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AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION INTO THE LABOUR
STABILITY AND ATTITUDES OF BANTU WOMEN IN A
TEXTILE FACTORY

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I. INTRODUCTION

A large-scale project undertaken by the National Institute for Personnel Research included an investigation into worker attitudes as related to absence, turnover and productivity at two textile mills, one situated in an urban area on the Witwatersrand, the other situated in a Border Industrial area in the Eastern Cape. Women employed at various levels of skill formed a very small proportion (4%) of the total labour force of the Border factory. Although they were so few in number (212 was the total employed during the year of the investigation and the maximum at any one time was 157) it was decided to take this opportunity of studying representatives of a section of the population about which little or nothing was known - the Bantu female factory worker. This decision was taken because the Institute had received several enquiries about the reactions of Bantu women to industrial employment and was not in a position to answer the questions. It had been decided to carry out a large-scale study on the Bantu Woman in Industry and it was felt that data from this study, coupled with certain information we had formerly had the opportunity of collecting on absence and turnover among a small number of Bantu women employed in the clothing industry would provide useful preliminary findings. Data on absenteeism and turnover and certain basic demographic factors were collected for all 212 women and 93 of them were interviewed to obtain more detailed demographic and attitudinal information. It was not possible to draw any conclusions about the productivity of these women because productivity indices could be calculated for only a few of them.

II. THE BANTU FEMALE EMPLOYEES

2.1 Demographic Factors

2.1.1 Residential History

Almost three-quarters (73%) of this group of Xhosa women were born in a rural area, 18% in a semi-urban area and 9% in a town. At the time of the study all but 2% were living in a semi-urban area. Eleven per cent of the sample were still living in their birthplace; 18% first left when under ten years of age, 23% between the ages of ten and 17 years and 39% between the ages of 18 and 24. People left home either because they moved with their parents (34%), to find work (22%) or for personal reasons (23%). They can be regarded as settled residents for almost two-thirds (63%) had been resident in the same place for over ten years and 38% for 15 or more years. Despite this one-third of these women regarded, not their place of current residence but some rural area, as their home although the fathers or husbands of only 11% had land rights.

2.1.2 Age and Marital Status

Almost three-quarters (72%) of this group of women were over 25 years old.

Table I

Comparative Age Distribution of the Men and Women

A G E	Males		Females	
	N	%	N	%
20 years and under	2	0,5	6	6,5
21 - 25 years	44	11,2	20	21,7
26 - 35 years	158	40,3	40	43,5
36 - 45 years	134	34,2	17	18,5
46 - 55 years	32	8,2	9	9,8
56 years and over	22	5,6	0	0,0
TOTAL	392	100,0	92	100,0

$\chi^2 = 33,989$. $df = 5$. χ^2 is significant above the 99,95% level.

Surprisingly, in view of this, over two-fifths (47%) were single. Another peculiar feature of the group was that 32% were "formerly married"¹ women. Only 21% were married. This is not reflective of the population of the area as a whole and can be regarded as being a result of economic forces and selectivity in the appointment of Bantu women. Lobola had been paid for all but one of the married women. In half the marriages it took the form of cash only and in another 21% of the cases cash formed part of the lobola payment.

2.1.3 Family Composition

In all but seven of the families of which the women were members there were at least two dependents and in six families there were more than ten. The maximum number of dependents was 14. The median number was five. In almost three-quarters of these families there was more than one contributor.

Table II.
Number of Contributors per Family of Females

	N	%
One contributor	23	27,1
Two contributors	39	45,9
Three and more contributors	23	27,1
TOTAL	85	100,1

No. of contributors unknown = 8

Many of these women occupied a key rôle in the households to which they belonged, for one-quarter of them were household heads and over one half (52%) were the main breadwinners of their families. Where someone other than our informant was the household head, it was most frequently the subject's

1. "Formerly married" is the term used collectively to describe widows, divorcees and women who have been deserted by their husbands.

husband. What is remarkable however, is that in 15% of the families the head was the subject's mother. Therefore in 41% of the families, the head was a woman. This again deviates from the pattern for the population as a whole and would seem, particularly when viewed in conjunction with the fact that 52% of the women were the main breadwinners of their families, to indicate that, in many cases financial need was a very strong influence in determining whether or not a woman would seek, and discipline herself to meet the demands of, industrial employment.

In addition to the immediate family, over half (52%) of our informants had other dependents living away, mostly in some rural area. Forty-one per cent of these dependents were looking after the rural home or preferred to stay there. Reasons given by the balance displayed no rural-urban orientation, but were mainly practical e.g. there was insufficient accommodation with the supporting family.

2.1.4 Education

Educational standards were, for a group of industrially employed Bantu, high. Almost one-quarter had Std. VIII or higher qualifications and only 2% were illiterate.

Table III
Educational Attainments of the Females

	N	%
No education	4	1,9
Subs A & B and Stds. I & II	8	3,8
Std. III - V	44	20,7
Std. VI or Form I	77	36,3
Std. VII or Form II	32	15,1
Std. VIII - X	47	22,2
TOTAL	212	100,0

Very few had any additional qualifications.

2.2 Employment Histories

In general, these women did not start their working lives very early. Only seven per cent started their first employment at less than 16 years old, but a further 10% between the ages of 16 and 18. One-fifth were over 25 when they started working.

Table IV
Age at which the Female Employees started Work

	N	%
Under 16 years	7	7,5
16 - <18 years	9	9,7
18 - <20 years	22	23,7
20 - <22 years	20	21,5
22 - <25 years	15	16,1
25 years and over	20	21,5
TOTAL	93	100,0

Almost half of them started work in industry and one-third in domestic service. A large proportion (45%) had worked nowhere else but at the factory where the study was conducted. Four-fifths had spent the greater part of their working lives in industrial employment. They were employed on skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled tasks¹. Many (48%) of the women had been in the employ of the factory for one year or less, 30% for more than one to three years and only 9% for more than five years. One-third had had a previous spell of employment in the factory.

1. The jobs these women did were evaluated according to the N.I.P.R. system of job analysis and evaluation. See Appendix A.

2.3

Absenteeism and Turnover

Absence rates among these women were low. The average absence rate for the group from January to December 1968 was 0,022. One-third of them were not absent at all during the year under review and only 13% were absent for more than 5% of the time.

Table V
Time Lost Rates for the Year among the Females*

	N	%
0% (no time lost)	73	34,4
1% (One day out of each possible 100 working days)	43	20,3
2%	34	16,0
3%	18	8,5
4%	9	4,2
5%	8	3,8
6 - 10%	19	9,0
11 - 15%	5	2,4
16 - 100%	3	1,4
TOTAL	212	100,0

* Time lost is expressed as a percentage of the total time each subject could have worked theoretically.

It can be seen from this that a small proportion of the group was responsible for much of the absenteeism. None of this absence was due to injury at work and very little to sickness. Only 19 women lost time as a result of illness and 15 of these lost five days or less.

Table VI
Days Lost during the Year as a Result of Sick Absence among the
Females

	N	%
1 day	6	32
2 days	4	21
3 days	1	5
4 days	3	16
5 days	1	5
6 days	0	-
7 days	2	10
8 days	0	-
9 days	0	-
10 days and more	2	10
TOTAL	19	99

No sick absences = 193

Thus it will be realized that most of the absence was unauthorised. It was not possible to establish the reasons for unauthorised absence as factory records did not reflect them.

Women in skilled jobs who were earning above R4,00 per week were absent more than those in semi- and unskilled jobs who earned less than R4,00 per week. Those of our subjects who were household heads or wives of male household heads were absent more than those women whose mothers were the household heads. 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. However, as it was not possible to ascertain reasons for absence it is impossible to draw any conclusions on this point.

Of the 212 women on the books, 10% were dismissed and 19% resigned during the year. The most frequently given reasons for resigning were of a personal nature, usually that the woman's domestic commitments necessitated such action or that her health was poor. Few women gave dissatisfaction with their employment situation as a reason for quitting. Where women were dismissed it was more often for unsatisfactory behaviour (theft, being convicted of an offence, chronic absenteeism or lateness) than for incompetence.

Table VII
Reasons for Separation among Females

			N	%
Separation	DISMISSED	Directly concerned with work situation	8	3,8
		Not directly concerned with work situation	13	6,1
		Reasons for dismissal unknown	1	0,5
		SUB-TOTAL	22	10,4
	QUIT	Factory-oriented reasons	2	0,9
		Personal-oriented reasons	32	15,1
		No reason given	6	2,8
		SUB-TOTAL	40	18,8
	Type of separation unknown		8	3,8
	Total Separations			70
No Separations			142	67,0
GRAND TOTAL			212	100,0

Women earning less than R4,00 per week were more likely to leave than others, while those earning over R5,00 per week were likely to remain in employment. Thus despite the fact that these women did not mention low wages when asked why they resigned¹

1. These reasons were abstracted from the factory records and thus may be biased by a reluctance on the part of the ex-employees to speak freely. It was not possible for the research team to interview leavers.

it seems, particularly when viewed with the repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with wages (to be discussed in the next chapter) that this must be an important contributory causative factor.

2.4 Attitudinal Data

2.4.1 Type of Employment Preferred

These women, in general, were favourably disposed to industrial employment. Of those who had experience of non-industrial work and could make valid comparisons, two-thirds preferred it to any other type of work they had done. Next in popularity was domestic service, which was preferred by 10%. A few (5%) of our subjects had been in professional employment, nursing and teaching, before coming to the factory and these were unanimous in preferring professional employment to other types. Four-fifths of the women gave firm-oriented reasons for preferring their favoured employment. They earned more in industry than they had formerly and preferred weekly-paid wages. Fifteen per cent mentioned the factory's proximity to their homes.

2.4.2 The Job Itself

Seventy per cent of our informants mentioned factors they liked about their jobs. Job-oriented reasons, such as good working conditions, a light job and autonomy in the job were given most frequently. About one-quarter derived satisfaction from the fact that they liked the actual work they did, were used to their jobs or had become proficient and gained experience.

A higher proportion (84%) listed factors they disliked about their jobs. Over half (55%) complained about the wages they earned, stating either that they were low or not commensurate with the work they did. Almost one-third complained that they found the work very strenuous or that they were unduly rushed. Despite these complaints, only 27% would have liked another job in the Department in which they were employed, either because they felt the desired job was less strenuous or carried better wages. One-third would have preferred a job in another

department, the reason given by 46% of this group being that wages were better. Others felt the desired job would be carried out under better conditions or would be lighter.

2.4.3 Remuneration

When wages were discussed, our informants were unanimous in their criticism. All complained that wages were low and 12% felt that they were not commensurate with the work required. When asked to tell of the difficulties that they experienced as a result of the low wages they stated that they were unable to feed, clothe or maintain their families adequately, that they could not afford to educate their children or could not pay their rent.

The single women with no dependents stated that they were unable to feed and clothe themselves adequately or that they could not save. It was stated earlier that over half of these women were the main breadwinners of their families. Therefore the wages they earn are not, in most cases, a supplement to the husband's wage. These difficulties, in this case, cannot in any way be regarded as being exaggerated and unrealistic.

Three-quarters of the women earned a bonus. The great majority of this group were dissatisfied as they felt it was too low to compensate for the effort expended in earning it. Those who did not earn a bonus thought they would like to earn one as it would augment their wages. Some of the dissatisfaction expressed by those earning a bonus is probably due to lack of knowledge as to how the bonus is calculated. Ninety-four per cent of our informants could not explain how the bonus was assessed. Most of the women stated they wished they did know how the bonus was calculated. Seeing that this is explained during training, it would appear that the explanations given are inadequate.

2.4.4 Supervision

Three-quarters of the women were satisfied with the supervision they received. They commented that their supervisors treated

them well, that they were good, kind and sympathetic. Our informants realised that good supervision resulted in general satisfaction among the workers and that it assisted people to be competent employees. Those who were critical of the treatment they received from their supervisors complained that they were unreasonable, inconsiderate, harsh, unnecessarily strict or that they displayed favouritism in their treatment of subordinates. Bad supervision was felt to cause general discontent and high turnover among workers and to contribute to incompetence.

In their reaction to their supervision these women were displaying a degree of sophistication unexpected in a group so new to industrial employment. These reactions serve to underline and emphasise the overriding importance of the supervisor's dual rôle as the chief communicator and interpreter of the firm's policy and philosophy to the front-line workers and as the person who, more than anyone else, can motivate these workers.

2.4.5 Firm

Attitudes towards the firm as an employing body were, in general, critical on account of the low wages paid. Sixty-four per cent of our informants complained that wages were low or that they afforded inadequate recompense for the work performed. Other sources of dissatisfaction were the fact that pay-cuts were imposed as a disciplinary measure in certain circumstances and that women were on occasion required to work irregular shifts. Aspects of the general employment situation that were commended were the location of the factory which was near their homes and the fact that wages were paid weekly.

The importance of wages to these women was reflected again in the factors they considered made a firm either a good or bad one to work for. Eighty-six per cent of our subjects stated that pay should be good if a firm was to rate as a good employer, while 89% stated that a firm was "bad to work for" if wages were low. Supervision was next in importance. A

variety of other factors such as conditions of work, security, benefits, intrinsic aspects of the job, social aspects and communications were seldom mentioned.

Although the level of satisfaction with their employment did not appear to be very high, these women had no intention of resigning from their jobs, for they needed the money they earned, inadequate as they judged it to be, and work in the area was scarce. Two-thirds of them admitted that they had in the past felt like leaving, the majority because of dissatisfaction with their wages, some because they had been dissatisfied with the supervision and others because they disliked the work they were required to do. When asked to give reasons why people who quit did so, 70% stated that low wages were the cause.

They displayed a good knowledge of the reasons for which they might be dismissed but one-third were not aware of the fact that the firm's policy was to warn people whose behaviour was unsatisfactory before dismissal. Only 41% stated that warnings were always given. The balance held that the dismissal policy was inconsistent. Two-fifths of the women felt the firing policy was fair. Others were critical and stated that warnings should always be given and mentioned that the firm was harsh and unsympathetic in its treatment of its employees.

These women were a very homogenous group. Their industrial behaviour, as reflected in their absence and turnover rates was not affected by factors such as age and marital status. They were a select group in that there was a large proportion of household heads and main breadwinners among them. These responsibilities apparently caused them to be stable workers.

III. COMPARISON WITH THE MALE EMPLOYEES

3.1 Demographic Factors

Demographically there were marked differences between the men and women. Thirty-eight per cent of the women were 25 years old or younger, while 41% of the men were over 35¹. A much larger proportion of the women were born in a semi-urban or urban area, while more men were born in rural areas. The women, as a group, were much better educated. Two per cent of them were illiterate and 30% had passed Std. VIII or higher. Eleven per cent of the males had never attended school and only 7% had passed Std. VIII. This was partly linked to the age differential as education was more general among younger people, but it was also due to the selection factors which operated when women were considered for employment.

Differences that were observed in the job histories of these people were due to the sex difference.

Table VIII
Nature of First Job X Sex

Sex First Job	Male		Female		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Domestic	34	8,7	34	36,6	68	14,0
Mining	151	38,5	0	0,0	151	31,1
Agriculture	42	10,7	0	0,0	42	8,6
Commercial	29	7,4	10	10,7	39	8,0
Industrial	123	31,4	44	47,3	167	34,4
Professional	0	0,0	5	5,4	5	1,0
Services	13	3,3	0	0,0	13	2,7
TOTAL	392	100,0	93	100,0	485	99,8

$$\chi^2 = 118,23$$

$$df = 6$$

χ^2 is significant above the 99,95% level.

1. See page 2 for Table I: Comparative Age Distribution of the Men and Women.

The greatest proportion of men started their working lives in mining; next in frequency was industry, which was followed by agriculture. More women started in industry than in any other field and the next most often observed "first job" was in domestic service. The higher educational levels of the women must have accounted for the fact that more of them than of the men started working in commerce or a profession.

Women differed strikingly from the men in their industrial behaviour, as reflected in absence and turnover rates but resembled industrially-employed women in other western industrial countries. As far as absence was concerned women lost more time than the men. The average absence rate for women was 0,022, that for the men 0,015. The proportion of women losing 2% or more time was greater than that of the men.

Table IX
Time Lost Rates X Sex

Time Lost R. Sex	0%		1%		2%		3%		4%		5%		6-10%		11-15%		16% and more		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Male	412	41,1	307	30,6	115	11,5	65	6,5	28	2,8	14	1,4	38	3,8	7	0,7	17	1,7	1003	100,1
Female	73	34,4	43	20,3	34	16,0	18	8,5	9	4,2	8	3,8	19	9,0	5	2,4	3	1,4	212	100,0
TOTAL	485	39,9	350	28,8	149	12,3	83	6,8	37	3,0	22	1,8	57	4,7	12	1,0	20	1,6	1215	99,9

$\chi^2 = 34,0632$

$df = 8$

χ^2 is significant above the 99,95% level.

The percentage of the women who left the service of the factory during the year was higher than that for the men.

Table X
Separations X Sex

Separation \ Sex	Separated		Not Separated		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Male	183	18,2	820	81,7	1003	99,9
Female	70	33,0	142	67,0	212	100,0
TOTAL	253	20,8	962	79,2	1215	100,0

$$x^2 = 23,1681$$

$$df = 1$$

x^2 is significant above the 99,95% level.

Moreover, 22% of the women as compared with 10% of the men quit while 9% of the men and 11% of the women were dismissed.

Length of service is not really comparable as women were first employed only in 1957. Thus it has not been possible for them to achieve a length of service of 15 or more years as have a proportion of the men.

3.2 Industrial Attitudes

3.2.1 Type of Employment Preferred

When the industrial attitudes of the men and women were compared, it was found that in many respects they were remarkably similar although some differences were noticed. Both men and women generally preferred industrial to other types of employment, and gave firm-oriented reasons, such as better pay than in other fields and the proximity of the factory to their homes, for making this choice. Among the women, next in popularity was domestic service, while among the men commercial employment ranked second. Job-oriented reasons for this preference were given more frequently by men than by women.

3.2.2 The Job Itself

When discussing positive feelings towards the jobs they did, both men and women remarked on the good working conditions and the acceptable physical output demanded of them. Women commended, in addition, the degree of autonomy they enjoyed. More women than men derived satisfaction from the work itself. Both sexes felt the acquisition of skills and gaining of experience was beneficial. When discussing factors disliked, both men and women criticised the low wages they were paid, but three times as many women as men complained of personal-oriented factors, mainly that their jobs affected their health adversely.

3.2.3 Wages

Generally employees were dissatisfied with their wages but the dissatisfaction was even more marked among the women than among the men. Eleven per cent of the men, but none of the women, were satisfied with the wages they earned. Complaints for both sexes were centred on the impossibility of living, or maintaining a family, on the wages earned, but the majority of women who experienced difficulties as members of a family group was greater than that among the men.

3.2.4 Supervision

Generally, both men and women commended the supervision, both groups holding a somewhat personalised viewpoint. Criticism was levelled in certain cases and twice as many women as men were critical. They complained that some supervisors failed to establish good interpersonal relationships with their subordinates. This highlights what appears to be a fundamental difference in requirements between the sexes. Women in industrial societies usually set greater store than men on the interpersonal aspects of supervision. Those men who were critical of the supervision and felt their expectations were not realised stated that their supervisors failed to integrate them fully into the work situation and to assist them to achieve high productivity.

3.2.5 Firm

Among men and women favourable attitudes to the firm were concentrated on the proximity of the factory to the workers' homes. Women commented favourably as well on the fact that wages were paid weekly. When asked what they disliked about the firm employing them, both sexes expressed considerable criticism on account of the low wages paid. However, all of the women and only 81% of the men were critical of one or another aspect.

A greater proportion (66%) of the women than of the men (54%) had felt like leaving at some stage. Furthermore the restraining influences differed. More women than men stayed because of familial and economic pressures, while some men, but no women, felt mobility was impossible because of government restrictions.

In view of the fact that women have been employed at the factory only since 1957, it is remarkable that they have so soon adopted the norms of industrial behaviour and developed expectations and attitudes similar to those of the men whose overall exposure to the factory environment is much greater than theirs.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

No firm conclusions can be drawn from such a small group of women (n = 212) employed in only one factory. However, the data presented indicate that Bantu women, as Bantu men have been found to do in many cases, adapt readily to the demands of industrial employment and develop patterns of behaviour similar to those of women in industrial employment in other industrialized societies. The absence rates were low, but higher than those of the men employed in the same factory.

Their turnover, as reflected in their separation rates was also low, but higher than that of the men.

Their attitudes to industrial employment were favourable although they were critical of certain aspects of the particular situation in which they found themselves.

These findings, which relate only to a small number of women employed in one factory cannot be accepted as being generally reflective of Bantu women in industrial employment. They do, however, highlight the need for more research to be carried out among a group which, as far as can be ascertained, has not formerly been studied.

APPENDIX ADEFINITION OF THE SKILL GRADESUnskilled

Work entails simple routine tasks of a repetitive nature. There is none, or a limited variation between the separate parts of the main task.

Decisions are based on a limited number of easily observable, direct visual cues of unchangeable meaning; possibly a limited number of memory cues - whereupon an automatic reaction takes place. There are usually only one or two alternatives facing the individual having to make the decision.

Semi-skilled

Partly repetitive processes with a measure of variation between the separate parts (i.e. gross discrimination and fine discrimination) of the main process.

Decisions are based on more than one type of perceptual cue and a number of memory cues.

Skilled

Work entails more than one semi-repetitive process, with a measure of variation between processes or various short processes which should be specific procedures.

Decisions are based principally on perceptual cues mainly of a tactile and kinaesthetic nature or on an intimate knowledge of the various short processes which demand perceptual acuity and fine discrimination.

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