

OFFICE-CLEANER Nomvula has to sleep on the chilly bare floor of her changing room when she finishes work at 3.30am.

Her "bed" is cardboard boxes, the "heater" is a hotplate and when the floor is too cold she snatches her two hours' sleep sitting upright in a chair.

Nomvula cannot leave for her Soweto home when she finishes her shift because there is no transport in the dangerous streets of the early morning.

It is not much safer at 5.30 when she finally does leave but if she waits any longer she arrives home too late to prepare a pre-school breakfast for her children.

Once she finishes these chores she snatches another three or four hours sleep before getting up to make a cooking fire and preparing food.

By 2pm she is back on the bus for the first leg of her journey to begin work four hours later.

"This job makes me sick," she says. "You've got sore eyes and you've got headaches all the time because you don't sleep full hours.

"Some women take snuff to keep themselves awake at work. We're taking tablets — like Disprin and Compral — so that we don't sleep.

"The tablets aren't healthy, but what can we do because we've got headaches and sore feet from standing all night, and backache from scrubbing. And you've got tension, you feel dizzy, you don't know how you are. That's why they take tablets."

Nomvula would love to find another job to replace the night work she has been doing for about 20 years.

"But we've got no choice. There's no work in South Africa and we must pay rent, must feed our children."

Nomvula is one of the women who relates her experiences in the book "Working Women: A portrait of South Africa's black women workers", launched in Soweto last weekend.

Tracing the movement of black women from rural poverty to the urban workforce, "Working Women" points out that in the 1980s the majority of women workers are still performing agricultural and service work with little, if any, legal protection.

A large portion of the book consists of touching interviews with women who work the double shift of paid work by day and unpaid housework at night.

Few, if any, of the women were helped by their husbands.

Said Nomvula: "My husband thinks if his friends find him sweeping they're

going to say he's stupid. So he can't do anything, he just sits there with the paper."

Domestic workers tend to be worst off, with no minimum wage and a meagre average wage of R32 a month in 1981.

Margaret Nhlapo, of the South African Domestic Workers' Association, told of one worker who earned R30 a month after working for her employers for 22 years.

"It's a bag of mealies," said Ms Nhlapo. "You work for a whole month for a bag of mealies and nothing extra."

For domestic worker Stephanie the worst aspect of her "unkind madarn" was her habit of locking all the cupboards in the house.

When she forgot to remove her keys from the lock she'd phone Stephanie to tell her to call one of her children to hide the keys away.



THIS farmworker gets no pay while she's off work with a broken leg

Black women have the heaviest burden

According to these poor conditions, coupled with the more stringent enforcement of influx control, are responsible for the decrease in the number of women willing to do domestic work.

Two major problems for working women: They invariably receive less pay than men doing the same work; and the lack of maternity benefits.

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