

# Unpaid, Unorganized

## Women Speak About Housework

*"HOUSE should not be prisons but bases to get to know the world. It seems ridiculous that women are chained to their houses, their gas-stoves, their curtains and carpets. A housewife is exactly what the word implies – a woman married to a house, and she has to marry the house to somebody else before she can go out to work. The urban housewife makes a religion of housework... How else can you explain washing, cleaning, polishing, even when everything is spotless! What a waste of women power!"*

-GERMAINE GREER

Housework is not just a waste of womanpower because it keeps women tied to monotonous drudgery. It is worse – it is unacknowledged as work, unrecognized by society. How often I myself have been guilty of asking women, "Do you work?" when the question should have been, "Are you paid for your work?" or "Do you work outside the house as well?" The answer too is characteristic : "No, I'm just a housewife"!

This thinking is also reflected in official documents. The 1971 Census of India for instance gives the following figures :

|                          |             |
|--------------------------|-------------|
| Total workers engaged :  | 149,146,069 |
| Male workers engaged :   | 78.99%      |
| Female workers engaged : | 20.01%      |
| Total Non-workers :      | 367,674,776 |
| Male non-workers :       | 36.69%      |
| Female non-workers :     | 63.31%      |

In the category of non-workers, of

\* Though these are interviews with real women, the names have been changed because the interviews prefer to remain anonymous.

course, come millions of housewives who slog from morning till evening, day after day – without rest, without holiday, without overtime, without bonus, or sick leave, with no retirement in sight, without any of the benefits that go with being "employed". How do these women look at their work?

### The Sorrow of Women

Sonali is a lower middle class housewife in Calcutta. Hers is by all accounts an idyllic marriage. Her husband is a clerk in a government office. She is happy, loves her husband, her home and children. If she was the heroine of a Hindi or a Bengali film, she would be portrayed as the paragon of wifely virtue and yet... her cousin Supriya narrates snatches of a conversation with her :

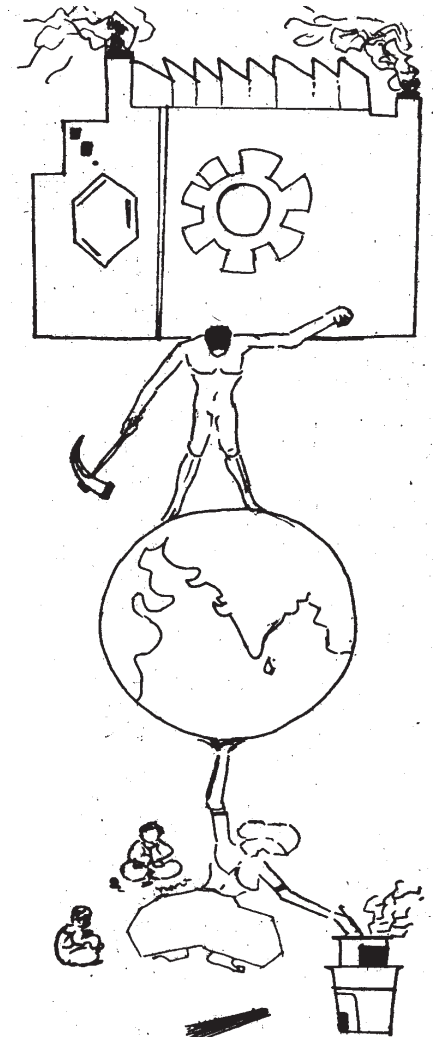
*How do you like doing the housework ?*

Well, it's the duty of women to do it. It's my duty to look after my husband and children. If I don't do it, who will? Yes, I like doing it.

*Then why were you complaining about it the other day?*

Yes, I did, didn't I ? Get up in the morning, have a bath, make the day's meal, feed them all, take the children to school, wash and clean, bring the children home, begin the evening meal, help them with homework... Every day, it's the same thing. But everyday I have to think of something different to cook, some variety... At least all you people in service get a day off in the week. I don't get a single holiday in the whole year.

See, last week I had flu. I wanted to lock the door and just sleep and sleep



Adapted from ISIS

and never get up. I even felt, let him and the two boys somehow feed themselves. But then I also know that he works hard all day and he comes home tired. So I forced myself to get up. Of course he helped me, but you see how I don't get even "sick leave"... I'm lucky because I have a sympathetic husband who understands the sorrow of women (*aurat ka dukh*).

*What is this 'sorrow of women' ?*

Why, having to do the same thing, the same routine every day, without any chance of a change. Sometimes I just long to get away. Get out and away and just not cook and clean for a week. But I can't go. He's such a good, gentle, considerate man and I know I'm lucky.

But he has some friends who are not very nice. When they come, he sits with them and doesn't help me. Then I get very angry. So now they come infrequently.

*Your eyes were red last night. Had you been crying? I didn't like to ask then.*

Yes. You saw how late he came home last night. He doesn't realize, you know, what it means to be trapped in this room, just wondering, worrying and waiting. Wondering and waiting. I can't sleep, I can't eat. I can only wait. This is also part of a woman's sorrow... Every time the union is preparing for an agitation or an agitation is on, he stays out late. I don't mind that, but at least he should let me know. Till he comes I can't eat or sleep. Sometimes I feel I'll just write to you and tell you to come and take me away from here. I'll just leave everything and go away.

*Yet, you say that he is a very good man.*

Yes, he is. I know I'm very lucky. But I suppose it's just our lot. It's a woman's lot to suffer.

### All In One

Uma is twenty five years old. She is convinced she has to make the best of her existence as a married woman. She grumbles to the woman who lives next door, but when asked what she thinks of houseworks, says, "So what if it is monotonous? There is no use feeling irritated by it. It is better to accept it as part of life. Looking after the family is the main duty of a married woman." Yet her day often ends on this note : "Well, Pushpa, I've finished all the jobs for the day – the cook's work, the ayah's work, the sweeper's work, the washer-woman's work – now only night duty is left" – referring to the "job" of sleeping with her husband.

### "I never Stopped You"

A recent encounter during a train journey to Bombay. A few seats away, a

Sikh family. The man is obviously a prosperous businessman, his wealth and status flashing in the diamonds of his wife and the imported clothes of his children. He notices copies of *Manushi* with me, asks if he can buy a copy and enters into a discussion on the rights of women. The wife keeps staring out of the window, apparently indifferent to her husband's attempts to provoke me into an argument. I go and sit next to her. She is humming. I ask, "*You sing very beautifully. Did you ever learn music ?*"

"She bursts forth, "Music was my life. My two brothers are known musicians. Before marriage, I gave dozens of concerts, appeared on radio and TV, but then I've made myself forget all that. I've cut out that part of myself..."

*"Why ? Why did that happen?"*

The usual story – my father-in-law didn't want me to sing in public. After marriage I was invited to participate in a concert. He just said a flat "No". I went to my room and tore up my music degree. I cried and cried, but that was the end of it. And then I even stopped crying. After all, my first duty is towards my family and a woman has to give up everything.

*"You mean you don't regret having given up music ?"*

"Yes, I do, but then, you see, peace has to be maintained in the family. If I had insisted, there would have been endless quarrels. My husband feels that if I start going out, the family will be neglected."

Suddenly the husband popped in : "Oh, come on, you never wanted a career in music. You women only want an easy life. If you had really wanted it, you would have done it. I never stopped you."

"What d'you mean you never stopped me? Tell me, tell me honestly – would you have liked it if I had made a career out of singing ? Did you oppose your father when he stopped me?"

"Why should I have opposed him? He never stopped me – he stopped you. You should have fought."

"Very nice! You say this now... When we go home and I say the same thing, you'll say "Come, come, we shouldn't quarrel. One shouldn't listen to outsiders and fight at home. In front of others, you will talk in this fashion."

Turning to me, "You know, on the one hand, he will not let me work because he says the family will suffer and then when he comes late from work, and I say something, he'll say, "What do you do all day long?" You don't know how well I look after my house. I do everything myself. My children are so well looked after. You come to my house – it's spick and span any time of the day. As for him, he doesn't even know what class his son is studying in. And then he tells me I do nothing."

Husband : "you call housework, work ? *ghar ka kaam bhi koyi kaam hai?*"

Wife : Let's see you do it. Do my work for six months and I'll see to your business".

Husband : "Oho, you'll see to my business! Women can't manage that kind of thing, madam!"

Wife : "You let me do it for six months. I challenge you, I challenge you. Why don't you accept this challenge?"

She repeated this challenge literally half a dozen times and her husband just laughed. But she sensed something in his laughter. Suddenly the challenging tone was gone. She put her arm around him and her head on his shoulder, squeezed his hand, and said, more to him than to me, "Actually he is a very good man. Where would I have found such a man? He takes such good care of me and the children." She had obviously gone beyond the limits permissible even in a joke.

### Sheer Shitwork

Most women are channelized into

housework even before they have come to recognize their own talent and creative potential. Their discontent remains vague and often unidentified. But for the women who are aware of their abilities, the struggle is much more painful. They have to tailor themselves to the required size so that they can fit into the roles of wives and mothers. The best is drained out in washing, cleaning, dusting, cooking and waiting on others.

Priya Ghosh is the mother of three school going children, but what is more important, she is a painter of exceptional talent. All these years have been a desperate bid to combine the two roles. Her conclusion today : "I realized that I made a mistake in getting married. Marriage is a very negative thing.. though it is one experience which really teaches you what it is like being a woman."

*Do you ever enjoy housework?*

No, it's sheer shitwork.

*Do you think your work as an artist suffered because of housework ?*

Yes. For the first two or three years, I just couldn't paint. I didn't get the time to even think of starting it. I felt it would come in the way of my managing the house. But when I realized there was no use giving up everything for a thankless job, I went and got myself some canvas and paints. The painting I did was different from what I used to do before marriage. Those days, I used to paint beautiful pictures of beautiful women. But I had never been satisfied with them. I knew that someday I would do something that would be more satisfying. The first painting I did after my marriage was of a woman with chains round her hands. It was a very grim thing. I'd never done anything like it, but I think it took me just five minutes to do it.

*Did you ever think that housework could be a substitute for painting ?*

No. I knew that for me, to be a painter was the main thing. I gave it up only because I didn't know how to fit it into

my life at home. I don't know why I kept getting the feeling that I had no right to carry on with painting which was something very much my own. I was supposed to do things for other people, not things of my own. Maybe I made a mistake but I felt that my home would break up if I devoted more time to my painting.

... Also, I was never in one place. I was always shuttling up and down between my husband and my parents-in-law, with the babies and all their bags and bottles... I did everything all by myself. And it was backbreaking. This is not true of me alone. You know, most Indian women develop kidney trouble because they just don't find the time even to go to the toilet and relieve themselves...

At times I used to become a raving maniac but they would just watch and snigger. I had to keep on looking after the children, feeding them, changing nappies, even when on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

*Can you describe what your routine was like when you were a young housewife?*

I would get up at five. The morning was a terrible rush, feeding the babies, washing the previous night's dishes, going to the market for bread and eggs, and putting on the tea kettle as soon as I saw him going to the bathroom. By 9 a.m. when he left, I'd start cleaning, then go to the market for the day's shopping, taking the toddlers along. Thrice a day, I had to fetch water from the tap. In the afternoon I'd wash clothes. The day was measured out by the feeding times of the two babies. After six, I would keep waiting for him but he usually came home very late, drunk.

Dinner was the only meal I ate because in the day I was too agitated to think of eating. And at night I felt it was my duty not to have dinner till he returned. But he would come, having already eaten. He'd fall on the bed, fall on the children. I'd pull off his shoes.

Sometimes he'd throw up and I would have to clean the mess. I would get to bed after midnight and I wouldn't be able to sleep because the whole day's work that lay ahead would hang heavy on my mind. I'd wake up feeling tired...

*Do you get more time for yourself now that the children are older ?*

Now, even if I don't have any work, I just lie down and stare at the ceiling. I don't want to be alive any more. These children and their future are my only reason for continuing to live.

## **Women Wasted**

Mrs. Sarita David was a brilliant all-round student, and a very gifted teacher before her marriage. Married at the age of 24, she devoted her whole life to housework, childcare; teaching and taking tuitions on and off. As a younger woman, she used to recite poetry aloud while doing all the cooking and cleaning. She continued her studies, doing a double M.A. but it was a great strain combining studies with housework and the care of two daughters. Now she is 50, and has started teaching after her husband's retirement. He has taken over most of the housework. Over the years, her health and energy have been drained out of her, but the vivacity and girlish love of life remain. When she gets fed up of being in the house, she escapes to her piano and to reading, which has always been a passion.

"I have been very fortunate because my husband helped me a lot with housework. After I started working and he retired, he is helping much more.

*Was this because you complained about the work?*

Well, he has been helpful all along. But yes, after the day's work, when the whole place would be untidy, the table covered with dirty dishes, it sometimes became too much, so I would get angry and complain.

*Why do you feel that the responsibility for keeping the place*

*tidy is yours alone?*

Naturally, because if the place is untidy, it reflects on the housewife. People will criticize her : “Look at the way she keeps her house”. I find this the most irritating part of housework – when the place is untidied again immediately after I have just spent hours tidying it. But when I have finally done it, I do feel a sense of satisfaction.”

*Do you think the children should help you ?*

They should, but then they have their work to do, how can I expect them to be doing this too?

*If you had the choice over again, what would you do ?*

I think I would take up a job. The main reason for my not doing so was that I thought the children would need their mother with them, if they were to grow up properly. But now they have anyway grown up different from what we wanted them to be, so what was the use? I would have got more satisfaction from working. So many of my friends who worked are now so far ahead, they have done so much ... As for my daughters, I think the choice should be left entirely to them whether to work or not, after marriage...

### **One Step Forward, Two Step Backward**

Whether we work outside the house or not, the burden of housework falls on us. Women find that their jobs outside home, instead of “liberating” them, only mean greater exploitation because they have to cope up with two jobs – one paid, one unpaid.

Mrs. Santosh Batra is a typical example of this predicament. She is a secondary school teacher and her husband works in a bank. They have four school going children – two sons and two daughters.

*Do you think you position in the family is better as a working woman ?*

I prefer to work. It is a strain but it increases one’s knowledge, keeps one



*-Ira Roy*

in touch with the outside world.... I leave for school at seven in the morning. I keep the breakfast for my husband and children. He leaves at nine. All he has to do is heat the milk before drinking it. That too the servant generally does.

*Does he help you at all ?*

No. No question.

*What about the shopping ?*

I do it on Sundays or other holidays. I buy vegetables every evening.

*Why do you think he doesn't help at all ?*

Men think, why should they do such trivial jobs ? Whenever I've spoken to him about it, he says it's better to keep a servant to do such things than to waste one's time doing them. He says I should pay the servant Rs. 10 more and get her to do it.

*So the price of your labour is Rs. 10?*

No, but he says it's a waste of energy to do it when one is working and can pay to get it done.

*Do you find it a strain combining work in and outside the house ?*

It's definite strain, because apart from housework, there are other pressure – guests, relatives visiting and expecting entertainment. No one considers that a lesser burden should be put on you because you are working... Then one has to help the children with their studies. And there is other work like knitting, stitching, which women have to do. (She was busily knitting when the interviews was taken).

*With all this burden on your mind, do you put enough energy into your profession ?*

No, not at all. We women can't do the extra reading which we should be doing... Men are far more active in the Teachers' Union. Women hardly go to meetings. For us, work is just a matter of finishing our duty hours. We don't participate in any activities outside that.

*What about promotion? How many women inspectors are there ?*

Very few, Women often refuse promotion because they feel the job will take too much time. Unmarried women do accept such jobs, but not married women. I would certainly refuse a

promotion if it was offered to me.

*Do you teach your sons housework?*

Yes, a little. Because my husband does not help me at all, I know how necessary it is for boys to learn. Nowadays, boys will probably marry working women and it would be good if they helped their wives a little.

*When did you start working ?*

Two years after I was married. He was absolutely against it. I had just finished my B.Ed. and really wanted to teach, but at the time of my engagement, they had made it a condition that I should not work. My parents made me accept this condition. For two years, I read lots of magazines, saw movies, but got very bored. He used to leave at 9 am and return at 9 pm. So without telling him, I applied for a job, went for the interview and told him only when I got the appointment letter. For a year I was very happy working. Then the first child was born. But that year of teaching was really good. Now, I want to leave the job but he doesn't want me to do so ... As one grows older, one can't take the strain, one's health suffers.

*Would you like your daughters to work ?*

It's up to them. They have their own ideas. My oldest daughter says she would rather eat dry *rotis* than take up a job. I think that seeing me, how tense I am, how much work I have to do, she has come to feel like this.

## **Double Slavery**

However, most women who work outside the home would find it difficult to give up this work, because even though it doubles the burden, it widens their horizons. This feeling was particularly strong among women workers in textile factories interviewed in Bombay by Meera Savara.

"The world of the home was the only one I knew. I used to sleep every afternoon, and live a lazy, leisurely life. There was work, housework, and every day passed like every other. I was quite

content with this life. However, once I began working, I found it extremely difficult to get back into that sort of life again. My daughter has been after me to retire so that she can take over my job. She tells me, "You have worked so long. Now relax." But I think, "What will I do when I stay at home?" So I continue to work as long as I can. I'll probably stop two years from now because the management will insist on it. But I shall feel lonely. I will miss work."

Another workers says : "We do feel that the day is never-ending in the factory. I think, when will this monotony get over, this endless repeating of the same gesture for eight hours of the day with the supervisor hovering around to pounce on me. But we all devise ways and means to pass the time faster, by joking with each other, by talking. When we go home in the evenings, we think about what we did all day, all the bits of fun we had, and it makes us laugh. If I stayed at home all day, I would have none of these distractions to make the days enjoyable..."

The unhappy family situation of most of the women makes home an unpleasant place. Work is sometimes an escape from domestic tensions, fights and beatings. One beaten worker says : "Whenever I am at home and my husband is there, I have to listen to a constant stream of abuse. He follows me down the stairs, shouting and all the neighbours keep staring. On my off days he doesn't go to work at all and keeps an eye on me all day. I hate it and wish I could come to work every day, to avoid the unpleasantness."

Another woman says, "There's a lot of work at home. It's not as if on our off days we can sit and relax. The entire day is spent in doing housework. Sometimes it's 3 pm before I eat lunch. The thing about housework is that it never ends. One can keep doing it. The place can always be made a little cleaner. There is always mending to be done. The children want me to make

something special on a holiday. So the whole day passes. I feel quite alone in the home. Talking with neighbours is mainly gossip : who did what, what sort of woman is she, did you see this woman? I don't like it much.

I feel very tired each day, because I get up at five, cook breakfast, leave at six to be in the factory by seven. I reach home at about six in the evening, after having spent an hour chatting with friends and buying vegetables. Then I have a wash, wash the clothes, begin cooking. It's about eleven before I sleep. Often, though I am tired, I can't sleep. I keep thinking of hundreds of things.

I don't think I would like to stay at home and only do housework. May be a shorter working day would help. Because when I go to the factory, I feel that at least my world is larger than my house and its four walls. I find out about things, about other people, I sometimes go to union meetings."

## **It Never Ends**

For a number of women, giving their lives to housework has meant not only a life of endless drudgery but also constant selfdenials and thwarted ambitions. What is more, this sacrifice is taken for granted, is unrecognized. The daily drudgery slowly erodes the sense of self, because housework, inspite of all its fancy trappings, is considered the most trivial of occupations.

Sanyukta Kapur, a 50-year-old middleclass housewife, has spent a whole lifetime catering to the needs and whims of her husband and three children. Every line of her face shows what a heavy toll this has taken – but the eyes are still soft. Condemned to be the "ideal" mother to her children, the amazing thing is that she actually manages to be one.

*Did you ever think of taking up a job?*

Yes, I did. No one ever allowed me to. I studied upto F.A. but Peshawar

was a backward area. I wanted very much to do a B.A. I also wanted to be a doctor. I begged, I pleaded, wept, protested, but no one gave me a chance or even listened to me. I wasn't a dull student. I always stood first in my class. But I was just married off.

After marriage, I joined a teacher's training course. The year I joined, they extended it from a three month to a nine month course, and that was the time I was expecting my second child! My husband used to say, "What do you want to do this course for?" I got nothing but discouragement from everyone. And then, after doing all the housework, I'd go to class. By the time I reached there, I'd be so tired, it was impossible to concentrate. No matter how great one's desire, if the energy is sucked out of one, how long can one sustain it? And there was not the slightest co-operation at home.

*Did you have anyone to help with housework?*

Not really – some part-time help, but all the work was mine. After my third child was born, I again thought of continuing my studies, but that is only possible if you get some cooperation. If one is constantly told, "Why do you have to study? Are we going to open a *Putri Pathshala* (Girls' school)?" one's enthusiasm is destroyed. I used to be told, 'In any case, you are dominating, once you start working, you'll be completely out of hand.'

*Do you think having a servant would help ?*

No, because if there is a servant, the housewife has to do everything he leaves undone. People expect much more if there's a servant but how much can one person do after all? So, the housewife is more strained – she has to manage the servant as well.

*Do you dislike housework ?*

What can be worse than this – that there is never a holiday in one's life? Even sweepers have holidays. On a holiday everyone relaxes, but for a

housewife there is more work than usual.

*Do you think things are simpler for the "modern" urban housewife ?*

No, they are more complicated. In the old days, people would get up, wash, eat and leave. There was no elaborate routine, no tea drinking, for instance. Now the woman has to keep supplying cup after cup the whole day. You have to lay the table in a certain way : you have to prepare all kinds of new-fangled dishes...

In the joint family, a woman got rest during pregnancy and menstruation. And children grew up almost without one's realizing it. Older people would help take care of the kids.

Now, all the work has descended on the head of one woman. Yet, husbands have the same old expectations – that their wives should worship the parents-in-law. If a wife is working, her salary is often taken by the mother-in-law, and money for transport rationed out to her. What rights does she have? She has to slave at home and toil outside too. Her husband will still consider it a disgrace to enter the kitchen. The child may be crying while she is cooking: why should the husband bother? He will keep reading his newspaper. There might be, at the most, one man in a thousand who would give his wife any help.

### Tailpiece

As I write this, and a few others are working on this *Manushi* issue, my mother is, as usual, cooking food for all of us. She is unwell, but then all of us are working so hard for such long hours – how can *she* let us remain hungry!



## for witches

*today i  
lost my temper.*

*temper; when one talks  
of metal  
means make strong,  
perfect.*

*temper; for humans,  
means angry  
irrational  
bad.*

*today i found my temper.*

*i said  
you step on my head  
for 27 years you step on  
my head  
and though i have been  
trained  
to excuse you for your  
inevitable  
clumsiness  
today i think  
i prefer my head to your  
clumsiness.*

*today i began  
to find  
myself*

*tomorrow  
perhaps  
i will begin  
to find  
you.*

**Susan Sutheim**  
(From *WOMEN : A Journal of  
Liberation*)