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Only Decent Girls Are Employed'
The Respectability, Decency and Virtue
of the Garment Workers on the Witwatersrand
during the Thirties.

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Elsabé Brink

'ONLY DECENT GIRLS ARE EMPLOYED'¹

The Respectability, Decency and Virtue of the Garment Workers on the Witwatersrand during the Thirties.

Introduction

During the inter-war years Afrikaner women who were employed as garment workers in the Witwatersrand clothing industry were confronted with harsh conditions of exploitation within their working environment. Moreover, on a social level they often had to face a denigrating and at times very hostile public. Garment workers were regarded not as respected and respectable working women, but as factory 'girls'.²

In 1952, after his banning under the Suppression of Communism Act, Solly Sachs, General Secretary of the Garment Workers' Union (hereafter GWU) from 1928 to 1952, in a farewell address to the garment workers, tersely summarised the social marginality of the garment workers,

U was slegs 'n fabrieksmeisie oor wie niemand bekommerd hoef te wees nie.
(You were merely a factory girl about whom no one needs to be concerned.)³

However flattering the epithet of eternal youth - factory girl - might have been, the categorisation of female factory workers as 'girls' had

¹ H. Pollak, *Women in Witwatersrand Industries*, M.A. dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1932, p.181.

² A girl is by definition young, immature, subject to parental and other authority, obedient, inexperienced and not fully responsible for her actions - all in all, a 'non-adult'. In 1932, during the general strike in the industry, garment workers were even referred to as factory 'meide' a term of abuse. For a comprehensive discussion of this question see E. Brink, "Naar 'n Klomp 'Factory' Meide": Afrikaner Family and Community on the Witwatersrand during the Twenties", in B. Bozzoli, *Class, Community and Conflict*, Johannesburg: Ravan, in press.

³ *KW/GW*, S. Sachs, 'Heil Volksmoeder, Werkster!', May/June 1952.

important implications.⁴ In many cases the term implicitly ascribed many of the characteristics of 'girls' to mature women. It conveniently reduced working women to the position of legal minors, who first should have been under the control of males, either a father or husband, and second could be exploited and abused on the factory floor. As working women, regarded as 'fabrieksmeisies' or factory 'girls', the garment workers found themselves in a very precarious position in society. Hence, one of the major achievements of the GWU was that it instilled a large measure of dignity, self-respect and pride into Afrikaner female garment workers, inspired them to regard themselves as worthy women or persons of the 'werkendeklas'⁵ and during the thirties and forties united them in a trade union renowned for its militancy and solidarity.

The low social standing of these women depicted as 'factory girls' is not a phenomenon restricted to the garment workers. Pollert, in an investigation of contemporary British female factory workers, remarked that,

Sexually the label 'factory girl' did not give them as high a price in men's eyes and they were forced to accept that they were at the bottom of the labour market both in class and in sexual terms.⁶

⁴ The use of the term 'girl' is also noted in other urban industrial contexts. E.g. see B. Gerson, *A Lifelong Day: The Meaning and De-meaning of Work*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, pp.26-27 and H. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working Class and Social History*, New York: Vintage Books, 1977, pp.26-27. A similar phenomenon is evident in the labelling of grown black men as 'boys'. Charles van Onselen examined the use of the concept 'Sambo' in the context of the use of black male labour on the mines in Rhodesia. C. van Onselen, 'Black Workers in Central African Industry: A Critical Essay on the Historiography and Sociology of Rhodesia', *Journal for Southern African Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, April 1975, pp.234-238.

⁵ 'Werkendeklas' in Afrikaans is an uncommon word - 'the class which is working'. The usual translation for working class is either 'werkersklas' or 'arbeidersklas'.

⁶ A. Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives*, London: Macmillan, 1981, p.99.

Studies elsewhere in the world tell a similar tale. Lambertz, who documented sexual harassment in the British cotton industry in the nineteenth century, maintained that,

....sexual access to women and girls was illegitimate because it was not based on mutual consent, but firmly lodged in situations of entrapment and economic coercion.'

Elson and Pearson mention this aspect of women's industrial labour in a contemporary context and Alexander also refers to the connection between female labour as cheap labour and the sexual antagonism between men and women in the work place and in trade unions.⁷ Likewise, during her investigation of women in contemporary South African trade unions Bird was told that sexual harassment "goes on here all the time".⁸

In this paper the hidden dimensions of the social marginality of the garment workers will be explored. First, the consequences of the loss of parental authority over these women and young girls and fear for their moral safekeeping will be analysed. Second, the anxiety voiced by the press, state, church and welfare organisations for the moral well-being of the new generation of Afrikaner workers, and articulated in proposed formal programs and campaigns needs some perusal. The outcome of these intentions, the provision of hostels for low-paid female workers, allegedly to reform and protect the virtue of, amongst others, the garment workers, will then be briefly analysed. Third, the belief in the vulnerability of the garment workers and the extension of their precarious position into the factory will be examined. Here prior attitudes towards

⁷ J. Lambertz, 'Sexual Harassment in the Nineteenth Century English Cotton Industry', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 19, Spring 1985, p.40.

⁸ D. Elson and D. Pearson, 'The Subordination of Women and the Internationalisation of Factory Production', in K. Young, C. Walkowitz and R. McCullag eds., *Of Marriage and the Market: Women's Subordination Internationally and its Lessons*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p.33. S. Alexander, 'Women, Class and Sexual Differences', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 17, Spring 1984, p. 45.

⁹ A. Bird, 'Organising Women Workers', *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 10, no. 8, July/August 1985, p.89.

single and unprotected females led to abuse and sexual harassment that in turn helped to reinforce the image of garment workers as fallen and immoral. Against this background it will be shown how the GWU stepped in to provide and reinforce a sense of worth and dignity in rank and file members of the union. The union, to achieve this objective, re-appropriated the image of 'Afrikaner dogters', utilised the Great Trek and the symbol of the Voortrekker Woman, and underlined the nobility of a working-class calling and strength of working-class solidarity as a basis on which garment workers could reaffirm their decency, virtue and respectability.

Family Relations

The social position of the garment workers was ambiguous. First, altered conditions at home led to the loss of parental control over offspring and consequently the development of parental anxiety for their safety in the new industrial environment.¹⁰ This alarm of parents over their offspring to a large extent hinged upon fears for the loss of moral integrity of their children. Mary Ryan found in her investigation of nineteenth century female moral reform movements in Oneida county, USA, that urbanisation in Utica during the mid-nineteenth century caused anxiety as to the moral well-being of offspring once they migrated to the city,

They (mothers) feared for their sons as well as their daughters, whom they envisioned leaving home only to be enticed into brothels and descend therewith into the almshouse, prison or the gallows.¹¹

¹⁰ Roberts, in his investigation of English working-class families, argues that industrialisation was seen as stripping the family of former functions. K. Roberts, *The Working Class: The Social Structure of Modern Britain*, London: Longman, 1978, p.72. Walker puts forward a similar argument. C. Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, London: Onyx Press, 1982, p.3.

¹¹ M. Ryan, 'The Power of Women's Networks' in J.L. Newton, M. Ryan and J. Walkowitz eds., *Sex and Class in Women's History*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, p.174.

Parents felt insecure, for once their children had migrated beyond their circle of control, other measures of control would be needed, since,

...parents' ability to restrict the sexual activity of their daughters and sons was being undermined by the extreme geographical mobility of the era.¹²

Ryan maintained that, rather than increasing promiscuity, this lack of parental control over offspring who had migrated to the urban areas helped inspire the moral reform action which eventually culminated in the restrictive Victorian code of behaviour in Oneida county.

Similarly, in her study of American mill workers at Amoskeag, New England, Hareven found that,

Once removed from the land, fathers in Manchester lost the bargaining power and control they had by virtue of their estates; thus the move to industrial cities may have weakened the patriarchal authority of traditional rural families.¹³

The hold parents had over their children was further weakened by the measure of financial independence experienced by the young wage earners, when they went to work, for,

...the mill did confer a degree of independence, particularly to younger women...It also gave them a sense of managing their own lives, albeit a limited one.¹⁴

However, Hareven argues that although the young men and women working in the mills gained some independence by becoming wage earners, they were

¹² Ibid., p.173.

¹³ T. Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relationship between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, p.117. Hopkins further argues that the role of the father is changed when he has to surrender authority to e.g. teachers in a compulsory education system, as well as medical and welfare officers. E. Hopkins, *A Social History of the English Working Class, 1815-1945*, London: Edward Arnold, 1979, p.205.

¹⁴ Interview conducted by the author with a retired garment worker (hereafter Interview), Mrs Lingenfelder, Johannesburg, 11.9.1984. T. Hareven, *Family Time*, p.75.

still expected to behave as 'obedient children' in their parents' households.¹⁵

Hints of a similar pattern of behaviour can be discerned in the family relations of Afrikaner migrants in general and garment workers in particular. In the rural areas prior to migration to the city, the Afrikaner father was considered to be the patriarchal head of the family, with his wife and children existing in dependent and subordinate relationships to him.¹⁶

The father was the head of the family, he transacted all business, even for his married children living with him or near him. His will was law and never disputed.¹⁷

The sons, married and unmarried, mostly worked with and for their fathers and remained under his authority. Daughters were equally under his control. This relationship of dominance and dependence, however, could not survive in the changed economic climate of the urban areas.

The Depression and resultant rural hardship forced their parents to allow Johanna Cornelius, national organiser of the GWU during the thirties and Mrs Deysel, a retired garment worker who was interviewed for this study, to migrate to the city to find employment. This relieved the financial

¹⁵ Ibid., p.187. Gaitskell refers to similar patterns of obedient behaviour expected from young African girls during the early twentieth century. D. Gaitskell, 'Wailing for Purity: Prayer Unions, African Mothers and Adolescent Daughters, 1912-1940', in S. Marks and R. Rathbone, *Industrialisation and Social Change: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness, 1870-1930*, London: Longman, 1982.

¹⁶ B Bozzoli, 'Feminism, Marxism and South African Studies', *Journal for Southern African Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, April 1983. Hopkins also found that in the structuring of the family as a work unit the father was the main organising force and that his wife and children had to adjust to the routine as laid down by him. E. Hopkins, *A Social History*, p.202.

¹⁷ Carnegie Commission, *The Poor White Problem of South Africa*, vols. I-V, Stellenbosch: Pro Ecclesia, 1932, vol. V, pp.31-32.

burden on their families.¹⁸ However, the reluctance with which parents sent their daughters to Johannesburg, suggests that parents allowed their daughters to migrate to the city only when there was no other way for the family to feed themselves. This attitude was poignantly outlined in the short story 'Pure Goud', published in a 1944 edition of the *Garment Worker/Klerewerker*. In this account a prospective garment worker, Nellie, seeks permission from her father to leave the farm to go to Johannesburg, considered to be a second Sodom and Gomorrah, in search of employment. He responds,

Indien ek 'n rykman was, sou ek onder geen omstandighede toegelaat het dat jy uit my huis gaan nie. Maar vandag is ek nie in die posisie om jou te gee wat jy nodig het nie... as jy vasbrand moet jy nie hulp verwag nie, want soos jy self weet is ons arm. (Had I been a rich man, under no circumstances would I have allowed you to leave my house. But today I am not in the position to give you what you need....if you run into trouble, you cannot expect assistance, because as you yourself know, we are poor.)¹⁹

Katie Viljoen provides a real-life example of the plight of single garment workers as is implicit in this short story. She remarked: "My parents never knew the hardship I had to endure."²⁰

After the Depression, when conditions had improved to some extent, Mrs Deysel, already mentioned, refused to heed her father and return to the family farm in the Bushveld. By then she had settled in the city and most probably treasured her new freedom and independence which resulted from her employment and relationships in the city.

¹⁸ GWU, Bch 1. H. or J. Cornelius, 'Why I left my home on the land', and Interview Mrs Deysel, Johannesburg, 12.2.1985.

¹⁹ *Klerewerker/Garment Worker* (hereafter *KW/GW*), 'Pure Goud' (Pure Gold), Nov./Dec. 1944, p.4. This has been found to be the case with parents who send daughters to work in contemporary world market factories. D. Elson and R. Pearson, 'Nimble Fingers make Cheap Workers: An Analysis of Women's Employment in Third World Export Manufacturing', *Feminist Review*, no. 7, Spring 1981, p.97.

²⁰ Church of the Province of South Africa Archives, University of the Witwatersrand, Records of the Garment Workers' Union (hereafter GWU), Bcc 2.2.1. Katie Viljoen, Life Story, p.18.

Obedience to their parents was expected from garment workers in Johannesburg who still resided at home. They were closely controlled, not only in terms of their freedom of movement, but also financially. For example, Mrs Lingenfelder recounted that "My ma en my pa het gesê ons moet elke week ons deel gee" (My mother and my father said that we should give our share every week.)²¹ All the children in the family contributed their earnings, increasing the contribution as their wages increased. They were each given 6d. per week pocket money in return.

Whereas garment workers were expected to and did contribute financially towards the upkeep of the family, their earnings also gave them some measure of freedom and the means to question the authority structure within the family. Mrs Harmse, for example, was strictly controlled in her leisure activities and was not allowed "om rond te loop" (to go out).²² Mrs Lingenfelder, on the contrary, evaded parental supervision, for she and her siblings used to escape through their bedroom window to go dancing in the city. It would seem that her employment made this measure of independence possible.²³

When parents could not look after their children in person, older married brothers and sisters would sometimes exert control over young working siblings *in loco parentis*. Miss Van der Merwe recounted that while employed as a social worker for the 'Fabriekwerkers Welvaart Vereniging' (hereafter FWV), she arrived home late one night. Her older sister with whom she lodged, then proceeded to scold her "like a little girl".²⁴

²¹ Interview Mrs Lingenfelder, Johannesburg, 11.9.1984. In a similar fashion, Mrs Britten contributed financially to the family income. Interview Mrs Britten, Johannesburg, 25.11.1983.

²² Interview, Mrs Harmse, Johannesburg, 16.1.1985.

²³ Interview Mrs Lingenfelder. cf. Interviews Mrs G., Johannesburg, 1.2.1985. and Miss O'Reilly, Johannesburg, 28.1.1985.

²⁴ Interview Miss L. van der Merwe, Germiston, 21.5.1985.

Similarly, when Mrs Ae. found work in Johannesburg her parents placed her under the supervision of an elder sister,

...maar ek is in goeie sorg, want my suster het my, jy weet, 'n oog oor my gehou...dat die lewe met my reg gaan.
(....but I am in good care, because my sister, you know, kept an eye on me, that my life went right.)²⁶

This was done because Johannesburg had the reputation of being a 'terrible place', a second Sodom and Gomorrah. Pauw maintained that decent parents were hesitant to send their children to Johannesburg, a place they considered an abomination.²⁶ Mrs Pa. recalled,

Mens het so baie dinge gehoor van Johannesburg. Jy het gedink jy kan nie hier in Johannesbrug in die straat loop nie, dan molesteer hulle jou.
(One heard so many things about Johannesburg. You thought you could not walk in the street here in Johannesburg, without being molested.)²⁷

Changed economic conditions and increasing migration to the urban areas had far-reaching consequences within the ambit of family relations. Economic hardship forced parents to allow their children to find employment in the urban industrial areas. Although many were still expected to behave like obedient children in the home, this brought in its wake new measures of economic independence for the younger generation. Where offspring had to leave their parental home to find employment, their departure generated fears for their moral well-being in the city. These fears were not confined to the parents of the new generation of workers, but were shared by the state, church and welfare organisations.

²⁶ Interview Mrs Ae., Johannesburg, 21.1.1985.

²⁶ S. Pauw, 'Die Beroepsarbeid van die Afrikaner in die Stad', DPhil thesis, University of Pretoria, 1946, p.73.

²⁷ Interview Mrs Pa., Johannesburg, 30.1.1985.

Virtue is a Grace

The maxim that the morality of young, single working girls was suspect, was widely held by the South African press, state, church and welfare organisations. It was felt that young and unprotected females had to be safeguarded against the evils of the city. Therefore, during the mid-thirties, alongside the emergence of Afrikaner nationalism, a growing public awareness of the very real poverty of the garment workers and their social conditions elicited a wide range of responses from these bodies. Efforts were accordingly made to provide hostel accommodation for these women,²⁹ which would not only provide for their protection, but would also save them for the 'volk', win support for the cause of Afrikaner nationalism and provide a docile labour force.

From the mid-twenties, state and welfare organisations began to express concern about the moral safekeeping and well-being of the increasing numbers of young, white, male and female workers streaming into the cities. In 1927 state concern crystallised in a committee which was appointed by the then recently established Department of Labour to investigate the desirability of hostels for rural children employed in town industries. The Committee was struck by the large influx of people from the rural districts, as well as by the appalling housing conditions of those who had drifted to the towns. The Committee remarked that,

The undesirable and unsavoury environment into which economic forces pushed many of these rural indigents do not tend to make their children an asset as a prospective source of labour.³⁰

The committee estimated the number of indigent rural children residing in poor white boarding-houses in the urban areas of South Africa at

²⁹ Gaitskell analyses a similar development in the provision of hostel accommodation for young black women on the Rand during this period. D. Gaitskell, 'Christian Compounds for Girls: Church Hostels for African Women in Johannesburg', *Journal for Southern African Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, October 1979.

³⁰ Central Archives Depot Pretoria, (hereafter CAD), VWN 479. Report of the Committee into Hostels for Rural Children in Town Industries, Bulletin no. 1, 1927, p.6.

7 000 to 8 000, whilst thousands more resided at rural settlements such as Kakamas, De Lagersdrift and various forestry settlements.

The committee saw the establishment of hostels for girls as more imperative than those for boys, because,

...there are smaller prospects for girls in rural areas than for boys, and in addition the discipline, supervision and friendly companionship of hostels is even more desirable in the case of girls than of boys.¹⁸

The report envisaged that the hostels would accommodate young boys and girls aged 16-22, selected by local rural committees as being "of good conduct and character and having a bright and intelligent appearance".¹⁹ These select few (initially only limited accommodation would be available) would be allowed to remain in the hostel for a minimum of two years, contributing a weekly sum of 5/- plus a third of the balance of their wages, on condition that they had found employment or become apprenticed or indentured in a trade.²⁰ At first the department granted subsidies to these hostels on condition that social services were rendered to the inmates by local welfare organisations to better equip them for life and aid their moral and spiritual development.²¹ Accordingly, during the late thirties and early forties, the Lionel Leveson Girls' Residential Club and the Brixton Hostel for young working girls were erected in Johannesburg and administered along the lines set out in this policy.²²

¹⁸ Ibid., p.9.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.18.

²⁰ Ibid., p.19. A recommendation for the implementation of this policy included the purchase of property in the factory area of Cape Town where a hostel for 40 girls could be erected, as well as the expansion of the existing Louis Botha hostel for boys in Observatory, Cape Town.

²¹ Initially, the Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Federasie (hereafter SAVF) instituted 'bekwaammaking' (training) classes, but this policy was later discontinued after criticism was voiced against these classes. CAD, VWN 465. Secretary of Education to Secretary of Labour and Social Welfare, 11.8.1936.

²² For a more detailed discussion of the issue see E. Brink, 'Virtue

The Depression precluded any state action towards the implementation of the recommendations of this report. However, in 1930 the Johannesburg branch of the SAVF began to collect funds for the establishment of a hostel for low-paid young girls in the city. In November 1934 they admitted the first three lodgers to a hostel,³⁵ which was established in a house at 113 Wolmerans Street, rented from the Dutch Reformed Church Irene parish (Johannesburg East) at £26 per month. It rapidly expanded.³⁶

The management of the hostel had a clear notion of an ultimate goal of moral reform which they wished to realise in the hostel, which was called 'Harmonie' (Harmony). The rules and regulations of the hostel were discussed with the inmates in order that the girls would not feel that,

...hulle met onnodige strengheid van buite oorheers word nie, maar lê hulle gewillig neer om die orde en geluk te help bevorder.
(...they were being controlled with unnecessary discipline from the outside, by willingly abiding by the rules of the hostel to further order and happiness.)³⁷

is a Grace: Organisational Involvement in the Lives of the Garment Workers, 1927-1945', paper presented to the Association for Sociology in South Africa Annual Congress, Cape Town, July 1985.

³⁵ CAD, VWN 465. Report of the Hostel Committee to the Annual Congress of the SAVF, Heidelberg (Tvl), 25-26.4.1935. In conjunction with the Department of Education and later the Department of Labour and Social Welfare the SAVF established their own hostels in Johannesburg and in Germiston, in 1934 and 1949 respectively.

³⁶ CAD, VWN 465. Report C.N. Kempf, 26.11.1935. The hostel proved to be very successful. By November 23, 1934, 15 of the 23 vacancies had been filled and by April 1935 another house next door was rented to accommodate 16 more applicants. By October 1935 two more houses were rented to accommodate about 50 girls. Letters, Mrs Niese wand to Secretary of Education, 19.3.1935 and 2.10.1935. By the middle of 1938 the hostel had been so well established that 72 girls were housed in six houses and the SAVF could begin negotiating with the Utility Housing Co. of The Johannesburg City Council for a sub-economic loan of 33 000 pounds for the erection of a hostel to accommodate 100 girls on a site acquired by the SAVF in Saratoga Avenue, Doornfontein. Mrs M. Niese wand to Secretary of Social Welfare, 20.8.1938. See also UG 11-1936, Department of Labour, *Annual Report, 1934*, p.38.

³⁷ CAD, VWN 465. Report Committee Harmonie Hostel to Annual Congress SAVF, April 1935.

The managing Committee saw their work, which was always voluntary, as a "groot kans (wat) ons het om 'n pragtige werk vir ons volk te doen" (a great opportunity that we have to perform a noble task for our volk).³⁸ Only by means of effort and sacrifice could these girls, "kostelike volksmateriaal" (precious potential of the volk), be saved,

Hulle is dit waard dat daar groot opoffering vir hulle behoud gemaak word...ander kerke en sektes is besig om vir hierdie meisies voorsiening te maak. As ons terugstaan, gaan baie van hulle so seker vir die volk en die kerk verlore.
(They are worthy of great sacrifices being made for their salvation...other churches and sects are busy providing for these girls. If we stand back, many of them will surely be lost to the volk and the church.)³⁹

The threat did not only lie with other churches and sects, for these girls were equally imperilled by bad housing conditions in unsavoury areas. A real danger existed, "om sedelik verlore (te) gaan in die stad en 'n las en vloek vir die volk (te) word, in stede van 'n bate" (of them perishing morally in the city and becoming a burden and a curse on the 'volk', instead of an asset).⁴⁰

Once the Depression had sufficiently abated, the state expressed itself vocally on the plight of the younger generation of urban industrial workers. For example, in the mid-thirties, Mr P. du Toit, Commissioner of Social Welfare, voiced concern for unprotected young people. Young girls needed sanctuary in the city lest they become,

... 'n prooi van onafrikaanse strominge wat hulle uiteindelik beland in die moeras van agterbuurt lewenswyse, en andere klim oor hulle liggame en siele na posisies van mag en rykdom en dan moet die staat weer duisende ponde spandeer as dit te laat is.
(...the prey of currents foreign to Afrikaner ways, which ultimately will land them in the swamp of slum living and others will climb over their bodies and souls to positions of power and riches

³⁸ Ibid. Mrs M. Niesewand to Secretary of Education 7.6.1935, The hostel committee consisted of Mrs Ds. Nicol, Mrs M. Niesewand (treasurer) Mrs M.E. Viljoen as secretary and Mrs ds. Pauw. Interview Mrs M.E. Viljoen, 3.5.1985. (The first matron was Mrs Schoeman, who was in charge of the hostel with the assistance of two black men.)

³⁹ CAD, VWN 465. Report, Committee Harmonie Hostel to Annual Congress SAVF, April 1935.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

and then the state once more will have to spend thousands of pounds when it is too late.)⁴¹

In 1939 the recently established Department of Social Welfare formulated the purpose which hostels for young girls needed to fulfil, that they,

...soos 'n vuurtoring oor die platteland sal skyn, omdat dit bekend is dat werksoekende dogters daar welkom is, tuisgemaak sal word vir 'n tydperk en werk vir hulle gesoek sal word.
(...will shine like a lighthouse across the countryside, because it is known that young girls (daughters) are welcome there, will be made to feel at home for a while and employment will be found for them.)⁴²

The Afrikaans press shared these fears about the destabilising influence of the city. In 1936 *Die Burger* reported that,

...so baie meisies onskuldig in die moeilikheid gesleep word eenvoudig omdat hulle nooit seker kan wees van die goeie naam van die goedkoop kamertjie wat hulle genoodsaak word om te betrek nie. (so many girls are innocently dragged into trouble simply because they could never be sure of the good name of the cheap little room they were forced to take.)⁴³

Die Vaderland echoed this view,

...onvertrou met die lewe en gedoe in die grootstad, staan hulle omring van faktore wat hulle kan vervreem en laat losraak van die volksgroep waaruit hulle spruit. (unfamiliar with the life and business of the big city, they stand surrounded by factors which can estrange and divorce them from the 'volksgroep' from which they stem.)⁴⁴

However, despite everything which was said on the matter, these efforts resulted in the provision of very limited facilities, long after the initial need had abated. In Johannesburg towards the end of the Second World War, accommodation for some 300 women only was provided by the SAVF

⁴¹ CAD, VWN 454. Letter, P. du Toit to Secretary of Social Welfare, 27.6.1936. For a discussion of the vulnerability of the garment workers to the threat of prostitution see E. Brink, 'The Garment Workers and Poverty on the Witwatersrand, 1920-1945', paper presented to the African Studies Institute Seminar, 25 May 1986.

⁴² CAD, VWN 2199. Memorandum, Secretary of Social Welfare to Under-Secretary, 29.7.1939.

⁴³ CAD, VWN 454. *Die Burger*, 'Losies van die Arm Meisie', 8.9.1936.

⁴⁴ Ibid. *Die Vaderland*, 'Die Afrikaanse Fabrieksmeisie', Editorial, 17.11.1936.

and the City Council. In Germiston, where the matter was hotly debated for more than a decade, 'Die Anker', a hostel accommodating about 100 young women, was erected by the SAVF in 1949.⁴⁵ During the late fifties, this hostel and those erected in Johannesburg were converted into old age homes, with the exception of the Lionel Leveson Hostel, which became the Johanna Raath Tehuis for young girls.

Abuse and Sexual Harassment in the Factories

The preoccupation with the virtue and vulnerability of these young Afrikaner women and their social marginality in the community did not end with the press, state and the church, but was extended into the factories. Here the vulnerability of garment workers to economic exploitation and the ambiguous relationship between male owners or overseers and female employees served only to cast further doubt on their respectability and virtue. This often led to physical and verbal abuse and sexual harassment in the factories, malpractices which in turn helped to reinforce the image of garment workers as fallen and corrupt.

Young women no longer under the direct control of their fathers or male kin, were easy prey for verbal and physical abuse. Males in authority over these women would appropriate paternal roles and liberties towards these women without the restraint of a kin relationship typical of rural society. Elson and Pearson, in their study of women in contemporary world market factories, proffer a reason for this phenomenon,

An important feature is that the sexual element in the relation between female employee and male boss is not contained and shaped by kin relations. This is one of the reasons why factory girls are often regarded as not quite 'respectable'.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Cf. E. Brink, 'Virtue is a Grace'.

⁴⁶ D. Elson and R. Pearson, 'The Subordination', p.33. World market factories are usually established by international companies in third world countries where labour is cheap.

In her study of contemporary working-class girls in Great Britain, McRobbie found that it was suspect to be a single and independent working girl, for,

...there is not much place for a single working-class woman in society. This is not simply a question of economics...though it will mean a life lived on the low wages of women in working-class jobs...but of being forced to live as a marginal person in working-class society.⁴⁷

Such marginality and vulnerability of the women contributed to a relationship between female factory workers and their male overseers and employers which was often coloured by fear. Hoel found this to be the case amongst Indian female garment workers employed in contemporary clothing factories in Great Britain. Here they,

do in fact leave due to the abuse from many of the employers, but they never reveal their real reason for leaving..(for)... the fear the female workers had for the employer was universal and they would rarely speak up about their grievances.⁴⁸

Lambertz likewise found that during the 1880's and early twentieth century in Manchester cotton textile towns, similar fears of dismissal often prevented women from complaining about abuse and sexual harassment.⁴⁹

These fears were equally present amongst female garment workers in the Witwatersrand clothing industry. For example, once during the early thirties, in a letter to the union, Miss Bruyns, an employee at a small garment factory, vented her anger at the abuse levelled at her. Her two postscripts gave a clear indication of her fear of actually having voiced

⁴⁷ A. McRobbie, 'Working Class Girls and the Culture of Femininity', in Women's Study Group, *Women take Issue: Aspects of Women's Subordination*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1978, p.107.

⁴⁸ B. Hoel, 'Contemporary Clothing "Sweatshops": Asian Female Labour and Collective Organisation', in J. West, *Work, Women and the Labour Market*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, p.83.

⁴⁹ J. Lambertz, 'Sexual Harassment', pp.32-33, 37.

her protest against this treatment by her overseer. First she reaffirmed that she was a good worker and added,

If any trouble is going to be caused rather drop the matter and let him keep his week's notice. I'm not fussy but I will be at his workshop Monday morning 8 o'clock to hear what is what and wait for your orders.⁵⁰

Male employers and overseers in the factories often felt at liberty to exploit the vulnerability of these workers. Physical and verbal abuse were common occurrences in clothing factories during the twenties and thirties.⁵¹ In 1929 Miss J. Hattingh complained to the union that when she had told her boss, Mr Taylor, that something was wrong with her machine, she was sworn at and given notice.⁵² In 1930 Mrs Elsie Pretorius (32), employed at the President Shirt Factory, testified that the forewoman of the set used to abuse and swear at them when something went wrong with production.⁵³ Miss Bruyns's letter to the union complaining about her employer, one Van Schalkwyk, further illustrates the abuse suffered by garment workers at the hands of their employers and foremen. She recounted,

I could stand that constant swearing no longer and the grumbling went on my nerves.⁵⁴

When finally she was again abused for giving notice she retorted,

...well listen I'm not going to let you swear at me. I am going home and if your temper had calmed down next week I'll come and work my notice week.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ GWU, Bbc 16.1. Letter, Miss Bruyns to S. Sachs, 17.3.1934.

⁵¹ GWU, Dac 2.7.10 and Dac 2.8.1. Letter, S. Sachs to Secretary Witwatersrand Trades and Labour Council, 1.10.1931.

⁵² GWU, Aab 1.17. Complaint, J. Hattingh, 28.10.1929.

⁵³ GWU, Cca 2.2 and Abb 2. Affidavit, E. Pretorius 14.7.1930. Equally abusive language was used against Miss H. Schneider of Judith's Paarl.

⁵⁴ GWU, Bbc 16.1. Letter, Miss Bruyns to S. Sachs, 17.3.1934.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

By contrast, in 1932 Mrs Booyens, the shop steward at Tiger Clothing Manufacturers, did not passively retreat in the face of abuse levelled at her by the foreman, Mr Gershman. She promptly slapped his face "for the insulting statements he is alleged to have made about her".⁶⁶ Miss E. Maartens, under similar circumstances, only lodged a complaint with the GWU for the abuse she had suffered at the hands of a foreman, a certain Mr Shiller.⁶⁷ In 1939 a Mr Bobrow, the foreman at the New York Clothing Factory, became the target of the women working there. They accused him of being a "hateful slave driver" who,

used such vulgar language that the workers could not mention it even among their own sex.⁶⁸

This was not an isolated occurrence, for already in 1937 the women at the factory had been prepared to sit in on a strike to protest against such treatment.

Not only were the women exposed to abusive language on the part of the foremen, but they were also exposed to sexual harassment, a familiar phenomenon in factories employing women. In her study of British female factory employees in Britain during the eighties, Pollert comments,

Supervision was sexually oppressive, the manner usually cajoling, laced with intimate innuendo, and provocative jokes, hands placed on girls' shoulders as they worked, imposition mixed with flattery.⁶⁹

Lambertz found more aggressive sexual harassment taking place in a Yorkshire town in the late 1910's. At the mill women were molested and

⁶⁶ GWU, Cca 2.2. Letter, S. Sachs to Secretary Industrial Council, 4.1.1934.

⁶⁷ GWU, Cca 2.1.1. Affidavit, E.M. Maartens, Germiston, 9.6.1936. It would seem that already in 1928 a similar complaint had reached the GWU with regard to Shiller's abusive language towards the women under his control. GWU, Cca 2.2. Letter, S. Sachs to Secretary Industrial Council, 23.11.1928.

⁶⁸ GWU, Bbc 9.5. H. Cornelius, Report on the dispute at New York Clothing Manufacturers, 19.10.1939.

⁶⁹ A. Pollert, *Girls*, p.143.

in a dark passage "an arm has been placed round their waist, and worse things have followed".⁶⁰ Freed came to similar conclusions in his study on prostitution in Johannesburg,

We were informed by several girls in a large clothing factory that male employees had made a habit of touching the female workers on different parts of the body in an accidental sort of way..... the language used in some of the factories and workshops visited can only be described as unprintable.⁶¹

The scarcity of evidence of such harassment in the Witwatersrand clothing factories, even today, could be due to the taboo which surrounds the subject, and the reluctance of young girls to confront the men involved. Very often the women themselves did not air their grievances or publicise the sexual harassment to which they were subjected. On one rare occasion Jeanette van der Walt (19) in an affidavit to the union on working conditions in the factory, was more explicit in her accusations,

Krut used to put his arms around me against my will when I worked for Levin, the third day he tried to kiss me but I shook him off.⁶²

Mrs B. recalled two instances when factory owners invited their young female employees to accompany them under false pretences. In the one case the factory owner, instead of taking the girl to the bioscope as promised, went to a private house in the suburbs under pretence of checking if everything was in order there. Continued Mrs B.,

...toe eers besef sy wat sy planne is. Net daar val sy op haar knieë en bid, 'Ag, Here, beskerm my asseblief'. En dit was nie net 'n skietgebedjie nie.
(....then only she realised what his plans were. Right there she fell to her knees and prayed, 'Please God, protect me'. And it was not merely a brief little prayer.)⁶³

⁶⁰ J. Lambertz, 'Sexual Harassment', p.37.

⁶¹ L. Freed, *The Problem of European Prostitution in Johannesburg*, Cape Town: Juta, 1949, p.93.

⁶² GWU, Bbc 16.1. Affidavit, J. van der Walt, 15.9.1933.

⁶³ Mrs B. ' 'n Terugblik oor die Ontstaan van die Randse Armsorgraad vanaf 1939-1963', 1985. (In possession of the author.)

The factory owner took her home in disgust, most probably having presumed that the girl in question was aware of the 'hidden' agenda for the evening. Another equally inexperienced girl was 'saved' when her suspicious landlord and friends saw her being escorted by an employer. They followed the couple and subsequently beat up the employer when he stopped with the girl in a desolate spot.⁶⁴

In the factories, garment workers were therefore considered easy prey and pursued. In a relationship with men not controlled or overseen by kin or family relations, these women were regarded as being unprotected and not quite respectable. Moreover, relationships between men and women in the industrial environment were often not based on mutual consent, but imbedded in situations of entrapment and economic pressures. In addition, this abuse and harassment garment workers were exposed to in turn also helped to reinforce the image of these women as fallen and corrupt.

Respectability, Decency and Virtue

The garment workers themselves were extremely sensitive to any supposed slur on their decency and respectability.⁶⁵ During her investigation Hansi Pollak recorded that the women she had interviewed regarded government notices put up in the factories detailing the benefits for unmarried mothers under the law, as a reflection on their respectability and regularly tore down such notices from the walls in the factory.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ This development would seem to run contrary to Shapiro's argument that, "Notions of respectability were of little use to these young women earning starvation wages, working long hours, desperately needing jobs in the face of a world depression". J. Shapiro, 'Political and Economic Organisation of Women in South Africa: The Limitations of a Notion of 'Sisterhood' as a Basis of Solidarity', *Africa Perspective*, no. 15, Autumn 1980, p.5.

Does the government think we're the class of girl who gets illegitimate children? It's a disgrace to put up such a notice when only decent girls are employed.⁶⁶

The predominantly female GWU executive which came to power during the mid-thirties, used a number of devices to reinforce the dignity and worth of fellow female rank and file members.⁶⁷ It did so by various means. First it vigorously defended garment workers against public assaults. During the late thirties after the 1938 Voortrekker centenary celebrations, the union utilised the Great Trek and the image of the Voortrekker Woman to accentuate the dignity and worth of the Afrikaner women who were garment workers. It also re-appropriated the image of the Afrikaner 'dogter' (daughter) in terms of these working women. Finally, it tried to generate the ideal of a working-class calling and working-class nobility amongst them.

In 1937, in defence of their good name, the garment workers reacted very strongly when their decency and respectability were threatened and called into question by the chairman of the Spoorbond, Mr P.J. Kock. In an Afrikaner nationalist attempt to damage the credibility of the GWU, he claimed with regard to female industrial workers, that "dogters van die Vrystaat gaan na Johannesburg om daar met kaffers (sic) te dans" (daughters of the Free State go to Johannesburg, there to dance with 'kaffirs').⁶⁸ At a special general meeting on the first of July 1937 attended by some four hundred people, Johanna Cornelius, under loud applause, reacted on behalf of all garment workers,

Alhoewel hierdie mre.(menere) wat ons aanval algar Dokters, Predikante, Professore en geleerdes is, kan ons hulle verseker dat ons klerewerkers net so skoon van karakter en liggaam is as hulle dogters en vrouens.

⁶⁶ H. Pollak, *Women*, p.181.

⁶⁷ In this regard the extent of the role and contribution of S. Sachs in his capacity as general secretary of the union to this aspect of the union's activities, still needs to be ascertained.

⁶⁸ GWU, Bad 1. Minutes Special General Meeting GWU, 1.7.1937.

(Even though these men who attack us are all doctors, ministers, professors and learned men, we can assure them that we garment workers are just as pure of character and body as their daughters and wives.)⁶⁹

Some time later, Anna Jacobs vividly expressed the feelings of the garment workers,

....aanstote, beledigings en valse beskuldigings is ons toegevoeg deur mans van ons eie nasie aan dogters en moeders van ons land wat so hard swoeg en slaaf om ons te red van gebrek en armlankedom. (...rebukes, insults, and false accusations are hurled at us by men of our own nation, at daughters and mothers of our country who labour and slave to save ourselves from deprivation and poor whiteism.)⁷⁰

Mrs Viljoen, an informant, recently also recalled the precariousness of the social standing of the garment workers during the thirties,

Ek onthou ook dat op een stadium die kerkgemeenskap die fabrieksvrouens so probeer onderdaar sleep het om voor te gee ons is straatvrouens. Dit het ook in ons lewe gebeur. (I also remember that at one stage the church community tried to undermine the factory women by implying that we are street women. This also happened in our lives.)⁷¹

On one occasion a meeting of residents in Belgravia was called to protest against the erection of a hostel for young working girls in the area, which would allegedly lower the value and prestige of the area. Tempers ran high and garment workers in the audience defended their respectability. One cried, "Allright lady, behave yourself, we are just as decent as you are", while another proclaimed that "ons is nie skaam om in die fabriek eerlik ons geld te verdien nie" (we are not shy to earn our money honestly in the factory).⁷² Johanna Cornelius took up their defence,

Tussen ons fabrieksmeisies is daar baie ordentlike en edele dogters en ons staan nie agteruit vir julle nie. Ons is gewillig om ons werk te doen, maar ons eis om met respek behandel te word.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ *KW/GW*, Anna Jacobs, 'Vyande van die Werkendeklas', February 1940, p.3.

⁷¹ Interview Mrs Viljoen, Benoni, 10.3.1984.

⁷² *KW/GW*, Ons eie Korrespondent, 'Rykes van Belgravia weier om in die omgewing van fabrieksmeisies te woon', June 1939, p.9.

(Amongst us factory girls are many decent and noble daughters and we do not stand back for you. We are willing to do our work, but we demand to be treated with respect.)⁷³

Not only did the GWU defend the respectability of its members, but also aggressively strove to instil a sense of worth and dignity in them. During and after the 1938 Voortrekker centenary celebrations, the union utilised the Afrikaner Voortrekker heritage and image of the Voortrekker woman to accentuate the worth of the garment workers. They claimed as their heritage the fierce pioneering spirit of the Voortrekkers. Like the Voortrekker women who were willing to cross the Drakensberg bare foot, the garment workers would also open up new frontiers. Johanna Cornelius cautioned all to remember, "...die honderde vrouens, die Voortrekkermoeders wat hulle lewens gegee het vir julle wat vandag diep in die goud sit...." (...the hundreds of women, the Voortrekker mothers who gave their lives for you who today sit deep in the gold....)⁷⁴ Anna Jacobs added,

...ons, as werkers van ons staat en vir al die vrouens van ons land sal die voortou neem en weer die Drakensberge bestyg. Die wat lafaards is, kan agterbly...
(...as workers of our state and for all the women in our country, (we) will take the lead and cross the Drakensberg again. Those who are cowards can remain behind....)⁷⁵

This invocation of the strength of their forebears reappears in an unnamed play in six acts, presumably the text of the play 'Slavin van Suid-Afrika', written by Hester and Johanna Cornelius.⁷⁶ It portrays the lives of six sets of women in South Africa; factory and farm workers, mothers, old women and pregnant women who all unite to struggle for better conditions for women. An older woman proclaims,

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ *KW/GW*, J. Cornelius, 'Wolf in Skaapsklere', September 1938.

⁷⁵ Ibid., A. Jacobs, 'Vyande', p.3.

⁷⁶ GWU, Bcd 1.2. cf. *KW/GW*, 'Werkers van Germiston', March/April 1941, p.12.

Die Drakensberg was nie te hoog en te gevaarlik vir die Voortrekkervrou om oor te gaan nie, en hierdie moeilikhede, wat ons vandag mee te kampe het, is ook nie te veel vir vandag se vrou om te veg nie, (The Drakensberg were not too high and too dangerous for the Voortrekker woman to cross, and these troubles that we experience today are not too much for today's woman to combat).⁷⁷

A young factory worker adds,

Kom ons volg in die voetstappe van die Voortrekkervrou wat gesê het, 'Al moet ons blootsvoets oor die Drakensberge loop sal ons nie teruggaan na die land van verdrukking nie.' (Let us follow in the footsteps of the Voortrekker woman who said, 'Even if we have to cross the Drakensberg bare foot, we will not return to the country of oppression').⁷⁸

Tant Sannie Potgieter, the mother of Jan and Lettie, in the play *Die Offerande*, links the garment workers' problems to the struggles of the Boers during the Anglo-Boer War. Although her husband had been deported as a prisoner of war, she maintains,

Ek het die swaarste gehad. Ons het geen konsentrasiekamp gevrees nie. As ons vrouens nie so dapper was nie, sou die oorlog vroeg-vroeg beslis gewees het.....ons het besluit dat ons sal aanhou veg, al stuur hulle ons mans oorsee, al moes ons van honger omkom en ons kinders se lykies in seepkissies laat begrawe het. (I suffered the most. We feared no concentration camp. If we women had not been so courageous, the war would have ended soon..... we decided that we would continue fighting, even if they sent our husbands over the sea, even if we had to die of hunger and allow the corpses of our children to be buried in soap boxes.)⁷⁹

Anna Scheepers also linked the Voortrekker heritage and trade unionism as organising principles in the lives of garment workers,

.....soos in elke land in die wêreld en soos die Voortrekkervrou in hierdie land, dra vrouewerksters haar deel by, tot die vooruitgang van die vakuniebeweging en van die volk as 'n geheel. (...like in any country in the world and like the Voortrekker woman in this country, women workers contribute their share towards the progress of the trade union movement and the nation as a whole.)⁸⁰

⁷⁷ GWU, Bcd 1.2. Unnamed Play, Act 5.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ GW/KW, H. Cornelius, 'Die Offerande', a working-class play, September/October and November/December 1941. It was performed before audiences of about 400 people in Johannesburg and Germiston on November 10 and 17, 1941, respectively.

⁸⁰ Ibid., Anna Scheepers, 'Vroue in Vakunies', October/November 1940, p.10.

Furthermore, the garment workers were no longer willing to be factory girls or factory 'meide', but strove to be seen as Afrikaner 'dogters', a respected and respectable image within Afrikaner society. Hester de Wet explained how the garment workers lost this place,

In 1928 when we had a strike in a few factories people looked on us in disgust. We were not recognised then as 'Afrikaner dogters' who were struggling for an existence. We were looked on as *common factory girls*; people who had no right to strike for better wages and conditions (my emphasis).¹

Nevertheless, during the thirties when Afrikaner nationalists under the guidance of Dr Albert Hertzog and the Nasionale Raad van Trusteas (National Council of Trustees) strove to gain control of the GWU, this attitude changed. The garment workers were then deemed to be worthy of salvation, for they were referred to as Afrikaner daughters, "meestal nog mooi sterk en skoon dogters" (on average still pretty strong and clean daughters).² These Afrikaner 'dogters', employed in factories and led by the so-called Communist Jew, Solly Sachs,³ while already partly beyond redemption, apparently still had some redeeming features which made the effort of saving them worthwhile. This approach would have it that these Afrikaner daughters did not belong in the factory. In 1936, Miss Van den Berg echoed this assumption, while talking about the living conditions of female factory workers, to the Saint Boniface Church Women's Society in Germiston,

Many factory girls from the farming community had been forced into factory life, but did not consider their position the right one. Socially they were higher. Aid should be given to keep their standards up.⁴

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- ¹ GWU, Bca 3. Commission of Inquiry, Statement to be submitted by H. De Wet, 1948.
- ² CAD, VWN 465. Report, Harmonie Hostel Committee to Annual Congress of the SAVF, April 1935.
- ³ See pronouncements e.g., "Die kommunistiese opruier, mnr. Sachs." CAD, ARB 1417. *Transvaal*, 'S. Sachs: Wie en wat hy is', 22.3.1944 and S. Sachs, *Garment Workers in Action*, Johannesburg: Eagle Press, 1957. p.23.
- ⁴ *Germiston Advocate*, 'Germiston Factory Girls', 6.3.1936. In 1935 and 1936 Miss S.M. van den Berg was member of an investigating team

In a recent interview Mrs B. also maintained that she never felt at home while employed in the factory.⁸⁵

Confronted with such prejudice, the union made concerted efforts to instil an ideal of a working-class calling and working-class nobility in rank and file garment workers. The GWU often used Soviet Russian social developments, working conditions and especially Russian heroism during the Second World War to generate a working-class pride in the garment workers. The union accentuated Soviet Russia as a country where the worker and the farmer were in control and no longer exploited by capitalist rulers.⁸⁶ In 1938 Sachs maintained, in addition, that the very actions for which garment workers stood condemned, were indeed the source of their strength,

Those daughters of poor starving people on the land, those whose fathers toil in the mines, on the roads, etc, those who are contemptuously referred to by the parasites as 'the factory girls' and are even despised by the stodgy trade unionists; they with their sincerity, determination, and loyalty, made our achievements possible.⁸⁷

Johanna Pretorius later echoed these sentiments,

Ons het stakings gehad en onself baie moes verlaag het.....ons het geloop en sing in die strate en baie mense kyk daardeur met 'n verlaagde oog op die klerewerkers. Wat ons vandag kry verdien ons na al die ontberings wat ons in die verlede moes verduur. (We had strikes and we had to lower ourselves a lot....we walked and sang in the streets and because of that many people regarded the garment workers with 'a lowered eye'(held them in lower esteem). What we get today we deserve after all the sufferings we had to endure in the past.)⁸⁸

appointed by the Department of Labour to look into the living conditions of female factory workers in Germiston. cf. CAD, VWN 468.

⁸⁵ Interview 27.

⁸⁶ See, for example, numerous articles in the *KW/GW* during the war years, which depicts Soviet Russia as a country where the workers govern. cf. *KW/GW*, 'Die Offerande', 1941.

⁸⁷ *KW/GW*, S. Sachs, 'Ten Years in Service of the Garment Workers', November 1938, p.3.

⁸⁸ *GWU*, Bca 4. Commission of Inquiry, Evidence, J. Pretorius, 1948, p.1935. Note the unusual use of the phrase "met 'n lae oog aansien" (literal translation - regard with a low eye).

Garment workers were then reminded of their worth and dignity. Sophie Meyer adamantly maintained,

In die fabriek is net soveel ordentlike meisies en vrouens as in enige ander plek en die man wat 'n fabriekwerkster kry vir 'n vrou kan trots wees daarop, want dan het hy 'n maat gekry wat verstaan wat dit is om skouer aan die wiel te sit en deur dik en dun saam met hom in die lewe deur te gaan.

(In the factories there are just as many decent girls and women as in any other place and the man who takes a factory worker as his wife can be proud, because then he has found a friend who can understand what it is to put the shoulder to the wheel and to go with him through thick and thin in life.)⁸⁸

She also advised another garment worker not to react to insults levelled at her by a young man who regarded them with a "lae oog (aansien) omdat ons in die fabriek werk" (hold us in low esteem because we work in the factories).⁸⁹

Furthermore, members who married were reminded of their links with fellow workers and were urged not to break these bonds,

Onthou dat die tydperk van jou lewe in die klerefabriek het 'n band van kameraadskap gebind tussen jou en jou medewerkers wat nooit verbreek sal word nie.

(Remember that the period of your life in the clothing factory forged a bond of comradeship between you and your fellow workers which will never be broken.)⁹⁰

Accordingly, a young woman, Anna Coetzee, about to marry Willie Ballot, was reminded not to forget her duty as "'n persoon van die werkendeklas".⁹¹ These young women were urged to raise their children as good members of the working class,

Ons weet dat jy jou dogtertjie sal oplei tot eer en voorbeeld van die werkendeklas in die toekoms, dat sy haar moeder se voetstaple sal volg en 'n ware leier sal wees vir haar medewerkers.

(We know you will bring up your little daughter to the honour of and as an example for the working class in the future, that she

⁸⁸ KW/GW, S. Meyer, 'Ope Brief aan MP van die New York Klerefabriek', October 1939, p.9.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid. 'Huweliks-klokkies', August 1939, p.13.

⁹² Ibid.

will follow in the footsteps of her mother and be a true leader of her fellow workers.)⁸³

The GWU, therefore, used a number of devices to reinforce the dignity and worth of fellow rank and file members. It drew extensively on various aspects of Afrikaner culture as well as socialist, trade unionist and working-class traditions to achieve this objective.

Conclusion

The garment workers found themselves in a precarious and marginal position in society. Once they had moved from their parents' sphere of control, their respectability and virtue were called into question. The state, church and welfare organisations shared the concern of parents for their offspring and in response envisioned the erection of hostels for low-paid young girls, not only as a practical solution to the problem of labour control and housing, but also as an exercise in moral reform. However, the suspicion surrounding the virtue and respectability of young female factory workers, found expression in the verbal and physical abuse and sexual harassment they experienced at the hands of male employers and overseers. This treatment reinforced the negative attitude with which the garment workers were regarded by society. Hence, as single working-class girls they did not have a secure position or place in society.

In response to their marginalised standing in society, the garment workers, and especially those women who had risen to executive positions in the GWU, strove to reinforce the respectability, decency and virtue of union members. They defended garment workers against public attack, claimed the Voortrekker cultural heritage and the image of the Voortrekker Woman for themselves, re-appropriated the image of the Afrikaner

⁸³ Ibid., 'Klerewerkersunie brei uit', May/June 1944, p.8.

'dogter' in terms of working women and tried to generate an ideal of a working-class calling and working-class nobility amongst Afrikaner women employed in the factories. In short, the dignity and worth of the garment workers were accentuated and, as women workers taking pride in their working lives, the garment workers united in a trade union remarkable for its solidarity and militancy.