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OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH - PART V.

STRESS, JOB DISSATISFACTION AND MENTAL HEALTH.

"Women who stay at home are dissatisfied because they don't work, whereas those who do have outside jobs are distressed because they do not stay at home." (1)

In previous Discussion Papers* we have considered various aspects of women's occupational health problems but dwelt mainly on the physical problems ie. fatigue because of their second unpaid job at home, their poor working conditions, monotonous repetitive work, piecework, the added burden of shiftwork etc. In this paper we discuss the relationship between the nature of 'women's work', the sex division of the labour market and women's double workload with job dissatisfaction, alienation and stress.

Very little research on the problems of women's work stress is available. Most studies on job satisfaction deal with male workers; studies on women and mental health either overlook the situation in the workforce or do not differentiate employed women from housewives.

WOMEN'S WORK.

Mental health is known to vary consistently with the level of job that an employee holds. The higher the job status with respect to skill, responsibility and pay, the better the average mental health. (2) Because most women are restricted to the low-pay, low-skill, low-status occupations with no responsibility, no job security or prospects for advancement, the very nature of 'women's work' tends to aggravate job stress and dissatisfaction. One study (3) on job satisfaction of women manual workers found the major source of overall job dissatisfaction was 'the nature of the actual work'. Other factors contributing to job dissatisfaction included inadequate pay, little opportunity for developing social relationships, a noisy badly-ventilated workplace, ineffective and inadequate communications from management, insufficient induction training and underutilization of skills and abilities.

The bulk of the female workforce is employed on boring, routine, largely fragmented tasks where there is no real control over the work situation and where the workers are viewed as appendages of machines and where they are regularly assured of their replaceability. In August 1977 11.3 per cent of women worked as process workers, 33.9 per cent in the clerical area, 12.8 per cent in wholesale and retail trades and 16.9 per cent in the services sector - all areas of increasing technological change and relatively high unemployment for women.

"Typists, key punch operators, switchboard workers and factory operatives are virtually human extensions of the equipment they operate. Service workers, like nurses' aides, waitresses and cleaning women are subordinate to the nature of their tasks. Sales workers must sell products they do not necessarily like to people whom they must treat as always 'right' and answer to the public for a bureaucracy that they cannot control. Sales workers tolerate work areas that are noisy, with no privacy and frequent supervision." (4)

Because it is assumed that women's place is in the home and work for women is of secondary importance, it is also assumed that women are not interested in a career, in promotion, in bettering their working conditions, accepting responsibility or participating equally in unions. Discrimination against women based on these myths ensures that 'women's work' remains low in prestige, poorly paid and underrated.

* Nos. 10, 12, 14, 16, 21, 24,

It is also believed that women prefer, are particularly suited to and will tolerate mundane fiddly repetitive tasks. Many women have to work on boring repetitive jobs because there is often nothing else or because, with their dual home/work role, they cannot cope with jobs needing concentration and responsibility. As one woman put it -

"It's very tiring work in the way that - it's boring you know. You put the same bits in and if you can't think of anything else you just think of the bits you put in. I switch off myself. I don't know what the other girls do but I can't think of work all the time otherwise I'd get real depressed." (5)

This type of work reduces women's self-esteem and self-confidence and lowers their own expectations about their capabilities which in turn makes them less willing to assume responsibility and less interested in advancement. Also, this attitude of 'switching off' has been described as a source of safety problems. (6)

"Because satisfaction derives from self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment on the job, it will be enhanced by variety, autonomy and meaningful responsibility, but diminished by boredom, job insecurity and relative powerlessness." (7)

Job dissatisfaction, alienation and lack of autonomy at work are often carried over to life outside work. A recent study by Otto (8) on workers in Victoria found semi-skilled women workers to be the most disadvantaged group both in their work situation and in relation to life in general. Perhaps realising their job's limitations and their own limitations within those jobs, they placed more value on 'security-oriented' work values (job security, having precise instructions) and on the quality of social relationships (having good mates, being treated like a human being and receiving appreciation for work done) rather than on job aspects to do with autonomy and independence (having frequent problems to solve, the chance to work according to one's own decisions and chances for promotion).

The effect of stress, particularly for blue-collar women workers, manifested itself by the women describing more illness symptoms (feeling depressed and rundown), in seeking medical help and in seeking comfort through analgesics. As life becomes more burdensome and stress more predominant, women tend to seek more professional help. As we have seen, stress is related to the level of work and in addition influenced by sexrole learning. Not only is it more acceptable for women than men to give expression to feelings and emotions but also to place themselves in a dependent position, as that of a patient in a doctor-patient relationship.

"However, doctors are neither equipped nor have time to concern themselves with anything else but the treatment of end result .."
(even though they may be aware of social causes.) (9)

Otto's survey also showed nearly one in two (45 per cent) of all semi-skilled women used analgesics "a few times a month" compared to one in three of all female clerical workers and one in four of women teachers. (See also our Discussion Paper No. 21, "Psychotropic Drug Abuse".)

HOUSEWORK TOO

A major factor contributing to the physical and emotional strain endured by women workers is the double commitment to both a job and home duties. It has been estimated that it takes 105 hours a week to carry out both of these jobs (10) This arrangement places a tremendous burden on women and may lead to feelings of guilt if they are unable to cope adequately with increased responsibilities.

"I get up in the morning around 5.30 am. and I pop downstairs and put the kettle on ... then I usually cook my husband's breakfast and my boy's breakfast because I feel guilty coming out to work, to be honest I do feel guilty. It's only because I feel guilty that I like to know that they've had a good breakfast." (11)

Working mothers with young children also suffer from anxiety about leaving their children, particularly if good quality child care is not available. Currently 28 per cent of the female labour force are responsible for children under 12 years of age. They may also be worried about inadequate child care before and after school. These feelings of guilt and anxiety are being further reinforced by the present attacks on the rights of married women to work or even gain further education. One woman told the Working Women's Centre recently that her neighbour accused her of taking her son's place at university even though she had not had the opportunity of education earlier in her life.

Unfulfilled educational expectations are an important factor related to job stress. The discrepancy between high expectations and low social and economic status of jobs was the major factor of female job dissatisfaction in a recent U.S. survey. (12) It arises because many women hold positions which are not commensurate with their educational backgrounds. For example, women university and college graduates mostly end up on the lower rungs of the promotion hierarchy in a limited range of careers. Women graduates (particularly from the humanities area) will often undertake further studies, librarianship, teaching etc. but many of them are undertaking work for which an academic qualification is not required (clerical and administrative work). Within these traditional 'female' professions the top administrative positions are held by men. Even *"when women have gained diversified skills and training, they have found it very difficult, if at all possible, to gain prestige and rewards in fields outside the areas of women's work."* (13)

OTHER SOURCES OF STRESS

Noise

Noise can be a significant source of stress. Excessive noise can cause permanent damage to a person's ability to hear. A noisy office situation, for example, although not so extreme as in a factory, can be annoying and can interfere with one's ability to communicate, to concentrate and to work efficiently. (14)

Sexual Harassment

Almost all positions with authority to hire and fire are held by men while women are concentrated in the lower-level jobs. Women are sometimes forced to provide financial or other bribes in order to retain their jobs. Unwanted sexual advances present a barrier to women's full participation in the economy by making job security and promotion dependent upon measuring up to an arbitrary standard of 'desirability'. These can have a variety of profound effects:

- They create an intolerable and stressful working condition hazardous to mental health,
- They force women out of their jobs, contributing to the cycle of women's unemployment,
- Failure to comply with sexual demands often results in women losing promotion or being fired,
- The existence of a sexual standard in the workplace heightens role conflict faced by women working outside the home and further inhibits the growth of women's identity as workers.

The attitude that sexual harassment is 'trivial' or that women should be able to 'handle' it remains alarmingly common. This attitude stems from traditional societal and institutional definitions which portray women as sex objects. As long as these assumptions prevail in the workplace, women will continue to be denied equal terms and conditions of employment.

Dealing with the Public

Women often work in the 'frontline' of the organization where they frequently interact with 'an alienated public' (eg. shop assistants, counter clerks, receptionists, etc.) but, because of their low status as workers, they tend not to hold responsibility or have the resources to cope adequately with the situation.

Unemployment

Increasing unemployment, particularly in the female sector of the labour force, is another factor affecting job stress.

Employers can intimidate workers with the fear that if they don't comply with the boss's wishes, they won't have a job the following day. The increasing incidence of casual contract labour, eg. contract cleaning, leads to a situation where women can never have holidays or take a sick day because they will lose their job.

Problems for Part-Timers

Part-time workers have reported low levels of job satisfaction (15) perhaps because part-time jobs are not especially challenging or rewarding and perhaps because a career-minded woman must make unsatisfactory compromises between working full-time and not being employed at all. In contrast, many women prefer part-time work in order to fit in with family responsibilities and child care.

Pay

Because most women's work is essentially low-paid, women may be unable to support themselves or their families. As society places great value on monetary rewards, being unable to support an adequate living standard becomes a very stressful situation. Because of this women may be unable to afford to change jobs or look for a better job.

"Women's earnings are a reflection of the social status of their work roles. Women's work is very literally valued less than men's. Jobs which relate to caring for children, for people, for homes are the lowest on the pay scale. Rewards like pay, prestige and a sense of achievement are based on how society values one's contribution. Women's work just does not rate very high." (16)

SPECIAL PROBLEMS

(i) Assembly Line Workers

Production line work is one of the major stress-inducing occupations, particularly for migrant women, who often perform jobs which Australian-born women are not prepared to accept. The Jackson Committee Report into the Manufacturing Industry found "the plight of newly arrived European migrant women was frightening. The hopelessness of their situation and the lack of support given to them by the community at large adds the final nail in the coffin of the egalitarian myth of Australian society." (17)

(ii) Teachers

Apart from the problems faced by all working women, women teachers who have resigned from teaching to care for their families find great difficulty, when they wish to return to teaching, in adjusting to the change which has taken place in the education system. The lack of continuity of employment means that they are faced with "a long and difficult path to get to positions of responsibility ... It is interesting that most women teachers wish to remain in classroom-teaching positions without seeking promotion. Yet, in traditional (male-oriented) terms, such aspirations are considered 'low'. Excellence as a classroom teacher gains little administrative or monetary recognition." (18)

(iii) Health Care Workers

Fewer than 2 per cent of female health workers are doctors, dentists, administrators or scientists; just over half are service workers - nurse aides, cooks, food handlers and cleaners; about 20 per cent are registered nurses. There are also large numbers of women doing clerical work in the health care system. Rotating shift work and the stress of looking after extremely ill and dying patients can cause fatigue and emotional distress (problems either ignored or down-graded by administration).

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is defined as "a state of unpleasant, emotional tension engendered in an individual when she/he is unable to satisfy needs within her/his situation of action".

One would not expect those attitudes which make a job stressful and dissatisfying to a male worker to be different from those which make it stressful and dissatisfying for women workers. However the double day of most women, their labour market segregation into the low-paid, unpleasant jobs which men do not want and the intrinsically boring routine nature of women's work interact to increase stress for women at work, particularly those in the semi-skilled sector. As the situation for many women is continually stressful, there is a high probability that women will become ill.

Data on morbidity and utilization of health services show women report more physical and mental illness than men and that women with pre-school children and employed women report less morbidity than their counterparts with older or no children, or those who are housewives. (19) Yet, when women do report symptoms of anxiety and depression they are often classified in studies as being 'mentally ill' or 'psychologically disturbed'. In fact these may be realistic responses to the situation at work and at home, described previously.

Despite increased morbidity, women do not have higher absenteeism than men. A survey (20) by the Department of Productivity found that there was no overall difference in absenteeism between men and women but that absentee rates related to the level and type of work performed rather than the sex of the worker.

WHAT CAN UNIONS DO ?

There is obviously not enough research on the effect of the alienating, soul-destroying work performed by women, particularly in relation to their dual role. Research in this area should be encouraged to safeguard the health and safety of the current workforce. Attempts should be made to consider how workers can gain increased autonomy, variety of tasks, greater responsibility and control over their work situation.

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