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WOMEN and SHIFTWORK

WHO ARE THE SHIFTWORKERS?

In his report to the Jackson Committee of Inquiry into Manufacturing Industry Professor G. W. Ford pointed out that there were no figures available in this country on the number of shiftworkers, who they were or where they worked.(1) Overseas figures for the year 1975(2) show that women were engaged in shiftwork in the same proportion in which they participated in the workforce.

Women shiftworkers are in two main areas:

1. The service area, e.g. waitresses, barmaids, cooks, cleaners, nurses and nursing aides.
2. Industries such as food processing, textiles, metal and electrical trades, chemicals, rubber, plastics and tobacco.

Shiftwork is increasing in the latter area due to the growing proportion of money being invested in fixed capital. In order to utilize fully expensive machinery, which is subject to rapid obsolescence, continuous production becomes a necessity.

With the growing mechanization of industry women are being brought into areas where they have not previously been employed. Most do process work - particularly migrant women who are concentrated in these areas of the workforce in a higher proportion than are Australian-borne women.(3)

With the increasing use of computers in the banking and insurance industries we can expect to see an increase in women working shiftwork in the "white-collar" areas, which have been traditionally 9am-5pm jobs, in order to maintain maximum capital utilization. As most women workers are found in mechanical routine jobs there is likely to be an unduly high proportion of them employed on shiftwork.

EFFECTS OF SHIFTWORK ON HEALTH

Our basic biological functions of eating, sleeping and elimination are governed by an inner clock and operate on a cycle known as the circadian rhythm. This affects the functioning of the kidneys, rate of heartbeat and body temperature. The cycle is set in early childhood and cannot be reset unless one changes to a new living/sleeping routine and sticks to it. Our bodies are geared to a routine pattern of sleep/work/recreation with biological activity declining when we are not working. When the circadian rhythm is disrupted, particularly in the case of rotating shift patterns, there may be severe symptoms. Some of the most commonly reported dysfunctions are chronic fatigue and insomnia, gastric upsets (particularly aggravation of existing gastric conditions such as peptic ulcers), anaemia, loss of weight, constipation, tension, nervousness and increased irritability.(4)

Although these are problems common to all shiftworkers, they are aggravated for women because of the domestic responsibilities which are almost invariably shouldered by women, whether they work outside their homes or not.

Many women work at night so that their husbands, who work during the day, can look after the children. The women try to snatch a few hours' sleep while the children play or rest. They cannot sleep soundly because they are constantly keeping an ear open for sounds of distress and worrying about possible dangers. Noise, light and interruptions from callers also serve to prevent shiftworkers from sleeping during the day. Many male shiftworkers have wives whom they expect to keep the children quiet and protect them from interruptions. Not so the women.

Most women nightworkers prepare the evening meal before they go to work so that their husbands only have to heat it up for the family but they themselves are unlikely to eat a proper main meal. Tiredness tends to make it difficult for shiftworkers to eat properly even if someone else has prepared the meal. Of course if they do not eat nourishing meals they become more tired and are more susceptible to the dysfunctions mentioned above. Tension builds up and leads to consumption of analgesics and tranquilizers such as valium which are addictive and so a vicious circle ensues.

EFFECTS OF SHIFTWORK ON FAMILY AND SOCIAL LIFE

In a society organized around the normal pattern of daytime work shiftwork has drastic effects on the lives of workers, particularly with continuous shift routines where workers are rotated and their days off staggered so that they may have only one clear weekend off in a month.

Where husband and wife work different shifts there are added strains on their relationship due to their different routines. They rarely see each other and when they do one is tired when the other has just slept. A survey⁽⁵⁾ of wives of male shiftworkers demonstrated a significant decrease in the quality of their sexual relationships and of family life in general. Activities which most workers take for granted, such as eating together, watching TV, spending time with children, visiting friends and relatives, going to the pictures and social or school functions, become almost impossible for workers on permanent afternoon shift and difficult to organize for workers involved in complicated shift changes. They are constantly missing out on things they want to do and also feel they are letting down other members of the family.

WHY DO WOMEN WORK SHIFTWORK?

The only scientific way to answer this question would be to say "We don't know" as there has been no research aimed at discovering the particular situation of women shiftworkers. The many surveys of male shiftworkers indicate that the overwhelming reason for their choice of working hours is the higher pay loading. Other reasons given are the ability to engage in daytime activities such as fishing, boating, gardening, sports, shopping, spending time with children etc. As the CURA Report⁽⁶⁾ showed that women workers consider social issues of more importance to the quality of their lives than a few extra dollars, the increased loading is unlikely to represent the major reason for shiftwork in their case.

The scarcity of childcare facilities and the high cost of what is available appear to be the major reasons for women choosing to work at night when fathers can care for the children. More positive reasons could be the ability to engage in community activities with their children and other women, shopping, gardening etc.

RESTRICTIVE LEGISLATION

The International Labour Organization has had conventions limiting women from working at night since 1884. They have been revised several times since then - always in the direction of greater flexibility - and have been ratified by many countries - although not by Australia. Many countries also have their own restrictive legislation which varies in extent. In Australia the situation is somewhat complex. New South Wales and Queensland forbid women from working in factories from 6pm to 6am and Tasmania after 9pm although there are some exemptions. Victoria, in common with South Australia and Western Australia, does not have such state legislation but various state and federal awards prohibiting night work for women do apply. Of twentyseven Commonwealth awards in industries employing significant numbers of women 10 prohibit night work for females only (5 Textile Industry Awards 1963, the Graphic Arts Award 1957, the Confectioners Award 1959, the Dry Cleaning and Dying Industry Award, the Footwear Manufacturing Industry Award 1963 and the Gelatine and Glue Workers Award 1948); 5 prohibit nightwork for all workers (Clerks (Aluminium) Award 1960, Saddlery, Leather and Canvas Workers Award 1951, Felt Hatting Award 1948-65 and Footwear (Wood Heel Last) etc. Award 1951. The others all allow night work for all employees.

Thus it can be seen that, with the exception of the textile and footwear industries, there are no limitations on nightwork in the major industries employing large numbers of women. Although ostensibly intended to protect women workers, such legislation is discriminatory in that it assumes that women are primarily and inevitably responsible for domestic life and that, by preventing them from working at night, disruption of the family will be prevented. Yet the absence of a father, as the survey of shiftworkers' wives showed, is just as disruptive.

The legislation is also discriminatory in that it prevents women from working in certain areas either because employers prefer men who have no limitations placed on their working hours or because lack of childcare facilities makes it imperative for them to work at a different time from their husbands. (7)

Some awards state that women who work after a certain hour at night must be provided with taxis or other private transport. This tends to inhibit the employment of women on late shifts for which there are higher rates of pay and may even be used as a reason for not employing women at all.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF SHIFTWORKERS?

1. Unions with large numbers of shiftworking members could think about appointing a night organizer since one problem is lack of availability of union officials if a problem comes up on the night shift.
2. Childcare facilities should be available on a 24-hour basis so that shiftworkers could have some respite from their children while they try to sleep during the day or, in some cases, so they could feel confident that their children were well looked after while they were at work.
3. Provision of nutritious and appetizing meals in factory canteens to cater for workers on all shifts.
4. Consideration of physiological needs in the organization of shift rotation with particular attention to sufficient time off between changes to enable the worker to adjust her or his rhythm and with added breaks on nightshift when workers can be expected to feel most tired.

Bearing in mind the disruptions to health, family and social life caused by shiftwork, it seems desirable that restrictive legislation should be extended to all workers with exemptions only in areas where real social need requires availability of services during the night, e.g. in the areas of health, transport, communications and entertainment. This legislation needs to be seen in the context of the need for more flexible working hours, availability of part-time work and job-sharing for both men and women, with free, high-standard childcare available at all times to enable workers to adjust and balance their work and home responsibilities.

Perhaps new approaches to the problem need to be found. Failure to approach the question, while at the same time scheduling rotating shift work as a condition of employment in many industries where predominantly women are hired, can be taken as one measure of the human irresponsibility of the industrial system.

REFERENCES

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- (4) Mott, P.E et al. Shift Work. (University of Michigan, 1967)
- Rogers, P.H.. Shiftwork in Industry. (Ph.D thesis, Monash Un.1974)
- (5) Mott et al. Ibid.
- (6) See (3)
- (7) Women's Bureau, Department of Employment and Industrial Relations. Nightwork Restrictions. (8) Cook, A.H. The Working Mother.

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