Bulletin, VI, 1 (July 1980), 35-36; A Survey of Race Relations, 1976 (Johannesburg, 1977), pp. 312-313 and Star 11/25/74.

<sup>14</sup>Hemson, "Trade Unionism," p. 32.

<sup>15</sup>Natal Labour Research Committee, "Control Over a Workforce - the Frame Case," South African Labour Bulletin, VI, 5 (December 1980), p. 38. This article also observes, "Women proved to be the most ardent champions of the strike cause, and were perhaps more united and purposeful than the men."

<sup>16</sup>Carole Cooper, "Details of Strikes During 1978," South African Labour Bulletin, VI, 1 (May 1979), p. 61; Survey of Race Relations, 1978, p. 260.

<sup>17</sup>Daily Dispatch, 10/4/78.

<sup>18</sup>Star, 9/15/79.

<sup>19</sup>Survey of Race Relations, 1978, p. 261.

<sup>20</sup>Rand Daily Mail, 8/22/74.

<sup>21</sup>Sechaba, VII, 6 (June 1973), p. 9 and VII (July 1973), p.9.

<sup>22</sup>L. Douwes Dekker, D. Hemson, J.S. Kane-Berman, J. Lever and L. Schlemmer, "Case Studies in African Labour Action in South Africa and Namibia," in R. Sandbrook and R. Cohen, eds., The Development of an African Working Class: Studies in Class Formation and Action (London, 1975), p. 217.

<sup>23</sup>Institute for Industrial Education, The Durban Strikes, 1973 (Durban and Johannesburg, 1974), p. 160.

<sup>24</sup>Hemson, "Trade Unionism" p. 32.

<sup>25</sup>See E.C. Webster, "Stay-aways and the Black Working Class since the Second World War - the Evaluation of a Strategy," n.p., n.d., pp. 17, 23; Hemson, "Trade Unionism," pp. 31-32; Counter Information Service, Black South Africa Explodes, Anti-Report No. 17 (London, 1977), p. 40. Whereas the turnout in industry generally was approximately 50 percent, that in the clothing industry ranged from 10-15 percent.

<sup>26</sup>Douwes Dekker, et al., "African Labour Action," p. 217.

<sup>27</sup>See the wage statistics reported regularly in the annual Survey of Race Relations.

<sup>28</sup>Financial Mail, 11/19/76.

<sup>29</sup>Douwes Dekker, et al., "African Labour Action," pp. 216-217.

<sup>30</sup>Adam Klein, personal communication, 6/8/81.

<sup>31</sup>J.H. Thomas, "The Wage Structure in the Clothing Industry," South African Institute of Personnel Management and South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, January 18-19, 1973.

<sup>32</sup>Rand Daily Mail, 2/6/73.

<sup>33</sup>Financial Gazette, 2/9/73 and Cape Times, 9/14/74 discuss the continuation of these pressures during the 1970s.

<sup>34</sup>Submission made by the National Textile Manufacturers' Association - Representing the Employer Party to Dr. F.J. Viljoen, Chairman, Industrial Tribunal. Durban, 8th February, 1966.

- 35"Arbitrator's Report and Award," Pretoria, 16th March, 1966.
- 36Wage Proposals by the National Textile Manufacturers' Association as at 8th February, 1972.
- 37Durban Strikes, p. 25.
- 38Durban Strikes.
- 39Durban Strikes, pp. 23-24.
- 40Natal Mercury, 1/30/73.
- 41Durban Strikes, pp. 29-31. According to the Financial Mail, the parent company of Consolidated Woolwashing, among the lowest paying of the Frame factories, reported an increase of over 70 percent in pretax profits between 1971 and 1972.
- 42Sechaba, VII, 4 (April, 1973), p.4.
- 43Sechaba, VII, 7 (July 1973), p.8.
- 44Durban Strikes, p. 16.
- 45Southern Africa, VII, 3 (March 1974), p.7.
- 46Durban Strikes, p. 35.
- 47"Control Over a Workforce," p. 38.
- 48Westmore and Townsend, "African Women Workers," p.26.
- 49"Control Over A Workforce," pp. 29-30.
- 50"Control Over a Workforce," p. 30
- 51"Control Over a Workforce," p. 39
- 52"Control Over a Workforce," p. 30.
- 53Submission of the NTMA.
- 54The manager of a R 10 million cloth and blanket factory at Butterworth in the Transkei reported a women's absentee rate of 3 percent compared with a factory average of 10 percent. Reported in Star, 10/9/74.
- 55S.K. Hall, "An Exploratory Investigation into the Labour Stability and Attitudes of Bantu Women in a Textile Factory," n.p., September, 1973. The study was based on interviews with 212 workers, apparently in a border area of the Eastern Cape.
- 56Westmore and Townsend, "African Women Workers," p. 22.
- 57Financial Mail, 2/2/73.
- 58Durban Strikes, p. 101.
- 59Sechaba, VII, 5 (May 1973), p.2.