

WOMEN, WORK & HEALTH

The daily lives of most working people involve some kind of danger to their health. Dangers include carrying heavy loads, unsafe machinery, exposure to poisonous substances, long working hours and stressful jobs. Over the years, workers have fought for health and safety guarantees, and in some countries these have become a normal and expected part of union negotiation. In these places, health and safety have been recognised as the right of workers.

In South Africa the picture is not as bright. Legislation covers some issues (through the Factory Act and Shops and Offices Act), but is limited and its implementation is not guaranteed. In most cases health and safety issues have been left for individual councils and unions to take up.

One of the areas least considered by such organisations has been the health of women workers. There is a tendency for trade unions and community organisations not to make demands which relate specifically to the form of oppression which women suffer. This is because, although women face specific forms of oppression, they are a relatively unorganised group. In addition men are traditionally seen as "workers" and women as "childbearers" even though women form a substantial part of the workforce. The fact that they remain primarily responsible for housework and childcare has allowed the reality of their place in wage employment to be ignored. This means that women are the least researched members of the workforce. Most studies of occupational health hazards use young men (and in the USA they are usually super-fit military men) as the sample, and therefore draw conclusions that do not accurately reflect on the average working population and especially not on women.

The question as to the occupational health hazards for women covers a number of areas:

- workplace procedures and substances that endanger pregnant women, their future children or their subsequent fertility,
- stress caused by the demands of housework in addition to a full day's wage-employment,
- hazards in those jobs traditionally undertaken by women e.g. health workers, textile workers, laundry workers.



DANGERS AT WORK WHICH MAY AFFECT THE ABILITY OF WOMEN AND MEN TO HAVE HEALTHY CHILDREN

There are many different sorts of work that may be dangerous to one's ability to have children. Many substances may lead to sterility, miscarriage stillbirths or birth defects.

A child is harmed at a number of different stages during his or her development. Damage can occur to the eggs of the mother, the sperm of the father, to the child while it is still in the womb, or to the child when it is growing up.

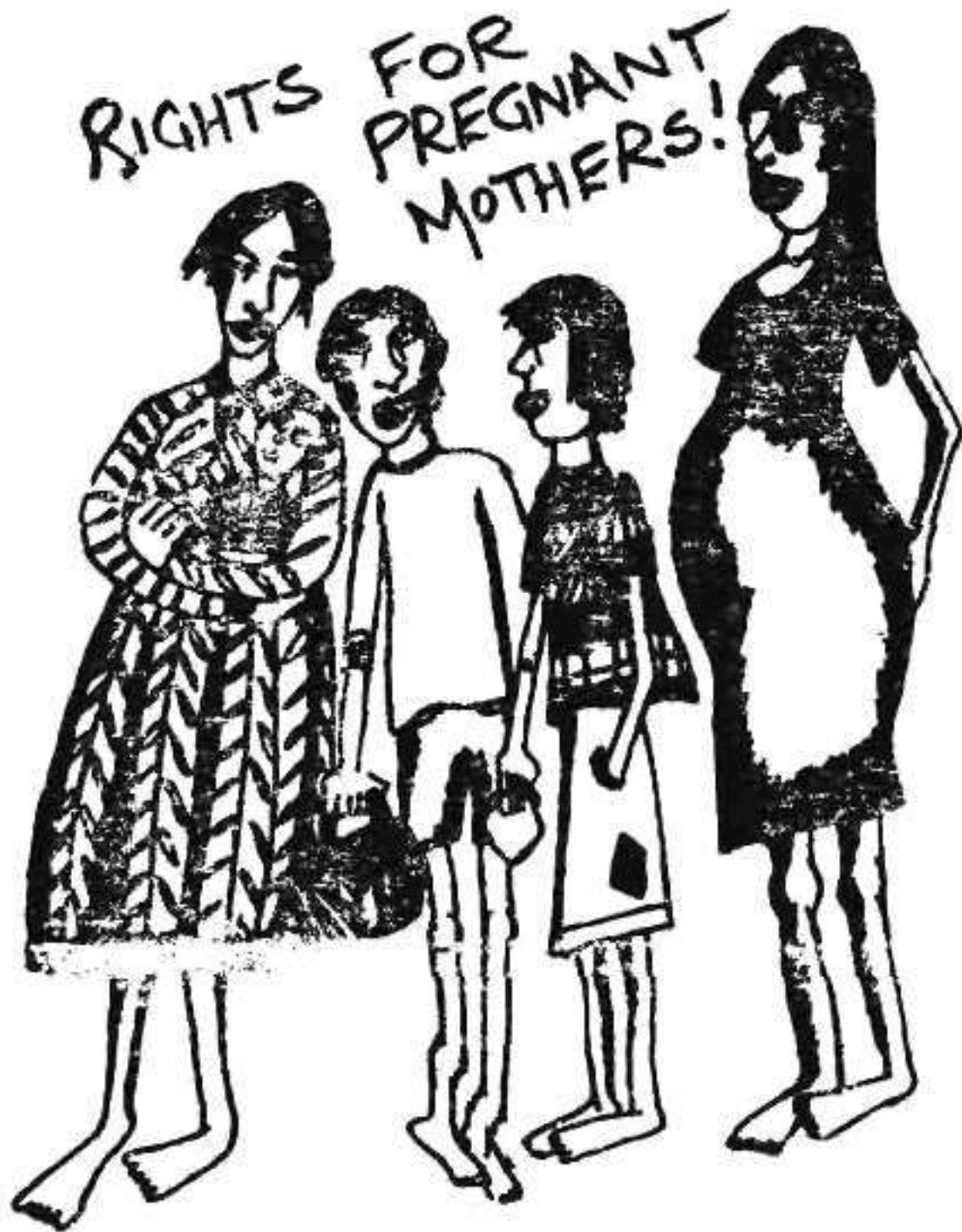
1. Harm to sperm and ovary

Certain chemicals may change the genetic makeup of cells. This is called mutation. Mutations in the man's sperm cell or the woman's egg cell can lead to birth defects or spontaneous abortions. Mutations are caused by many things including X-rays, lead, some pesticides and chemicals such as vinyl chloride which is used in making plastics. Studies have shown that communities near vinyl chloride plants have more children with birth defects. Anaesthetic gases used in operating rooms also cause mutations. (see section on health workers.)

Hospital workers, people who work in plastics manufacturing, drycleaning and perfume manufacturing, textile spot cleaners and electronic equipment cleaners may all suffer from mutations. Even long after the worker has left that job, her damaged eggs, or his damaged sperm can cause a miscarriage, still birth, or make the child defective.

2. Harm to the foetus

A teratogen is a substance which passes from the women's blood through the placenta to the unborn child, and harms the child. This can cause spontaneous abortion, still births or birth defects. Well known examples are lead, mercury, benzine, organic dyes and radiation. In fact these also endanger the health of the worker whether male or female. Viruses can also damage the foetus. The best known example is German measles. This affects health workers, primary school teachers, social workers, animal handlers, meat inspectors and others.



RIGHTS FOR
PREGNANT
MOTHERS!

3. Harm to the child

Children are exposed to work hazards in two ways: through the mother's breast milk, and through substances brought home by the worker on his or her hair, clothes, or shoes. Things like pesticides, food additives, drycleaning solvent (see laundry workers) which have entered the mother's milk can poison the child. An example of substances brought home by the worker is asbestos. The families of asbestos workers experience a high rate of mesothelioma, an unusual form of cancer caused by asbestos. The asbestos fibres are brought home on work clothes and spread to the rest of the family. Children of motor mechanics, painters and other workers exposed to lead run a greater risk of getting cancer than non-exposed children.

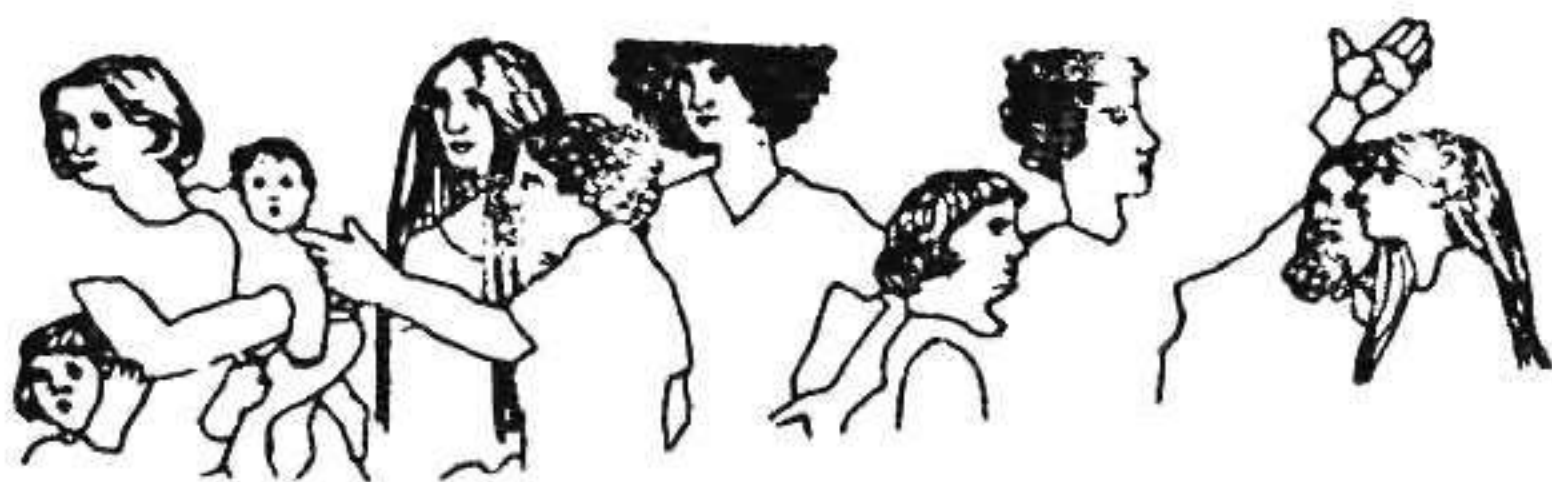
Clearly both men and women can be harmed by substances in the workplace which they in turn can transmit to their children. This fact is

frequently ignored by those employers who do not recognise the potential dangers to women's health. This leads to the ironic situation in which women are kept out of dangerous industries to "protect" them and their future children, and men remain in those industries unprotected. They may then suffer sterility or some other hazards that may be passed on to their children.

So although it is crucial that health hazards to women are better researched, and consistently taken up by workers and unions, the ultimate intention must not be to remove women from dangerous situations, but to remove the dangers themselves to make workplaces safe for all workers.

If workplaces were bound by adequate health and safety regulations, they would be safe for all workers and women would no longer be discriminated against when looking for work.

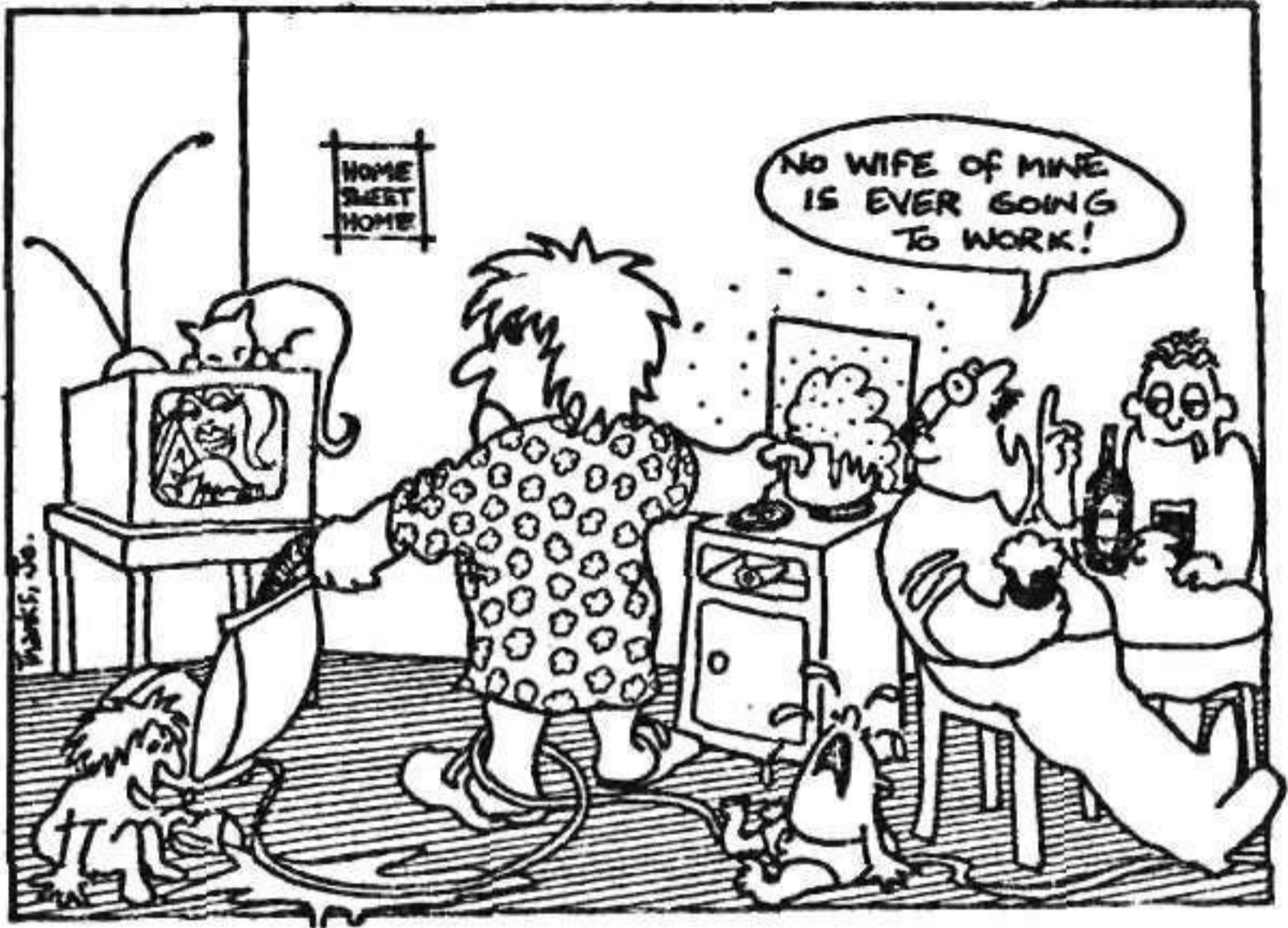
Only by demanding one health standard for all workers, which recognises these dangers, will their health and that of their children be safeguarded.



STRESS CAUSED BY UNPAID DAILY HOUSEWORK PLUS DAILY WAGE EMPLOYMENT

Women often work a full day in a factory and then go home to housework. This is one aspect of health that applies specifically to women.

Very often women have to do very heavy work in their homes - scrubbing, washing clothes, etc. This is very tiring when they have already been



working for a whole day. It is a great burden for women to carry alone, and it affects their health in many ways. Although there is little research, it seems that one of the main health risks of this double job for working class women is the stress caused by having so little time and so much work.

Stress can cause physical and psychological changes. Tension and depression are common. So are other disorders related to stress such as hypertension (high blood pressure).

An extreme example of the problems described occurs with shiftworkers. Women who work at night arrive home just in time to make breakfast for their husbands and children. After cleaning the house and shopping, there are only a few hours left to sleep in the afternoon before their children come home and they must cook an evening meal.

Shiftworkers suffer from nervous disorders much more than day workers. The symptoms are general weakness, an inability to sleep, depression and aggression. As they get older they suffer more.

In one study, 70% of shiftworkers over the age of 40 suffered from sleep disorders. Some countries like Belgium, Norway and Sweden have banned night work in all industries except those which cannot stop production.

In South Africa the Factories Act has prohibited women from doing night-shift work, with a few exceptions, unless the employer gets an exemption through an industrial council. This involves the worker "agreeing" to do shift work, and the employer applying for each worker. But under the present move towards non-discrimination between the sexes, women may be forced to do shift work in the way men are. Alternatively shift work could be stopped for all workers, but this is most unlikely. This is a good example of the way in which so-called non-discrimination can lower the health and safety standard for women instead of raising it for all people.



- now for the other 40 hours!

Another major effect of the long hours taken up in work, is that women seldom have the time to do anything else. There is seldom even time to visit friends, or even for church - the one escape to which many women are attracted. This may be very demoralising and a further cause of stress.

In addition it means that very few women have time to involve themselves in union activities since union meetings are usually after hours. This creates further problems because if women are not actively involved there is nobody to express their needs and to ensure that they are taken up by the unions. The health rights of women are therefore further diminished by their lack of access to unions.

HAZARDS IN WOMEN'S JOBS

This section looks at two of the types of work which employ mostly women, and the known dangers of these jobs. The two jobs selected and described below are health workers and laundry workers.

A: HEALTH WORKERS

Ironically hospital workers face a high level of risks to their own health. Some hospital hazards endanger all health workers and some affect only workers in particular jobs.

All healthworkers are exposed to infection and other hazards.

Health workers run the risk of picking up patient's infections such as hepatitis, TB, skin infections and other contagious illnesses. This happens through direct contact with patients. Other infections can be transmitted through waste materials. Used hypodermic needles may poke through plastic rubbish bags and prick maintenance workers. This can cause severe illness such as hepatitis.

X-rays can also damage people's health. Portable x-ray units are often used in places where people work without protection against exposure to x-rays. People who are exposed to too much irradiation may suffer from genetic damage, sterilisation, or even cancer at a later time in life.

Microwaves and ultraviolet light are also used in hospitals and may eventually irritate the skin or cause cataracts in the eyes if people do not have adequate protection.

Most injuries to hospital workers result from strain and falls. Workers may hurt their backs while lifting patients and moving heavy equipment. Many suffer from other problems because they rarely get a chance to sit down and rest. The main

reason for many of these injuries is a shortage of staff and equipment.

Operating theatre staff

Female operating theatre staff may have a higher rate of miscarriages than other hospital staff. This is because of exposure to anaesthetic gases, which very often leak into the air from unsafe anaesthetic equipment. The gas can cause genetic damage, liver damage, miscarriages and possibly cancer. Theatre staff must demand that anaesthetic equipment is fitted with devices which can collect leaking gas.

Laboratory workers

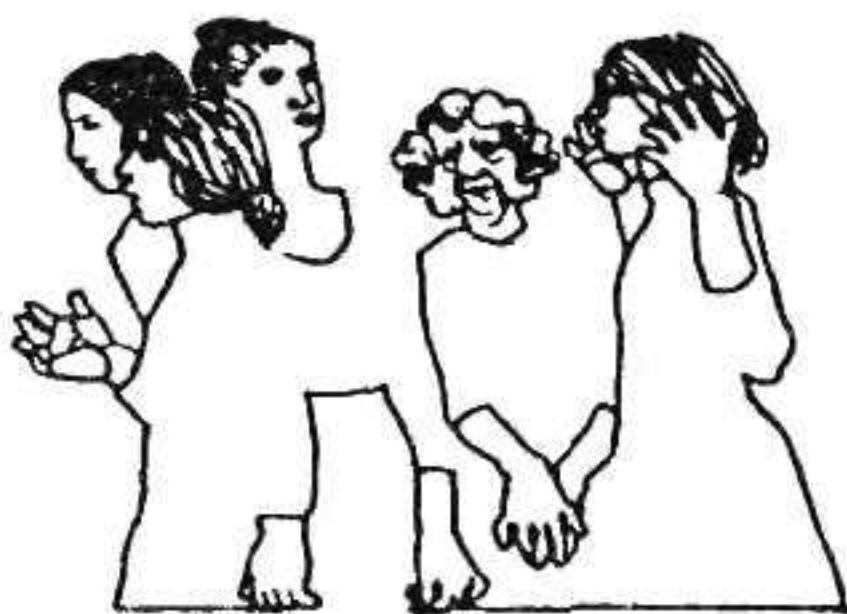
Laboratory workers are exposed to infectious specimens (and cultures). People who work with blood or equipment with blood on it are especially in danger. Some steps to avoid this danger are to provide protective clothing, to label infectious samples clearly and to use adequate handling techniques.

B: LAUNDRY WORKERS

Laundry and dry cleaning workers face a number of serious hazards. Laundry workers are exposed to a range of chemicals including formic acid which irritates the skin and mucous membranes, oxalic acid which irritates the skin and may cause kidney damage, hydrogen fluoride which will eventually cause lung damage (the symptoms are coughing, breathlessness and general irritability), and carbon tetrachloride and bleaches which are serious skin, eye and upper respiratory tract irritants. Laundry workers can also develop diseases from exposure to clothes contaminated with such dangerous substances as asbestos and lead.

Dry cleaning workers are exposed to perchloroethylene or trichloroethylene, the solvents used

to "dryclean". These are potentially addictive drugs. Too much exposure causes giddiness, nausea, co-ordination loss, and eye and throat irritation. Because they are addictive, people can begin to tolerate high levels of exposure without obvious ill-effects. But they are capable of causing liver damage in the long-term. Some solvents are suspected carcinogens and suspected of harming the foetus.



Although the factories act provides regulations for adequate ventilation these are often not adhered to.

Other hazards result from heavy work. Laundry workers often suffer back problems from heavy lifting, varicose veins from over-exertion and long periods of standing, and burns from clothes presses. Abortion may result from over exertion and heavy work. A Johannesburg employer remarked that a US expert referred to his manual pressing machines as "Abortion machines", because pregnant

women who operated these machines daily might miscarry as a result. Some women workers in the laundry made the following comments about their jobs:

"Healthy? No you can't be healthy in this job"

"Sometimes I feel sickly at work, maybe I'm going to get the TB; that ammonia is too strong, I feel dizzy, it can make a person drunk you know, and they don't give us anything for it. I am coughing a lot."

"I am not healthy. My body is always sore, it's tiredness."

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