

WOMAN AND INDUSTRIAL WORK IN EGYPT⁽¹⁾

In studying the phases of women's involvement in the industrial sector in Egypt, it is noteworthy that this country experienced the process of transition from a subsistence cultural economy to a semi-industrial economy earlier than any other Arab or African country.

The first phase occurred under Muhammad Ali who tried to forge the economic basis of Egypt's independence from Turkey and succeeded in establishing a number of national factories where veiled women worked side by side with men and shared with them the same oppressive treatment, which in some cases was worse for women.

When Mohammad Ali founded the school of midwifery, his project met with resistance from the upper class of society but those of the lower stratum were ready to enroll their daughters at the school in large numbers and the State encouraged them by arranging marriages between midwives and medical students.

The second phase took place with the expansion of cotton cultivation in Egypt which encouraged women's work in cotton mills as well as in other growing industries such as sugar, textile and cigarette manufacturing. Just as in the Muhammad Ali era, they were also involved in construction. As a result, the veil in factory and construction work was removed while among peasant women engaged in rural work, it had already disappeared.

World War I, by reducing the volume of imports, spurred the development of local industry. In 1914 women comprised about 5 percent of the workers engaged in industry and construction. In the period which followed, 1915-1942, women and children worked under an oppressive legislation: 9-15 hours per day, on all shifts. Women worked in mining and other underground work, wages were irregularly paid, married women were forbidden to work, workers had no right to strike or to form trade-unions. Yet on several occasions, they succeeded in organizing demonstrations and strikes.

With the liberation of Egypt from colonialism in 1952, the policy of centralized planning focused on the development of heavy industry. The Labor Code of 1954 contained a large number of laws which brought about an improvement in the conditions of female workers. Between 1961 and 1971 the percentage of women engaged in the manufacturing industries rose from 3.3 percent to 11.7 percent and that of illiteracy among females in the labor force declined from 82.4 percent in 1961 to 54.1 percent in 1971.

A field research in 1975 was conducted in a textile factory located in Chubra el-Kheima, in the outskirts of Cairo, where a relatively large concentration of women were employed: 1150 females out of 20,000 workers. Workers interviewed numbered 148 (about 37 percent of female workers employed in the silk factory): 65 percent of them were single, 25 percent married, 10 percent divorced; about 10 percent had

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attended preparatory school. The illiteracy rate among the totality of women workers was 33 percent.

RESULTS AND COMMENTS

The researcher points out the sharp class separation existing between the workers and the administrative staff. As an example, the factory compound had two gates, one exclusively used by the administrative staff, the other by the workers. They were transported to and from work on separate company buses.

Transportation of women created for them certain problems. Their working hours dictated that they leave home between 4.00 and 5.00 a.m. in order to walk to the bus station and ride the hour long commute to the factory. They had to be accompanied to the bus station by a male escort; otherwise, they would be subjected to a whole range of male abuses.

Another problem was that of women who had children below school age. If they had no relative or neighbor where the child could be deposited, they had to take him or her to a costly day care center which was not always reliable and rarely provided instruction.

When asked why they chose to work, they all gave economic need as the unique reason for working. Another reason for seeking employment was that a job offered women a socially acceptable opportunity to get away from the home environment and make new acquaintances. Single women considered their occupation as a means of accumulating enough savings to provide household furniture when they get married. An interesting method they practiced for stretching the family budget was the «Gam'eyya», a sort of credit cooperative, by which each member contributed to a common fund, allowing all the members to make loans granted on a temporary basis.

SOCIAL VALUE OF EDUCATION

They all considered education as the only avenue for upward social mobility and exhibited enormous concern that their children, including daughters, «not be deprived of it like their parents». The most frequently mentioned occupation aspired to by the mother for her son was that of engineer and for her daughter, that of doctor. They considered all jobs preferable to their factory work. None of them said that if she were educated she would aspire to an administrative position related to factory work.

Owing to the poor cultural background offered by their home environment, it is difficult for children of laboring classes to achieve the educational level required for college or university entrance. As a result, many parents resort to the questionable practice, very common in Egypt now, of private tutoring lessons, which results from classroom overcrowding and the desire of parents to push their children into academic success.

Another sign of backward mentality among those women is the persistence of the traditional scorn of manual work. Textbooks used for adult teaching contain a bias toward intellectual rather than vocational training. While those books occasionally emphasize the importance of the workers' contribution to social welfare, they fail to recognize the role of the working woman in this field and thus fail to encourage women's participation in industrial activity.