

GHANAIAN WOMEN IN FACTORY EMPLOYMENT: A CASE STUDY

By

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The advent of Ghanaian women in industrial employment is a new phenomenon. Their traditional economic activities have been trading and farming. With respect to trade, Boserup (1970:87) reports that 80 per cent of Ghana's labour force, both in the village and in the city, is made up of women (also see McCall, 1961). This would imply that Ghanaian women have always worked outside the home to support themselves, although not as industrial employees but as self-employed. The women who participate in trade and farming are mostly illiterate. With increasing education¹, however, the educated Ghanaian women are branching out into other employment areas - mostly nursing and teaching and a few² of them into factory work³. This paper examines, among other things, the characteristics of Ghanaian women in factory employment and whether there are any differences with respect to work behaviour, between these women and their male counterparts working in the same factory.

The data to be discussed here are extracted from a study⁴ conducted from July 1972 to March 1973, of a group of Ghanaian factory workers with the main aim of providing a further test of the Industrial man hypothesis in the Ghanaian setting. These workers were the employees of a Ghanaian State Garment Factory situated in Accra. Although it was a case - study, the employees of three private garment factories were also looked at. Therefore, where appropriate, comparisons will be made between the employees of the state and private factories.

Forty eight per cent of the state factory's 283 employees and between a half and a third of those in two of the private factories consisted of women. If we accept Moore and Feldman's view (1960:85)

that "one good test of the degree of commitment of a labour force is the per centage of it comprised by women", then this Ghanaian labour force could be described as committed. However, as Lambert (1963:85) points out, the proportion of women in a labour force sometimes is not related to the choice of the women concerned nor of their families, but upon the willingness of the employer to hire them. For example, in the third private factory looked at in the study there were only 3 women out of a labour force of 65 because of a deliberate policy of the management not to employ many women owing to the amount of working time lost through the maternity leaves of women employees.

Factory jobs, however, have been described as not attractive to Ghanaian women as self-employment (see Peil 1972a: 36) because it requires working regular hours and also because of the scarcity of day nurseries where children can be left. It would appear then that the garment factories studied are exceptional in having a high proportion of women employees. Peil, however, mentions sewing as among the occupations in which Ghanaian women are mostly found and since sewing is the main work done in these factories, it is not surprising then that they have such a high proportion of female workers.

It is true to some extent that most Ghanaian women with skills, like sewing, seem to prefer self-employment to wage-employment. Almost two thirds of the seamstresses in all the factories investigated began their sewing career in self-employment. Self-employment attracts Ghanaian women because it allows the married woman some flexibility: she can leave her work without any fuss to attend to home duties like children and husband when the need arises. She can thus work shorter hours or fewer days in the month (cf. Boscrup 1970:115), the kind of freedom denied her counterpart in wage-employment in the factory. Self-employment, however, has a disadvantage, namely the irregularity of the income derived from it.

Many of the seamstresses interviewed gave this as their reason for entering into regular wage employment.

Marital Status

Most of the Ghanaian factory women studied were married and thus differed from the Ugandan factory women studied by Elkan (1955:41) who were reported to have had marital disruptions. However, these Ghanaian workers needed regular income because their husbands were mostly in working class or low middle class jobs like the typist, driver and clerk. The women's regular income was thus necessary to supplement their husbands' small pay packets. There were very few of the husbands in upper class occupations like managers. For example, one female junior supervisor in the state factory had a husband who was an Assistant Manager with the State Cocoa Marketing Board. There was, however, one case where the husband was unemployed, so the seamstress had to use her factory income to feed and clothe the husband as well as the children. Also for most of the women, their work was necessary so that they could support some members of their extended family especially mothers, brothers and sisters. A fifth of the women were divorced, separated or widowed. These needed their factory income to live on. For example, when the marriage of a thirty year old Kwahu seamstress broke down, she learned tailoring from an aunt and found employment in the factory as a seamstress. There was also the case of a woman from the Volta Region who learned tailoring in her youth but got married immediately after her training and became a full-time housewife. When she divorced her husband and the latter took away the sewing machine he had given her, she found employment in the factory. A further fifth of the women were in polygamous marriages. This could be explained in terms of the fact that it is easier for a woman to leave home to work, if there are co-wives at home to serve the husband (McCall 1961:293).

Children

Most of the women were within their child bearing period. Therefore, the married and even some of those who were not currently married had small children but were in full-time wage employment with its regular hours of work. This was helped by the fact that they had they had parents, grandparents, maidservants and other relatives to look after their children for them while at work. This would seem to suggest that the Ghanaian kinship system makes it easier in a country where nurseries are so few for these women to enter into full-time wage employment. The fact that the Ghanaian woman in wage employment continues in regular employment even though she has small children represents one point of difference between her and her counterpart in Britain and the other western industrialised countries where married women tend to leave employment during their childbearing period (or take up part time employment) although some may re-enter when the children reach school going age (see Klein 1960; 1961 and 1963; Confederation of British Industry 1967). In this sense, then, Ghanaian women factory employees cannot be described as "birds of passage in industry" as Lupton (1965:191) does in connection with the British women in industry. One attraction of the factory for its married female employees is its shift system which permits them not to spend the whole day in the factory. During the interviews, some of the women mentioned that they liked the shift system because it left them time to do their house work.

Age

The average age of the women in the state factory was 33 years. This was slightly lower than that of their male counterparts which was 36. Generally, however, the average age of both the men and women employees in the state factory was higher than in most Ghanaian

factories (see Peil 1972a: 39) and in the three private garment factories studied. This high average age is explicable in terms of the nature of the state factory's labour force, its history and its turnover rate. The employees were skilled workers and Peil found (1972a: 43) in her study that the median age of skilled workers was above the median age for all the other workers. However, the workers in the 3 private factories were just as skilled-trained tailors and seamstresses - as those in the state factory, yet the former had a lower average age (28, 30 and 26 respectively). This would seem to imply that the high average age of the state factory's employees is explicable in terms of other factors.

The state factory, unlike the private ones in the study, was established in 1962 and this makes it quite old in a country where factories are mostly of very recent origin (Date-Bah 1972:86). In addition, its labour turnover has been low. This means that although the state factory's employees were recruited young, they had grown old on the job. The latter factor is related to their comparatively long, length of service in the factory (8.6 years). This is illustrated in Table 1.

Table I

The Distribution of the Employees in the State
Factory by length of service and sex (percentages)

Length of Service	Male	Female	Total
1 year or less	4	3	3
2-5 years	5	8	7
6-10 years	77	84	78
11+ years*	14	5	12
Total	100	100	100
N	146	135	281

In contrast to this, in the three private factories the average length of service was 3, 4 and 3 years respectively. The employees' short length of service in 2 of these factories is due to high labour turnover while that in the last factory is explicable in terms of its short history. As Peil has said, "workers will be younger in new factories, in those factories experiencing high turnover" (1972a: 39).

Education

It has already been mentioned that educated Ghanaian women tend not to participate in trading and farming, the traditional economic activities of Ghanaian women, but seek employment in the modern economic sector. Thus it is not surprising to find that most of the women found in the factories covered in this study were educated. The majority have had ten years of education. Perhaps this is explicable in terms of a deliberate recruitment policy of these garment factories to employ only educated people since the work done in them demands ability to read and measure. For example, the few tailors and seamstresses with no formal education, have some working knowledge of reading these measurements.

This high proportion of educated people, both men and women, among the employees is in complete contrast to their parents, a majority of whom are illiterate. This is explicable in terms of two factors - a general increase in the country's literacy rate and the different kinds of job engaged in by the parents. About two and a half decades ago, only 4 per cent of the total Ghanaian population (Gold Coast Census 1948: 18) was educated but in 1970 as much as 44 per cent was educated (1970 Ghana Population Census, Vol. 11:xxiv). This expansion has meant that more of the younger people including the female have received education. Again unlike these workers, the parents are mostly farmers and traders; the mothers following the well-known occupation of Ghanaian women are in trade

and the fathers in farming. Compared to their parents then these factory women have achieved considerable inter-generational mobility in education and job done.

In this respect they are similar to their male counterparts. However, apart from the fact that they are both first generation wage-earners, the women were in the main, in their first or second full-time job while the men tended to have had longer work history and were thus in their third, fourth or fifth jobs. It would appear that compared to the men, most of the women tended to have no previous experience of wage employment since even those who had had jobs before their present one, had been in self-employment.

How socialized then have these women been in the conditions and ways of factory employment? How committed are they to factory employment? These two questions will be answered by looking at certain indices of the women's work behaviour like absenteeism, lateness, turnover.

Absenteeism, Lateness and Turnover

Although the absenteeism rate of the State Factory's employees was generally not high (7.5%). It was found that that for the women was higher than that for their male counterparts. The women's total absence rate was 9 per cent while that of the men was only 4 per cent. Behrend (1951) also found a similar thing with regard to the women in the 51 factories she studied in Britain. She reports that the absenteeism rate of the British women was 5 to 9 per cent, while that for the men was 3.5 to 5 per cent. It would seem then that with regard to the rate of absenteeism there is no difference between these Ghanaian factory women and their British counterparts.

Two reasons have been put forward by Argyle, Gardner and Cioffi (1958:29) to explain this high incidence of women's absences:

- i) Absenteeism is higher among unskilled workers and since women tend to have less skilled jobs, this explains why they have a high absenteeism rate.
- ii) It may be due in part to domestic affairs which impinge on women, especially married women, more than on men.

The first explanation does not account for the higher absence rate among the female employees in this Ghanaian factory since almost all the women there performed skilled jobs. The second reason seems to be the one which explains the situation, for most of the women were married and even some who were not currently married had children. They absented themselves not only when they themselves were ill but also when their children were.

- iii) This would seem to indicate that these female workers' external associations and interaction with their family explain many of the diversions of their time and energy temporarily from the factory.

Some working time was also lost through lateness. Although lateness was less widespread in this Ghanaian factory and was attributable to mainly the irregular transportation system in the city of Accra, the women were more often late than the men. This was confirmed by the remarks made by the factory's supervisors. According to them, the female employees were always late to work and thus were less productive than their male colleagues. On one such occasion during the study period, ten seamstresses in the State Factory on the afternoon shift came to work twenty minutes late. The senior production room supervisor stressed the fact that no tailor or male employee was among these latecomers and warned the seamstresses that they would be sent home if they repeated this practice. The

next day, this supervisor ordered the production room door to be closed five minutes after the start of the shift and three seamstresses were sent home and thus lost their wages for that day. Like the higher female absenteeism rate, perhaps this higher female propensity to be late to work can also be explained in terms of the duties they have to perform at home. This would thus seem to be one of the consequences of a woman or more precisely of a mother or wife, combining her house duties with wage employment outside the home.

With regard to turnover, none of the state factory's employees left its employment either voluntarily or involuntarily during this period. It was however, obvious from responses to the question "would you like to continue to work in this factory or go elsewhere to work?" that some of the employees wanted to leave but had not actually done so because of their inability to obtain alternative employment or find the capital to set up themselves in private practice. It was found that while most of the tailors wanted to leave, the seamstresses were generally inclined to stay. This might be explicable in terms of the fact that the former have higher aspirations because they are primary breadwinners, and, therefore, were searching for avenues where they could be adequately rewarded. The seamstresses, on the other hand, can be regarded to some extent as secondary bread winners.

Informal Relations

With regard to informal associations at the work place, it was observed that both the men and the women employees engaged in them. There were friendship associations, "Susu" groups,⁵ card-playing groups and other specialised associations like the cigarette-sharing and lottery groups. Some of these groups overlapped in the sense that for example, workmates who are friends may also belong to the same "Susu" group, or share sticks of cigarettes. It was, however,

observed that some of the informal associations were sex-linked; only men for example engaged in cigarette-sharing and in working on the lottery. With regard to the Susu groups, these tended to be mixed groups.

These informal associations were sometimes carried outside the factory. This was, however, done to a very limited degree owing to a number of factors - the marital statuses of the workers, their residential non-propinquity and the fact that they engaged in additional money-earning activities in their free time after work. Marriage (see Peil 1972b:6) has been found to limit the worker's freedom of movement off the job since the time off the job tends to be spent with spouse and children at home. The women, after work or at the week-end when they did not go to work, engaged in household chores like cooking for the husband and children, washing and ironing of their clothes and those of their family and in going to the market. (see Table 2). This table indicates an interesting sex difference in the off-the-job activities engaged in by the men and women workers. For example, the household activities already mentioned were in the main done by the women, although generally for both men and women their single most important activity on Sunday is going to Chapel, since most of them belonged to one Christian religion or other, on Saturday they wash and iron and after work on the working day, many just rest. The women, however, rest in addition to performing their household chores, while this is not the case with the men workers.

The women did not indulge in much visiting after work not only because their household chores took a lot of their free time, but also because the workers did not all live in the same neighbourhood nor near each other but were scattered throughout the city. In a small town with one industry or in an isolated community like a mining village, work mates are the same people one meets during leisure (Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter 1956:79-82; Gouldner 1954: 134-6). Blauer (1960:35), however, says with reference to factory

workers in the city that occupational communities rarely exist among them. Since the workers, in my study, lived in different parts of the city and taking into consideration Accra city's irregular transportation system at the time of the study and its relatively high expense for the lowly paid worker, it could not be envisaged that there would be much interaction between workmates off the job.

Table II

The Employees' off-the-job Activities, by
Day of the Week and Sex

Class of Activity	Sunday		Saturday		Working Day	
	m.	f.	m.	f.	m.	f.
<u>A) Household Duties</u>						
Wash/iron	18	26	24	57	0	15
Cook	3	42	4	39	2	2
Cleaning	3	20	2	36	5	16
Totals	24	88	30	132	7	65
<u>B) Recreation</u>						
Cinema/drinking bar/football	8	5	10	7	3	3
TV/music/radio	3	2	2	1	9	7
Cardgame/talk	4	3	6	4	13	8
Rest	21	3	13	5	45	36
Totals	36	13	31	17	70	54
<u>C) Other Outside Activities</u>						
Church	38	45	3	2	16	10
Visits	16	8	15	10	18	17
Travel to hometown	7	3	8	4	2	0
Attended funeral	5	4	2	2	1	2
Went to market/shop	0	8	3	33	3	15
Totals	66	68	31	51	40	46
<u>D) Sewing/Private Business</u>						
	16	10	33	22	27	00
<u>E) Haircut/Platted Hair</u>						
	1	3	1	4	1	1
All Activities	143	182	126	226	145	186

Activities in class as percentage of all activities

A)	17	48	24	58	5	35
B)	25	7	25	8	48	29
C)	46	37	25	23	28	24
D)	12	5	26	9	18	11
E)	0	2	0	2	1	0
Totals	100	99	100	100	100	99

* Activities like "took my bath" and "ate" were excluded from the table because almost every employee did them.

Both the men and women were found to operate businesses in addition to their factory work. These took the form of sewing for their private customers in their spare time and in a few cases petty trading. They said they engaged in these money-earning activities to supplement their poor factory pay. During the study, it was realised that the major grievance of most of the factory's employees was that their pay was small which in July 1972 averaged £36.00 monthly. Most of them reported that they could not make ends meet on their factory pay and therefore had sometimes to borrow from friends and money lenders as well as use their free time to work for money. This meant that they had little or no leisure time within which to visit work-mates and other friends off-the-job.

This short exposition has illustrated a number of aspects with regard to the female employees in the garment factory studied. They have been shown to be educated, have a relatively short work history in wage employment and comparatively young compared to their male colleagues. They have young children but are working full time. With respect to their work behaviour, they have higher absenteeism and lateness rates owing to their home obligations which tend to interfere with their factory working time. At the workplace, they form friendly and other informal associations with their work

colleagues although these did not tend to extend much outside the confines of the factory organization. These are a few of the side lights which were shed on female employment from this case study of a Ghanaian garment factory. Being a case study meant that one cannot generalise on the findings. To find whether the findings of this present study are applicable to other Ghanaian women employees, therefore, it would be necessary to do a further study in which an attempt is made to cover a large number of these employees.

Footnotes

- 1) In 1960, the percentage of uneducated Ghanaians was 73% but in 1970 the percentage had decreased to 56.8% made up of 49.3% males and 66.2% females. (See 1970 Census Vol. II, p. xxiv).
- 2) Boserup (1970:109) mentions that Ghanaian women employees form only 3 per cent of the total industrial labour force.
- 3) This trend is illustrated by the work history of a 32 year old Ga Seamstress. After completing her elementary education, she entered trading but abandoned it because, in her own words, "trading is not a fitting job for an educated woman." She got apprenticed to a Seamstress in Accra and, after one year, got employed to a garment factory as a Seamstress
- 4) Two sets of interviews were done: the one at the beginning of the study sought to elicit information on the basic social characteristics of the workers like age, marital status, employment history, ethnic background and number of children. The second interview at the end of the study concerned itself with the workers outside work activities. A lot of data was also collected through observation.
- 5) These are contributory clubs where members contribute fixed sums of money at regular intervals and the sum realised is given to each member in rotation.

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