Introduction

Concerns about gender equality in all spheres of social life have gained momentum in recent years, with several development agencies taking stances on the issue. The Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, 1995 brought to the fore the plight of millions of women world wide in the home, workplace and other social environments.

Additionally, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), was designed to protect and improve the status of women worldwide. CEDAW is an international treaty that is part of the United Nations human rights' system and has thirty articles that promote women's equal attainment of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. All independent Caribbean countries have committed themselves to implement the Convention.

It has been noted that there is a link between the state of affairs of women and economic development in a country. The World Bank highlighted that gender inequality has a direct bearing on slowing economic growth and maintaining high poverty levels and has sought to integrate gender issues as a central component of its overall mission to reduce poverty and stimulate economic growth. The Bank has an Operational Policy that spells out its responsibilities in this area, and a strategy to implement this policy, as it recognises the link between gender equality and poverty levels in a country.

A substantial part of the world's population are women, this means that development initiatives which are not geared towards women, have effects on the rest of society. Firstly, women are usually primary care-givers for children and the extent to which women are empowered to adequately nurture their dependents will reflect on the health, educational attainment and general welfare of these children. The World Bank also stresses that research shows that women usually work harder than men, are more likely to invest their earnings in children, thus contributing to overall development of human resources. Women also tend to shoulder more critical life-sustaining responsibilities without which men and boys depend on for survival and their own productivity.\(^1\)

Yet, in spite of these important facts, women continue to be marginalised world-wide. Women are twice more likely to be impoverished than males, are more at risk of domestic and

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\(^1\) http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTGENDER
sexual abuse and subject to the illicit sex trade. In parts of India, the life of a female child is devalued and infanticide is practised where girls are killed upon birth. In almost every sphere of human activities, the social, political, domestic, and workplace, women are oppressed. In parts of Asia women are not allowed to vote or hold political offices, even in countries where women are allowed political involvement, the offices actually held by women are far less than those occupied by men (UNFPA 2005).

It is largely due to these reasons why the third major goal of the UNDP’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is the ‘promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women’, which seeks to have all developmental initiatives, irrespective of sector or issue, underpinned by this concept (UNDP 1995). The UNDP, in a departure from the traditional measures of development, has formulated measures to capture gender issues. The Gender Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Index (GEM) are instruments designed to rank countries based on the level of equality in political and economic participation, among other things, that are afforded to women. These measures are forceful messages that overall human development cannot be assessed solely by economic indicators, but also by equity and equality as it relates to groups within a population, whether it is stratified by gender (male vs. female), age (old vs. young), socio-economic status (rich vs. poor) or ethnicity etc. The area of work is no exception with regards to female subjugation and discrimination. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) highlights that although recognition of women’s rights in the workplace has improved considerably in the last decades, women are still disadvantaged with respect to their male counterparts. In an ILO article, ABC of Women Workers’ Rights and Gender Equality (2000), it was highlighted that the bulk of employment opportunities for women are still concentrated in low-skilled, labour intensive areas with low income and social security benefits, factors which perpetuate the inability of women to lead independent lives. Additionally, women are under-represented in senior and decision-making positions at work. The article went on to state that despite the existence of legal machinery for the protection and promotion of gender equality at the national and international levels, there is a disparity between the “rights granted ‘on paper’ and the actual situation” (ibid: 1).

The aim of this case study was to provide an in-depth description of the experiences of nine (9) young Jamaican women aged 18–25 working in the retail/wholesale industry in downtown Kingston. It sought to assess the general working conditions that the women were subjected to, as well as the social, economic and psychological impact that working in the retail/wholesale industry has on them. It was hypothesized that women undergo exploitation while working in these shops, and there were violations of several employment and labour laws. Additionally, one of the intents of this research was to elucidate and bring in focus the importance of gender planning and development as it relates to women and labour in Jamaica; more specifically, young women from a more disadvantaged socio-economic background who struggle daily to eke out an economic survival. The choice of retail/wholesale grocery stores in downtown Kingston for assessment was rationalised by the paucity of documentation of women’s work experiences in this sector and the significant policy implications that could flow therefrom.

The research was exploratory as it attempted to delve into the experiences of women working in the retail/wholesale grocery shops in downtown Kingston. The areas which
were assessed fell under the categories of 'Wage', 'Physical Work Environment', 'Work Hours', 'Fringe Benefits', 'Organization of Work', 'Occupational Health and Safety', 'Staff Development' and 'Industrial Relations'. Attempts were also made to explore breaches of the Jamaican employment and labour laws and the ILO Declaration on the Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work which include, excessive work hours, payment of salary below the national minimum wage, non-payment of relevant statutory deductions, inability of workers' to unionize, lack of health or other fringe benefits, inadequate leave entitlements, improper ventilation and sanitary conveniences.

Background

Gender Considerations in Jamaica

The administration of all general gender related matters currently falls under the purview of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), with the Bureau of Women's Affairs as a department of the OPM, specifically responsible for oversight of such matters.

The Bureau of Women’s Affairs mandate is to be an advocate for womens’ rights and to ensure that government addresses the problems that confront women, given the impact of patriarchy and sexism. The problems include high rates of unemployment, violence against women in various forms such as spousal abuse, rape, incest and sexual harassment. Its objective is to enable women to recognize their full potential as individuals and to create avenues for their full integration in national development. In order to be successful in this endeavour, the Bureau has three main functions: research and policy development; public education and training and project planning and monitoring.

Other women’s rights organisations include the Jamaica Women’s Political Caucus, the Jamaica Labour Party’s National Organisation of Women (JLP NOW) and the Association of Women’s Organisation of Jamaica. The Jamaica Women’s Political Caucus, established in 1992, was the first non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the English-speaking Caribbean that trained women and promoted their increased participation in the political process. Other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Sistren Theatre Collective, specialises in women rights and empowerment initiatives. Activities of these organisations have span areas such as parents’ education, establishment of shelters and providing counselling for battered and abused women. Several other projects address the problems of adolescent girls and teenage mothers. Jamaican NGOs have also promoted programmes to provide housing for women and mobilize them around relevant issues and increase their involvement in representative politics.

In recognition of the social, economic, political and cultural importance of women, the 1987 National Policy Statement on Women was formulated to incorporate gender considerations in the development of policy in all sectors.

The National Five-Year Development Plans of Jamaica for 1990-1995 and 1997–2000 also included a component on women that was mainly developed by the Women’s Task Force (created by the Bureau of Women’s Affairs). The Plans of Action covered areas such as training, improved access to credit, marketing and support services, and mobilization of farmers and unemployed women in the development of small community-based farm projects to improve domestic food crop production.

A Gender Advisory Committee was convened in 2005, with the main aim of formulating a National Gender Policy. The main
objectives of the Committee, which is comprised of persons from the academia, government officials and representatives of NGOs, are to identify obstacles to gender equality; propose key initiatives to overcome these; equip a critical mass of persons with skills and tools for conducting gender analyses to inform the design of projects and policy development.

Jamaica is also a signatory to several international conventions which address gender concerns. The CEDAW was signed in 1981 and commitments have been made to the ILO conventions and the MDGs.

History of the Retail Trade in Kingston

In the last few decades, there has been a proliferation of shops in downtown Kingston known as ‘wholesales.’ It must be noted that these shops occupy old buildings that were constructed in the 1900s that have undergone just a few renovations to the interior. As such, it is not unusual for some of the structures to dangle precariously onto the walkways over the heads of passers-by. The owners of the shops are still Chinese or of Chinese descent, but they no longer live in the same buildings in which they operate their business.

The name ‘wholesale’ might be a bit misleading, for while the shops do sell in bulk and offer discounts for purchases of larger amounts of merchandise, they also engage in retail selling. However, the term ‘wholesale’ has been accepted in the social domain to refer to these shops in downtown Kingston, where the consumer can get great bargains, getting much more commodities for far less money than in stores located uptown. It should be noted however, that wholesales are not exclusive to Kingston, and are found in other parts of the island as well. For the purposes of this paper, the term ‘wholesale’ will be used to refer to the grocery retail/wholesale stores in the downtown, Kingston area.

Typical stock at the wholesale consists of general household items and foodstuff such as cereals and staples, canned meat, beverages and dry goods; chemical compounds such as insecticides and household cleaning agents; toiletries; fashion jewellery and other accessories; hair products; toys; some wholesales specialize in selling clothing or different kinds of raw meat. The merchandise is stacked in an enclosed area, behind the counter-tops and security grills. As such, the customer does not have direct access to the goods that they are purchasing. There are no long aisles to stroll down, to do proper inspection of commodities and then make a selection of what is needed.

Instead, the consumer has to stand on the outside in front of the countertop and the security grill, look through the grill at the items displayed on the shelves and then order their supplies. The workers on the inside would then locate the supplies based on the order that is made and gather them on the counter-top. The money is then passed through a slot in the grill and once paid for, a window in the grill is opened and the good pushed through for the buyer to collect.

The customer is not allowed to inspect the supplies before the purchase is made, but rather, has to look through the grills and may request that an item be changed based on it being the wrong brand, size or an incorrect item that was brought by the worker. A receipt may or may not be issued, it largely depends on the practise of the particular wholesale. In most instances however, a receipt is not given and this suggests a finality to the business transaction once the money and goods have been exchanged. This finality occurs as the consumer has no proof of purchase in the event that an item needed to be returned.
As mentioned before, the wholesales offer lower prices than supermarkets or other grocery stores in the Kingston Metropolitan Area (KMA). This is so for several reasons, two of which are the sub-standard quality of some of the goods sold, as well as the procurement methods of the shop owners. It is not coincidental that some of the items stocked have the label ‘Made in China’. These items are shipped directly from factories in parts of Asia and are faux products, that is, imitations of genuine brands such as Nike and Addidas. With regards to the apparel industry, Tommy Hilfiger and Guess are just some of the brands imitated. As such, these goods can be sold much more cheaply than the authentic brands and also, the production costs of goods in Asia are lower, hence, the consumer pays less in Jamaica.

Currently, purchase of three or more of the same item at the wholesale will result in a discount on the basis of volume. However, one item may be purchased at the ‘regular’ price. Traditionally, the wholesales catered for a niche market in Jamaica, the hustlers or small merchants who made a living from ‘buying and selling.’ That is, these merchants would buy items in bulk from the wholesales at a reduced cost, stock their own shops in the rural areas or in their urban communities and then add their ‘mark up’ to goods when re-selling them. However, in the last few years, due to harsher economic realities, the average home-maker, not engaged in any trade, have been travelling to the wholesales in downtown in search of bargains not found uptown.

**Literature Review**

Studies assessing the role of women in Caribbean society have been mostly fashioned from the feminist school of thought. Feminism views society as being structured in a manner which oppresses, exploit and keep women in a subordinate position to men. Feminism also entails the conscious action to change and seeks to transform this status quo (Reddock 1994). The source and cause of this subjugation of women differs, depending on the perspective of the different feminist paradigms. The various paradigms include radical feminism, socialist feminism and liberal feminism. Radical feminists view society as patriarchal, being dominated and ruled by men who are in turn the main exploiters of women. Conversely, socialist feminists do not attribute women’s exploitation entirely to men; it is largely due to capitalism.

Liberal feminists on the other hand maintain that the configurations of the political, economic and social systems leave women in a disadvantaged position. These systems adversely affect both men and women, and it is a situation which can be addressed with fundamental changes to these systems (Haralambos & Holborn 1996). As such, the focus of liberal feminists would be more on gender equity and gender equality, wherein the development of both men and women are fostered on equitable terms. The aim is not for one sex to necessarily supersede the other, as the radical feminists would advocate for female supremacy.

In the Caribbean, scholars have fuelled feminist research and have paid particular attention to specific areas which include: women and the notions of economics and development (Hart 1986; Leo-Rhynie and Barrow 1997); women and social history (Reddock 1984); and women and anthropology and structures of class and ethnicity (Senior 1991).

The Caribbean woman is a unique being, shaped historically by a colonial past that renders her distinct from her other counter-parts in the world. Women in the Caribbean have always been hard workers from the days of slavery, hardly afforded the luxury of being a
‘domesticated spouse’ left to solely tend to the affairs of the house. Plantation owners regarded women as an economic entity to be used for the express purpose of production, and as such were as utilized in very much the same way as Negro men were in slavery—subjected to hard labour (Dunn 1991).

After the abolition of slavery, this trend of hard work continued for women where women became engaged in other forms of work to provide sustenance for themselves and their dependents. During the post-emancipation era, they served as indentured labourers, then as small farmers and assumed other roles, as domestic workers, market vendors, seamstresses, washers, higglers etc.

Another feature of Caribbean society that was inherited from slavery is family patterns which saw the dislocation of the male as being the breadwinner of the family. This has led to the high incidence of matrifocal family structures up to the present day. In 1995, 22%-44% of households in the Caribbean had a female as the head of the household and in Jamaica, between 1985-1992, female headship increased by 12% (Mandesire & Dunn, 1995). According to the Jamaica Survey of Living Conditions, in 2001, 44.7% of households in Jamaica were headed by females (PIOJ 2002). Traditionally female household headships in the Caribbean were more evidenced within the working class, but in recent times, have been increasing in the middle class as well (Bailey & Ricketts 2003).

It is therefore clear that women bear the brunt of the responsibility of being care-givers to their children and of the elderly that often comprise their household. As such, the implication of this is that women play a crucial role in the development of a country. They serve a reproductive function and nurture children and in so doing, directly affect the quality and sustainability of an economically productive generation (Mandesire & Dunn 1995).

Despite recognition of this vital role, women continue to experience hardships, with scholars observing that there is a feminisation of poverty world-wide. According to the Report on the Status of Women in Sixteen Commonwealth Caribbean Countries (Mandesire & Dunn 1995), women in the Caribbean earn less than men (about 70% of what men earn on average) and have higher unemployment levels compared to men. Additionally, to complicate matters further, women are in a disadvantaged position in relation to men, with having to extend their earnings to care for their children, the elderly and general household management. As highlighted earlier, often times these women are the head of the household and receive little or no financial support from elsewhere.

The cycle of poverty in which women are entrapped is perpetuated by the restricted opportunity to be gainfully employed. The Report went on to highlight how the labour force participation rates for women are generally lower than for men, a trend which is caused by gender biases in the labour market and by legal impediments.

The UNECLAC/CDCC report, Advancing Gender Equality in the Caribbean: Legislative Approaches to Sex Discrimination (2001), enunciated similar patterns in labour force participation when assessed by sex. In Jamaica, in 1999, labour force participation rates for males were 73% compared to 56.6% for females. Likewise, women were more likely to be unemployed (22.4%) than males (10%). In Trinidad and Tobago, in 1999, the labour force participation rate for males was 75% and 46.6% for females.
In instances where women were successful in securing employment, it was likely to be concentrated in low-end, low-wage, slow-growing occupations or sectors of the economy which are the least protected (Seguino 2003). Additionally, after these low-paying jobs are secured, women were more likely than men to be made redundant. The Jamaica Labour Force Survey (STATIN 2002), shows that in 2001, 16,250 (64.2%) women were made redundant compared to 9,050 (35.8%) men.

So far it is seen where there is a triple threat in the path of women for economic independence. The first obstacle is the difficulty in gaining employment, and when a job is secured, it is likely to be low-paying and thirdly, there is less security of tenure. However, the more salient threat to women is the exploitation and harsh treatment that they are subjected to in some work environments. The less than pleasant experiences of women in the free zone factories, offshore data services industry, security field and as domestic helpers have been well documented and a brief overview will be presented here.

In the ILO Working Paper, *Employment, Working Conditions and Labour Relations in Offshore Data Service Enterprises: Case Studies of Barbados and Jamaica* (Dunn & Dunn 1999), the segregation of job tasks and specialization along sex lines in this industry was highlighted. It showed that while women dominated the ranks of the lower paid, less skilled tasks, the majority of men were software programmers, which meant higher wages. The majority of the workforce in this industry was female (over 90%), between ages 18-25, with dependent children. There were major occupational safety and health issues with the women reporting pain in the neck, shoulders and wrists associated with rapid and sustained keyboard use. The study went on to further highlight how the freedom of association and the right to organise were strongly opposed and workers were kept in line with threats of loss of employment or a threat of relocating operations to other destinations.

Women were also branded as having 'poor work attitudes' when they requested time from work to attend to domestic matters. Other issues mentioned were the tedious transportation arrangements for getting to and from work, as some women have to travel many miles (sometimes from adjoining parishes), the low wages and the reluctance to pay wages for the half-hour lunch periods or when a bathroom break is taken. These issues led to a high turnover rate as women became increasingly dissatisfied with the working conditions. Most data entry operators stayed between six months and a year to two or three years.

Similar experiences were also reported by women engaged in work in the free zones of the eighties and early nineties. The free zones were characterised by young women under 25 years of age with children and the working conditions were hazardous to their health as well (Dunn 1991). There were complaints of back pain, respiratory problems from overexposure to steam irons, kidney and bladder infections from retaining urine for long periods and sinus problems from the dust and materials used (Dunn 1987). In Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, there were instances where written permission was needed to use the bathroom, as well as the frequency and duration of such visits carefully monitored. In the latter Caribbean territory, the toilet doors were removed in some factories, with the claim that it reduces theft! (Dunn 1991).

Dunn & Dunn (1999: 3), articulated that the "choice of a female workforce [in the data service industry], under pressure to support their families is not unintentional." This is so because most women, many of whom are new entrants
to the labour force are ignorant of labour laws and hence are vulnerable. It was also highlighted by Dunn (1987), that women are preferred in labour intensive industries because they are ‘docile’, ‘dextrous’ and more easily adaptable to tedious, monotonous jobs and historically female labour has been cheaper than male labour.

Clarke (2002) conducted a study which highlighted the experiences of women employed as domestic helpers in Jamaica. Rampant discrimination was observed, with the domestic helpers not being permitted to eat the same food as the employer, or consume any food in the family dining room nor sit in the formal living room. The terms and condition of employment were not clearly defined, a situation which led to very long working hours as nothing was documented. The study further revealed how some domestic helpers were made to wash their employer’s underwear, clean shoes and flush the toilet. These were all tasks that the women felt indignation in performing. Pregnancy or illness on the part of the workers could also jeopardise their jobs.

Similar findings were also unearthed as it related to female security guards in Jamaica. These category of workers were sometimes subjected to long working hours, usually twelve hours daily, with little benefits and sick leave or pregnancy could lead to job loss or relocation. There were also reports of National Housing Trust (NHT) and National Insurance Scheme (NIS) statutory deductions not being paid by the company on the workers’ behalf (Henry-Lee 2002).

Rickets (2002) succinctly observed that the participation of women in the labour force in Jamaica, like in other developing countries, has usually resulted in extended working hours, reduced leisure time, less time spent with children and a decrease in hours spent in household chores.

Methodology

Being largely qualitative in nature, the methods of investigation that were employed in the research were in-depth interviewing and observation. For the former, nine women who are currently employed or were employed in the wholesale stores in the previous twenty four months were interviewed, as well as three key informants from the Ministry of Labour and Social Security and two key informants from the Bureau of Women’s Affairs. The gate-keeper to the women employed in the retail/wholesale grocery stores was a worker in the industry and was known to the researcher because of interactions with the researcher in the past. The women were all interviewed after work hours in the confines of their homes.

The in-depth interview as a data collection tool was ideal to probe for issues relevant to the research objectives. The research employed a purposeful sample design as the wholesales and in-depth interview participants were chosen simply on the basis of accessibility. The gate-keeper originally permitted access to just three persons that could be interviewed. Each interviewee was then asked to identify at least one person who would be willing to participate in the study and this person was in turn asked to recommend at least one more person. This type of snowballing technique continued until nine persons were obtained. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured, with standardized set of questions asked of each person.

A number of ethical concerns were identified and where possible, steps were taken to address them. Observing the women on the job without either the store owners’ or the women’s
knowledge or consent was one such issue. However, this approach was ethically justified on the grounds that an awareness of the researcher’s presence and intent would have biased or altered the treatment meted out to the women on the job. Any suspicions on the part of storeowners and the women that they were being observed (especially given the purposes of the observation) may have lead to an outright refusal to participate in the research for fear of prosecution from the authorities or for the women, a fear of job loss. Out of concerns over their safety, all the interviews with the participants (whose informed consent was solicited) were conducted away from their place of employment. All the women were briefed on the objectives of the research, as a means to encourage full co-operation and as a means of assuring them of the genuine intent of the researcher. Confidentiality and anonymity were also guaranteed to safeguard their employment and the possibility of unpleasant repercussions for them.

Triangulation of information from different and multiple sources such as published literature on the subject area, in-depth interviews with Ministry of Labour personnel as well as the Bureau of Women’s Affairs and observations were all used to bring credibility to the research findings. Additionally, there were member checks, that is, consultation with the participants was done to attest to the emerging issues, to ascertain if what was recorded was indeed the meaning or interpretation that they had intended. Apart from that, there was also constant peer review of the research material to ensure that academic and professional standards are met. All of nine women interviewed had all worked in at least two different wholesales in the past. The implication of this then, is that the working conditions at approximately eighteen wholesales were unearthed by this study. Additionally, at the time of the interview, none of the women worked in the same wholesale. Credence was also given to the establishment of an audit trail that comprised of recorded materials such as interview transcripts and notes, documents and lists of categories and hypotheses that were used while analysing the data.

Limitations

Entry to the field or access to the women rather, posed an initial challenge due to the configuration of the employment scenario. The women who work in the wholesales are quite insular and to some extent, an isolated group, which usually form close-knit relationships with each other. From preliminary investigations, it was seen, where workers in some of the wholesales were recruited by a relative or friend, who themselves are currently working or have worked in the wholesales. The women were also concerned about the possibility that they could lose their jobs if they participated in the study. It was only after repeated assurances that neither their names, nor that of their workplace would be recorded, that the fears were abated.

Findings

Profile of the Women

The women interviewed were between the ages of 18 and 24 years old and have at least one to three children, often times these children were fathered by different men. Two pervasive characteristics among the women in the sample were the absence of a skill and limited formal education. None of the women possessed any academic qualifications, a marketable skill or trade and some were only functionally literate. One of the women, a 19 year old mother of two, was illiterate. They all admitted to dropping out of secondary school at around ages 13 to 16,
either because of financial constraints or due to pregnancy. The first pregnancy in most instances was at age 16 or 17, and all of the women were either in common law or visiting relationships, none was married at the time of the interview. One woman in the sample had to leave school at age 15, because her mother had died of natural causes and she subsequently got pregnant in the same year.

Another woman’s schooling was prematurely interrupted due to ongoing gang violence in her community. She was pulled out of school by her mother to live in a rural area for several months due to concerns that she might be gang raped, or worse, killed simply because she is from the ‘enemy’s community’.

All of the women interviewed lived in close proximity to their place of employment. These homes are situated in the slums, in the deep recesses of downtown Kingston, invisible to passers by or a keen observer. At the end of long winding lanes that lead from the main road, culminating into a cobweb of intersections and behind the galvanized zinc rusted by years of corrosion, lies a series of tenement yards. In a big dirt filled lot there stands at least seven small semi-attached structures, which are homes to several families. Sanitary conveniences are shared, with one standpipe and two toilets to an average tenement yard. A single lane can have as much as ten tenement yards, each containing from approximately three to seven housing units, which in turn has approximately five members in a family, a rough estimation puts the total at 150 – 350 persons living in a lane.

In these crammed and squalid dwellings, lie the homes of the women, which were either one bedroom (a separate area for living/dining) or a studio. The latter consisted of just one room which had one or two small beds, a dining table and chairs, a dresser/chest of drawers, a refrigerator, a sofa set, a television and a stereo system. This was home to the woman, her two or three children and a common law husband (who in some instances was not the father of any of the children). The children would sleep on one of the beds, while the couple would share the other.

All of the women in the sample worked in a wholesale owned and operated by a person of Asian descent. The longest period worked by any of the women was three years and the shortest was two weeks. Most of the women had worked in at least two wholesales at the time of the interview.

Terms and Conditions of Employment

Hiring and Firing

All of the women interviewed were introduced to the job by a friend and although this type of employment was not viewed as being ideal, they recognised it as being one of the few viable options available to them. The women were cognisant of their limited education and skill levels and when asked, ‘What were some of the other types of jobs that you could do/or used to do in the past?’, the responses were all standard: domestic helper, janitor, store clerk or a ‘higgler’ [vendor]. One woman was once employed in a Fast Food restaurant but had to discontinue because she just had a baby and the hours of the late shift did not facilitate her in caring adequately for her child.

Despite the negative things they had heard about the wholesales from persons in the community, it was still the easiest job for a young, functionally literate and unskilled woman to acquire. The women all related the hiring procedures at these shops. The job hunting
exercise involved a woman donning her best attire in the morning, leaving her home by 7:00 am and walking on the streets of Kingston and arbitrarily choosing wholesales to enquire if a vacancy existed. In every instance, once a vacancy existed and the shop keeper favoured the woman, she was hired on the spot and commenced working immediately. She would never be asked if she had worked in such a capacity before, or for references, or if she had a Food Handlers Permit (none of the women in the sample had ever possessed a Food Handlers Permit, with the exception of the person who had worked at the Fast Food Restaurant!). Indeed, she was not even asked her age or if she could read or write or proof of any qualifications for that matter. There seemed to be no selection criteria, considering that women were literally hired on a whim. As such, the woman left her home in the mornings and if her family did not see her return in a few hours time, they knew she was successful in securing employment.

Not surprisingly, the same manner in which a woman was hired, the same manner she was fired. Oftentimes, no explanation was given when one was dismissed as the person would work for the entire day and at the end of the day she would hear the words, ‘you, do not come back tomorrow.’ This is so, irrespective of how many months the woman had been working in the shop.

**Staff Development**

The women were asked to relate their experiences of the first day on the job. None of the women received an induction or any form of training during their tenure at the wholesales. Orientation took the form of an utterance that the shop owners gave when someone was hired:

If yuh break, yuh buy
If yuh thief, yuh leave

A new employee must always abide by these two things; the knowledge that if she deliberately or accidentally breaks any of the merchandise, the cost of the particular item will be deducted from her pay and if she is caught or even suspected of stealing, she is fired immediately. In terms of learning the job, the person has to rely entirely on the women who have been working there before and she must be an adept learner. This is so, as the pace of work is so fast that no one has the time to stop and teach. Most of the information has to be acquired through observational learning. A new worker was simply thrown in the thick of things and expected ‘to sink or swim’. Four of the women interviewed recounted how they had seen many women cry when they were verbally abused by the shop owners and called ‘ediant gyal [idiot girl]’ because they were new to the job and were not locating the goods fast enough, or told the customers that a particular item was not in stock when in fact it was. One woman stated that she was a victim of this treatment and it was one of the main reasons why she worked at three different wholesales in the space of two months.

There were also high expectations of all workers in spite of the lack of training. New workers were expected to know all the products and their locations within one week and old workers had to know any new product that was added to the list of items that the wholesale sold, as well as some of the suppliers. None of this knowledge was ever formally imparted, and the women had to rely on shrewdness and observational alacrity. It was evident that there was an absence of staff development as the women related how they were spoken to in a derogatory fashion almost everyday on the job. Additionally, there was no appraisal system to serve as a reference for a woman’s job performance and to serve as an encouragement to the women to perform. In the view of the
women, the only reason for working industriously was the fear of job loss, not because of a high morale.

**Organisation of Work**

The organisational structure of the wholesales was an unsophisticated one and comprised the shop owner(s), the female and male workers. The majority of the workers were women, with each wholesale having approximately five women employed, to two men. Oftentimes there would be two co-owners in the shop, which were usually a married couple or blood relatives. The roles and responsibilities of the men, women and owners were strictly delineated, although the roles of men and women converged at times. The shop owner in all wholesales, in all instances, was the sole person allowed to handle the cash and operate the cash register, there were no exceptions. In all wholesales, without fail, the shop owner can always be found seated and perched high above the shop floor, keenly surveying the transactions between the women and the customers below. From this vantage point as well, they would have a ‘hawk-eye’ view to detect anything and everything that moves, to help mitigate against theft or delivery of goods that was not paid for, through the slots in the security grill.

The chief responsibilities of the women were to take the customers’ orders, locate the goods in the wholesale, gather them on the counter-top, write invoices (if requested by the customer), pack the shelves, weigh goods (such as flour, sugar and rice) and make deliveries. The latter consisted of the women pushing trolleys laden with purchased goods to any location in the downtown area that the customer required, which could be any where within a one mile radius. As a matter of fact, the women in the sample explicitly stated that they cannot refuse to carry the heavy load, as it was a part of their job, and as long as there were excess goods that the customer cannot manage to carry by themselves, the women would have to transport it. The women were told that pushing the trolleys to bus stops or wherever downtown the customer wanted the goods, was a part of their normal job responsibilities and as such, did not attract additional wages.

Men were responsible for taking goods off the delivery trucks that came from the suppliers. Caseloads of merchandise would be lifted, placed on trolleys and stacked in the warehouse section of wholesales by the men. Whilst this type of intense manual activity was done by the men, the women were not exempted from having to perform some aspects of this task. Since women were responsible for packing the shelves and the replenishing of stock, they had to fetch supplies from the back of the wholesales. The women spoke of the many occasions in which they had to lift and carry heavy carton boxes, sometimes laden with canned meat, from the warehouse section to the front of the wholesale. Once there, the boxes would then be opened so that the shelves could be packed with the contents.

Additionally, the women stated that in the event that a customer requested an item that had just arrived from the supplier, they would have to go into the warehouse section and depending on where the item was, climb a long ladder and lift off boxes of other supplies in order to retrieve the requested items. When asked why the men did not assist in these activities, the women replied that the men only helped if they were fond of the particular female. This is due to the fact that the shop owners did not compel the men to assist if they did not want to.

The women also disclosed some unsavoury practices that formed a part of their work duties.
Every woman interviewed spoke of how they were coerced into cleaning the bathroom on a rotating basis. In all instances, there was only one bathroom in the wholesale that men, women and the owners all used. This bathroom, the women stated, was always in a filthy condition, partly due to the age of the fixtures, which were cracked and stained brown from years of use. However, the main contributor to the dirty state of the bathroom was the ‘nastiness of the men and owners who used it’. The women spoke of the urine and faeces that were splashed on the toilet seats and walls, that dried and ‘caked’ on these surfaces. Additionally, there were soiled ‘pads [feminine sanitary napkins]’ left strewn on the bathroom floor. The women, knowing that they would be chosen to clean the bathroom, did their best to avoid using the bathroom at all costs. However, this did not matter, as they were still called upon to choose among themselves, someone to clean the bathroom. The women spoke of how they dreaded this experience and would argue among each other about whose turn it was to clean. Other cleaning activities included sweeping and wiping the floors, as well as wiping the dust off the shelves.

Another unorthodox job task was the washing of clothes by the female workers. This practice however, was an isolated one, as only one woman in the sample told of such an experience. The other women did not recall ever being asked to wash clothing on the job. However, at the particular wholesale that this woman worked, the women were asked to wash articles of clothing belonging to the owners at the back of the wholesale! It should be noted that the women were never paid an allowance or had any extra money added to their pay for all the cleaning (and washing in the isolated case) they had to do. Refusal to clean the bathroom or wash the clothes resulted in immediate dismissal, as was indeed the case with one of the women interviewed.

Work Hours

On average, the typical work hours for all the women varied on different days due to the nature of the business. Naturally, weekends such as Fridays and Saturdays (especially when these days coincide with days that consumers receive their wages - ‘pay day’) resulted in longer work hours due to the larger volume of shoppers. On Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, the work hours were between 7:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. Wednesdays are a bit different, as Downtown shuts down as a commercial district by 1:00 p.m. As such, the women would leave work by 2:00 p.m. Often times, on Fridays and Saturdays, the work hours were from 7:00 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. Only one woman in the sample worked on a Sunday from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. However it was optional and she was not discriminated against if she refused. It was more of an opportunity to work for extra money.

The rationale for opening the shops so early in the mornings, was to attract customers who were on their way to work and needed a few supplies (since they had to reach their jobs by approximately 9:00 a.m.). All the women stated that tardiness had severe penalties - any morning that a worker reached the shop at 7:05 a.m., he or she was not permitted to work on that day and hence was not paid for the day. This would be the case irrespective of the fact that the same worker has always been a punctual person and this was the first offence of lateness. Likewise, if the trend of lateness happened on three consecutive mornings, the person was dismissed. Some of the women indicated that once late, they would hang around the wholesale for a few minutes and beg the owner to let them in. Hopefully, if the owner feels merciful on that particular morning, they would be allowed to work the day, if not, they simply went home and tried to arrive earlier the next morning.
On days in which there was a large delivery of items or a lot of customers, the women stated that they would not leave work until 8:00 p.m. or 8:30 p.m. The owners explicitly told them that they could not leave the shops until the men had finished loading the goods into the wholesales. As such, they had to stay behind and sometimes help the men lift the goods out of the delivery trucks and unto the trolleys. The women and men were not paid overtime wages for these additional hours worked, nor were the women paid any more for engaging in the lifting and carrying of heavy goods. Interestingly, all the women interviewed suspected that the real reason why they were detained past the normal working hours, was not to help quicken the pace of unloading the goods, but rather, the owners feared being left alone with the men.

There was no designated time for the consumption of lunch and the owners only permitted one of the workers to purchase lunch for the group in the afternoons. As such, lunch could be bought any time after 12 noon, with the owners’ permission of course. One person would be sent to purchase the meals from food shops, and could not stay longer than 15 - 20 minutes, or else they would not be sent on the road for this purpose the next day.

This meal would then be eaten at the countertop while standing, in full view of the customers, and if anyone needed to be served, the woman would have to stop eating and attend to them. On average, the women stated that they would get only 5 - 15 minutes of ‘lunch time’ each day, due to the frequent interruptions to serve customers (despite the fact that other women were working so that each woman would get her turn to eat). The women stated that the only line they heard constantly from the owners were, ‘you lazy gyal, stop nyam and serve smaddy nuh!’ [you lazy girl, stop eating and serve somebody!]

### Wages

According to the women, the wages were always the minimum wage as set by the Government of Jamaica. The figures quoted by the women were J$2000, J$2400 and J$2800—all were the national minimum wage figures for respective years, with J$2800 being the national minimum wage as of January 2006 (J$80=1USD). As stated earlier, the women were never paid overtime wages for the additional hours worked, or paid an allowance for the additional work done (helping men to lift boxes, cleaning of floor/bathrooms and the delivery of goods). Only one woman in all of the ten women interviewed, was paid overtime wages, although the circumstances surrounding its payment defeated its purpose as a means of compensation. She was paid J$2800 weekly and a flat rate of J$200 for any overtime worked during the week (not J$200 per hour or per day). However, she worked past 5:00 p.m. every evening in the last three years, so in essence, J$3000 was her regular pay. However, for another woman, if she chose to work on a Sunday (which was always optional), she would be paid J$300 for the day (8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.).

The women also related how they were not aware of statutory contributions being deducted from their pay. Surprisingly, half of the women interviewed were hearing of National Insurance Scheme (NIS), National Housing Trust (NHT), Education Tax and Income Tax for the first time when the researcher asked if any of these taxes were deducted from their pay. Interestingly though, personnel from the Ministry of Labour related that some of the wholesales deducted these taxes from the workers’ pay, however, this fact was never communicated to the workers themselves. It would only be uncovered after investigations were done by the Ministry.
Wages were simply deposited in the workers’ hands on a Saturday evening, no pay slip was given nor was the ‘money even put in a brown envelope.’ The women could not definitely state how much the men worked for, as the men did not discuss their pay. However, they knew for a fact that it was more than the pay they received as women. Despite this however, the women were quick to mention that they thought that the higher amount that the men got was negligible, approximately J$500 more at best.

**Physical Working Conditions**

Most of the wholesales are housed in buildings that are relics from pre-Independence days. As such, most of the buildings have undergone just a few renovations to the interior and only a fresh coat of paint to the exterior. However, the structures are fundamentally the same. From the researcher’s observations, the floors have terrazzo tiles laid on them and the walls have cracks and old plumbing pipes bulging from them. The air in the wholesales is musty and can be attributed to accumulation of dust and grime over the many years. None of the shops have air conditioning units installed and only one small fan is usually present in the entire wholesale. The women all stated that this fan was only placed directly on the owners who were seated behind the cash register. Inside of the shops was very hot during the day as there was no proper ventilation or proper air circulation. The layout and design of the wholesales exacerbated the problem, as heat from the sun was absorbed by the slab concrete roofs, which was then trapped inside by the lack of adequate windows and the placement of high shelves further disrupted air flow.

The women all described the wholesales as being ‘dark and dingy’ and they were ‘hot and sweaty’ in the days. They also stated how they felt like ‘trapped animals in cages’—a direct reference to the security grills that stood between them and the customers. As stated earlier, there was only one bathroom that was used by both sexes, and there were also no canteen facilities at any of the wholesales. There was not even a designated area in which lunch could be consumed. The women also complained of the excessive dust that was always present, irrespective of how often they cleaned. Additionally, there were no seats on which the women could sit, instead, they would have to brace on the countertops as support for aching legs.

**Occupational Health and Safety**

All of the women complained of ailments that they attributed to working in the wholesales. Chief among them were the swollen legs and varicose veins that occurred after standing for entire days whilst on the job. Sitting was expressively forbidden, and as such, no seats were provided. The women would have to hide and sit on unopened boxes of supplies at the back of the wholesales, and if caught, they risked losing their job. At one wholesale in particular, the woman spoke of how the workers would hide and sit on the crates that the goods were delivered on. However, once the owners discovered this practice, they insisted that the delivery trucks took back the crates after each delivery. Crates that were left behind were chopped and burnt by the owners to prevent the women from sitting on the job! The women lamented that even when the shop was empty, they still had to stand. To do otherwise, would mean being branded as lazy and told not to return to work the next day.

The women also complained of respiratory problems and the asthma attacks that were
brought on by the dusty environment in which they worked. Lower back pain was also reported by the women, due to the lifting of heavy goods and sometimes they would have to climb stairs and ladders with the load. The women also spoke of digestive disorders that were experienced because of the irregular and infrequent times that lunch was consumed. Bladder infections were also reported because of constant urine retention. It was explained how bowels and urine were ‘held up’ for the entire day just to avoid using the ‘filthy’ bathrooms.

Additionally, the constant climbing of long ladders and stairs with heavy goods was also considered to be a cause for concern by the women. They stated that the handling of goods so high up shelves is potentially dangerous, as one wrong move could send them tumbling down the stairs and ladders. The handling of toxic substances such as household cleaning agents without the proper safety garments was another concern.

One of the women in the sample sustained an injury on the job (she was cut on the leg by a piece of metal protruding from a shelf), and was not given any compensation or even time to seek medical attention. She simply had to treat the wound at home in the nights (the wholesale closed late each day), and this resulted in an infection of the area. Despite this, she still had to work. Another woman collapsed on the job and when rushed to the hospital, the doctors told her that she was anaemic and was not eating regularly. The doctor also told her that her eating patterns as well as the heat and standing for long hours resulted in her fainting on the job. Overall, extreme fatigue was reported by the women as being the major adverse health effect that stemmed from working at the wholesales.

**Fringe Benefits**

It was consistent among all the women interviewed, that none of the wholesales have a pension scheme, or even a health insurance scheme for any of the workers. Allowances or gratuities were non-existent, and most of the women indicated that they did not receive a bonus or a gift during the Christmas season. Only one woman received J$1000 for Christmas in 2005, from the owners, as a token of her service throughout the year.

**Leave Entitlements**

There were no structured arrangements with regard to taking days off from work. It was unanimous that none of the wholesales gave their workers vacation leave, or even sick leave. Maternity leave was often unknown.

The researcher asked what happens in the event that the woman needed time in the day to do her personal business. Responses included: that the woman asks the owner, and she *may* be given the day (if it was even thirty minutes that was requested to do the business, it forfeited the entire day). However, she would not be paid for that day. It should be noted also, that it was not a given that the woman will be granted the time, the decision was solely left up to the discretion of the owners. One woman who requested an hour to take her child to the clinic was flatly told ‘if yuh waa mind baby, stay home and mind baby, don’t come back’ [if you want to take care of your baby, stay home and take care of your baby, don’t come back]. Additionally, consecutive days, such as three or more days could not be requested, or else the woman will be given a permanent hiatus- to never return to the job.
In terms of sickness, the women related how they would have to bear the pain in silence, because if they requested a day due to the illness, they would not be paid for it. The same woman who had fainted on the job, had produced a medical certificate to the employer. However, she was still not paid for the day she was at the hospital, nor was she granted the rest days that the doctor outlined on the certificate.

Once a woman discovered she was pregnant, she would simply leave the job, because of two reasons. Firstly, if a woman was feeling ill, without even ascertaining what was the cause, she was told that ‘if yuh a breed gwaan a yuh yard’ [if you are pregnant, go home] which simply meant that the person should quit the job. Secondly, even without being told these words, a woman just knew that she was still expected to climb ladders and stairs, lift and carry heavy goods, stand all day, move briskly and work long hours during her pregnancy.

However, if the woman worked in the particular wholesale for a number of years and/or was a ‘good’ worker who was liked by the shop owners, she would be granted two weeks Maternity Leave with pay. After this period, if she was still absent from work, she would not be paid for those days. Additionally, if the woman stayed from the job too long, for example for one month, she would risk losing her employment.

**Labour and Industrial Relations**

The relationship between the workers and the employers can be best described as antagonistic with the women being kept docile and productive through intimidation and coercion. There were no mechanisms to deal with conflicts that arise either among the women themselves or between the women and the employers. In the event that there was any disagreement between any of the parties, the employers’ will always prevailed. A ‘troublemaker’s’ services were quickly terminated and there was no internal system to seek redress. None of the women were unionised and some of the women did not even know what the term ‘trade union’ meant. The women related how they were always spoken to in a degrading fashion (which the researcher was privy to witness) and the employers spoke in a foreign language around them most of the time.

**Ministry of Labour (MOL) and Social Security**

According to the interviewees, the complaints from the women in the wholesale were chiefly focused on wages; the non-payment for the additional hours worked (hours in excess of the 40 hours work week as prescribed by law) and the refusal of employers to give severance or redundancy pay. The women always complained that they were dismissed without notice, as well as not receiving full payment for the services rendered up to the point of this dismissal. The Ministry has assessed that on average the women work fifty-six hours for the week and are usually paid the national minimum wage for the standard forty hour work week.

Outside of the overwhelming complaints which surrounded wages, women did make reports concerning inadequate lunch time, eating and working, climbing of ladders and the lifting of heavy goods. As a matter of fact, the researcher was told that just two days prior to conducting the interview, a disturbing report came to the attention of the MOL.

It was alleged that at one of the wholesales that sold articles of clothing, the women were
being searched as a means to reduce theft. Male employers were demanding that the women lift up their clothes on the shop floor, to detect if they were wearing more than one underwear!! In another instance, a male employer in a particular wholesale dictated that the dress code was ‘skirts only’ and required that the women never wear denim jeans trousers to work. As such, he would always insist that the women climb the ladder to retrieve goods and always volunteered to hold the ladder, so that he could look up to see the woman’s underwear. The Labour Officer (who was the same person being interviewed for this paper), went on the scene just in time to witness the employer as he was peering up the woman’s skirt. Other reports made involved the women being cajoled and coerced by the employers to enter intimate relations with them, or else they would lose their jobs. It was communicated by the Labour Officer that the Pay and Conditions Branch was not legally empowered to act in instances of sexual harassment in the workplace, as their role was restricted to more general conditions of employment and mainly the calculations of wages/money owed.

Currently, a Labour Officer’s job is greatly hampered by the crude record keeping practices of the owners, the informal employment arrangements and the inadequate parking facilities in downtown. Oftentimes, the expediency of an investigation is compromised by lack of wage records and documentation of the number of days a woman had worked and days she was granted leave (or was absent from work without permission). Shop-keepers did not even have to know the woman’s real name, or even her full name. Women were sometimes simply known as ‘Marie’, ‘Stacey’ or ‘Punkie’. The Labour Officer stated that women did admit to giving aliases such as ‘Ann Brown’ as they did not necessarily want the owners to know their real name. Additionally, no formal employment contracts, written or verbal even existed.

These facts coupled with the lack of records on the part of the owners made the investigation process most tedious, as even the simplest of information cannot be verified at times. The Labour Officer would get in contact with a wholesale about a complaint, and the owner may vehemently deny that the woman had worked there (and sometimes with good reason because the name may be unknown to him) and without any documentation, the matter cannot proceed further.

In terms of response, the MOL personnel stated that the wholesale owners were in most cases, receptive to the MOL interventions and subsequent recommendations. Rarely did a particular case reach the point where the Civil Court became involved, as the shop owners were most times compliant, especially if threatened with legal actions.

Bureau of Women’s Affairs

Information furnished by personnel from this entity revealed that no formal complaint or official information on the plight of women in the wholesales has ever been reported to the Bureau. As such, no mechanisms have been instituted to address or discuss this issue at the national level. It was communicated to the researcher, that the most likely organisations that the women would have first contacted, is the MOL. As such, when issues of sexual harassment and mistreatment of women on the job arise, the MOL should refer them to the Bureau so that further action may be taken.

Overall Experiences of the Women

The women in the sample all likened their experiences working at the wholesale to that of
slavery. Conditions of employment in their estimation were most horrific. Their experiences whilst working were so pervasive, that even outside of working hours, their domestic lives and responsibilities were affected by the job.

The women all complained of how meagre the salary was, especially when matched with the tasks they had to perform. Pinkie spoke of how she and the women would have to rely on the kindness of the customers who sometimes gave them tips. This tip would be like J$50 or J$100, and if three persons a day gave her tips, she would be happy. The pay was not adequate to cover their daily needs and the women stated that when they received the pay on a Friday it was finished by the Monday. The money they received from the men in their lives was hardly adequate to address the many needs of the wholesales, as the men were either working in the wholesales as well, or engaged in an equivalent job, where the wages were low. From the woman’s pay, expenses related to the children, such as lunch money for the week, money to pay the baby-sitter and money to buy pampers were taken out first. The remainder of the money was used to purchase food and household supplies, as well as to ‘throw partner’.

‘Partner’ is an informal savings scheme that is initiated among friends, wherein a fixed sum of money is given or ‘thrown’ by each member of the scheme at regular intervals, which can be weekly or monthly. At specific times, a person will receive a ‘draw’ or a lump sum from the pool of collected funds. The money collected is interest free as it is not stored in a financial institution, but rather, it is kept by a member of the scheme known as the ‘banker’. Theresa was a member of such a scheme and would throw J$500 weekly, and since there were ten members in the partner, she opted to take her draw in the tenth week – she would collect J$5000.00. This was how most of the women survived, by supplementing their pay with ‘partner draws’, tips and spousal support (sometimes sexual relations with more than one man). Additionally, they would purchase substandard goods and food of lower nutritional value, such as bulk milk/generic products, than the regular baby formulae, because these were cheaper.

The instability of the job was another reason why the women despised working in the wholesales. Annie spoke of how one would just have to look at the owner the wrong way, and would be fired. She stated how disgusted she was with the manner in which both her and the customers were treated. A customer would return an item, and would be told an expletive by the shop keeper, and if any of the women collaborated with the customer that the date on an item had indeed expired, she would risk losing her job. Although she is just 19 years old, has two children, and was unemployed at the time of the interview, she was resolute in never accepting a job at a wholesale ‘as long as [she] live’. She had worked at three wholesales in just two months, and the experiences of hard and tedious labour, verbal abuse and low wages were the same in all the wholesales.

Marsha related how she felt ‘like less than a person’ working there and how the owners always had an attitude of distrust towards the workers.

Yuh would always be suspected of being a thief, dem would always watch we, whether we a weigh out de rice or de sugar, and when we tek money from the customer, if a cent drop, we have to step back and show dem, we caa [cannot] pick it up just so. Dem always search we a evening time, and me strongly believe that dem call we all kinds of

She went on further to speak of how she felt robbed and victimised in every way, for her labour and her time. On one particular day she was elected to purchase lunch for the group, however, she took approximately 15 minutes of the time to purchase some personal effects. Upon her return, she was interrogated about where else she went and was told that 30 minutes was too long a time to stay on the road to buy food. Although she insisted that the queue in the food shop was long, she was strongly reprimanded and was not sent to buy lunch again for several days.

In light of all these grouses, the women were asked about the actions, if any, that were taken, or they believe they could take, to address their concerns. Interestingly, none of the women have taken any actions to help alleviate their condition or to seek redress. The only action that was taken was simply leaving the job. This was not necessarily to proceed to a better job, or even another job, as some of the women were unemployed as in the case of Annie, Sandra, Rose and Stella. The other women in the sample were still employed at the wholesales and stated that they did not have any other options. However, all the women expressed the same sentiment that the Ministry of Labour and Social Security was the entity to which complaints could be lodged in seeking redress.

All the women interviewed expressed feelings of worthlessness and indicated how they felt ‘small’ and of low importance. They rationalised their situation as falling under a wider ambit of ‘poor, black, ghetto people’ that ‘nobody nuh care for’. They repeatedly used phrases such as ‘nobody don’t care about downtown people’ and were not the least surprised in their view, that ‘no one is doing anything for [them].’ Annie stated that everyday she went to work she felt more depressed until she had to leave the jobs. Although illiterate and unemployed, she felt that having a ‘little dignity’ was better than working under such abuse for a few measly dollars. They spoke of how the long hours on the job had also interrupted their social life, with little time to attend parties or to even engage in simple forms of entertainment. All of the women spoke of the psychological toll that the jobs were taking or have taken on their lives and felt as if their ‘lives were slipping away.’

However, when asked what they saw for themselves in five to ten years time, the answers and responses were all the same- there would be a pause before answering the question, their eyes would drop to the floor and they would quietly answer to the effect of ‘I do not know’.

None of the women in the sample were aware of national labour laws, or any of the international conventions to which Jamaica was a signatory. Interestingly as well, none of the women knew of the Bureau of Women’s Affairs and its function, nor did they have the faintest idea about women’s rights (they had an inkling of human rights) or any aspect of gender affairs.

Discussion

Although the findings seem somewhat outrageous, they are not surprising, as these conditions of employment are not unique to the women in this study. So far, the findings have been consistent with the literature on the subject area. Experiences of the women in the wholesales were similar to that of women in free zone garment factories and the offshore data services industry. Likewise, the characteristics of these women, being semi-literate, aged 18–
25 with children, seem to be the prototype for these categories of workers who are subjected to this kind of treatment on the job. Dunn and Dunn (1991), observed that the selection of these type of women to be engaged in these type of labour intensive jobs are deliberate.

The high turnover rates in the wholesales were also another feature that was corroborated by the literature on marginalized women in the workforce. None of the women interviewed in this study worked at one wholesale for longer than three years. The extended working hours, reduced leisure time, the less time available to spend with children and to tend to household chores that were experienced by the women working in the wholesale, was also highlighted by a previous study (Ricketts 2002).

Many of the practises at the wholesales were in contravention of several national labour and employment laws as well as international conventions. Breaches of the various national laws were evident, and will be discussed in tandem with breaches of international standards or conventions as in most instances, both sets of issues overlap.

There were flagrant disregard and abuse of human rights, such as the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of one’s interests and the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay (Articles 23 and 24 respectively of the Fundamental Human Rights). Other violation of Jamaican employment and labour laws and the ILO Declaration on the Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work that were evident, included excessive work hours, non-payment of relevant statutory deductions, lack of health and other fringe benefits, inadequate leave entitlements, improper ventilation and sanitary conveniences.

Additionally, Article 11 of CEDAW was not observed, which states that “women will have the same employment rights as men as well as maternity leave and special protection against harmful work during pregnancy” (UNIFEM 2004).

There were several infractions of the Shops and Offices Act, whose Regulations stipulate the meal intervals for workers, the provisions of seats and the hours of operation of shops. According to Section 10 of the Shops Regulations, 1961, “every person employed in or about the business of any shop shall be allowed a luncheon interval of not less than three-quarters of an hour during the period between half-past eleven o’clock in the morning and two o’clock in the afternoon on which his hours of employment include the whole of that period.” This was clearly not being observed by the employers in the wholesales, as the lunch hours were usually between five to fifteen minutes.

Likewise, Section 12 of the Regulations which state that “the occupier of every shop in which persons are employed shall provide behind the counter or in such other position as may be suitable for the use of such persons, at least two seats in proportion to every three persons employed therein,” was obviously ignored. It was not even a case of inadequate proportion of seats to workers, no seats were provided!

The Maternity Leave Act was likewise ignored, as none of the stipulations were observed, as more often than not, women were not granted days to recuperate after a pregnancy and therefore the issue of wages being paid for this period away from work is irrelevant. However, in the event that Maternity Leave was granted, it was less than the eight weeks as dictated by law, and if the woman stayed away
from the job longer than the time she was given by the employer (though within the time legally permitted), she forfeited her job.

Equal pay for similar job tasks undertaken was not being practiced, as men were paid more than the women in every instance for the similar tasks undertaken. While it could be argued that the men did the majority of the strenuous tasks and hence deserved higher remuneration, it was evident that the women actively engaged in this type of activity as well. Additionally, to solely base the rationalisation of salary between men and women on just the amount of muscle power involved, or on sex, is flawed. How much dollar value should be attached to the amount of cleaning (and washing in one instance), sweeping, dusting, packing, lifting, writing (of invoices), taking customers’ orders, fetching of goods, climbing and delivery that the women had to do on a daily basis? Clearly then, on the basis of diversity of tasks, the women deserved more pay than the men! In this practice, not only have national laws not been adhered to, but the ILO Convention No.100, of 1951, concerning equal remuneration between men and women for work of equal value has also been violated.

Interestingly, laws clearly exist to adequately address all the highlighted concerns in this study. It was evident that it was monitoring and enforcement of these stipulations that were lacking. Labour Officers tended to focus too much on wages and other monetary aspects, much to the detriment of assessing other areas in which they are legally empowered to act. These other areas include general conditions of employment such as the provision of adequate seats for staff, proper ventilation and sanitary conveniences, lunch hours and the physical condition of the area in which lunch is consumed.

However, in spite of all these breaches of the law, it was indeed sad that the women did not recognise that their fundamental human rights were being violated and that legal remedies existed. The exploitation of the women occurred on many different levels, on the social, psychological, sexual and the economic. It was seen where not only were the women underpaid, overworked, sexually harassed, but in some instances were used as human shields. As stated earlier, the women stayed until even 8.00 p.m. on evenings when supplies were delivered and being packed in the warehouse by the men. It was felt by the owners that they were protected from harm at the hands of the men as long as the women were present.

Nonetheless, knowledge of these exploitations only entered the women’s consciousness through the fact that intuitively, ‘something was wrong’ - that women lifting and carrying heavy loads could not be right, leaving the job because of pregnancy was not right and likewise, ‘not even getting a brown envelope with one’s pay’ just seemed wrong. They were not aware that they were being denied certain social welfare benefits because taxes such as the National Insurance Scheme and the National Housing Trust were not being deducted from their wages. Some of the women did not even know of the existence of these type of taxes and the benefits they hold in assisting them in old age or in acquiring a home. The only thing that the women were aware that they had a legal entitlement to, was overtime pay for additional hours worked and severance pay. Likewise, they knew that the MOL could be sought for redress, and many women did act upon this knowledge.

The wholesale jobs are so designed to perpetuate a cycle of poverty and dependency.
Akin to a drug dealer and an addict, the women were paid just enough to cover their basic needs, were keenly monitored (amount of time spent on the road was observed), controlled and intimidated (women were petrified of job loss if they talked to an ‘outsider’ or voiced their concerns to the owners). It is not a mere coincidence that all the women resided downtown, as the wages were essentially the transportation costs for women who lived outside of this area. With no skills, the women were trapped in a cycle of poverty and forced by circumstances to keep working in the wholesales. There was no aspect of the job that was empowering and many of the women adopted a fatalistic outlook and were at a loss as to how they could redeem themselves. All of the women in the study felt powerless to act. This was largely due to an awareness of their limitations. That is, their lack of a skill or formal education meant fewer opportunities to escape working in the wholesales or in equivalent jobs.

This fact, coupled with the Bureau of Women’s Affairs unawareness of the women’s plight, are causes for deep concern, as the women are the chief breadwinners and caregivers for their children and extended family and as such, there was more than the quality of life of the woman at stake. Children and the elderly of these families are at a serious disadvantage due to the sustained state of poverty. The presence of men in these women lives were unstable (few of the women interviewed were currently living with the father of any of their children) and even if a man stayed committed in the relationship, he was just as uneducated and had low skilled employment. As such, the brunt of the responsibility for the children and the elderly lay squarely on the woman’s shoulders. There was simply not enough money to provide access to proper healthcare and educational services.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Based on the findings discussed, we can see that a series of actions are necessary to mitigate against the myriad of issues now confronting women in the labour force. These interventions include legislative review, policy measures and the formulation of social programmes, sensitization and dissemination of information and structural changes to organisations that specialise in areas related to gender and labour.

Legislative Review

As stated earlier, laws that comprehensively address most of the concerns related to women in the world of work do exist. However, some of these laws need to be revised to increase the fines and the length of imprisonment as a means to encourage compliance.

Sexual harassment on the job was one of the issues that was repeatedly brought up in most of the interviews, however, there is currently no legislation to address this matter. This represents one of the few areas in which Jamaican law has lagged behind, especially in light of international trends in bringing sexual harassment issues to prominence in the last few decades. However, the Bureau of Women’s Affairs and other NGOs have been playing an advocacy role in pressuring the government to formulate a Sexual Harassment Act. Currently, a draft Bill has been prepared and is based on the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Model Legislation (Henry-Lee 2005).

The Women (Employment) Act has the potential of being a powerful piece of legislation for women’s rights if it were not for its archaic state. This Act has not been revised since 1956, which is apparent in its content, as it solely
addresses the employment of women in night work. Although aspects of women affairs is captured under various Acts such as the Maternity Act, The Employment (Equal Pay for Men and Women) Act etc, the Women (Employment) Act could be a unifying piece of legislation that encompasses all these issues as well as that of sexual harassment of women in the workplace.

Policy Action and Social Programmes

The current formulation of a National Gender Policy (as of April 2006) has long been overdue, and its completion should be hastened. Similar to the national laws, social policies and programmes related to gender and women’s rights have been too fragmented in the past. There has been the existence of many piecemeal initiatives with a particular Ministry or non-governmental entity implementing its own programme, often times with divergent mandates. It is hoped that the new National Gender Policy will bring cohesion to all these initiatives by serving as a clear guide to highlight certain priority areas and the intended outcomes. Interestingly, attempts have been made to pay particular attention to gender mainstreaming and the 1987 National Policy Statement on Women stated that all policies and programmes of the Government (including economic and social development) must be underpinned by gender considerations.

As mentioned earlier, men working in the wholesales were subjected to similar working conditions and instances of exploitation. In terms of wages, the women acknowledged that whilst the men received more pay than they did, it was still not substantial. Men also had to work in the ‘hot and dingy’ wholesales with improper ventilation and sanitary conveniences. As such, there needs to be a shift from the traditional ‘women in development’ (WID) approach to one of ‘gender and development’ (GAD). The former approach deals entirely with the integration of the needs of women into development strategies, while the latter focuses on both sexes and the unequal relations between them. As such, it is not simply a matter of women’s rights, rather, it speaks to the more holistic development of men and women in an equitable environment.

Alongside these policy considerations however, the location of the Bureau of Women’s Affairs within the Government, is of much importance with regards to the level of profile it is given, funding received and the amount of impact that it will have. It is being strongly recommended that the Bureau of Women’s Affairs remain under the Office of the Prime Minister. In the past, this entity has fallen under several portfolios and has moved to five different ministries between 1974 to 1985. Initially, the Bureau of Women’s Affairs was located in the Ministry of Youth and Community Development, then moved to the Office of the Prime Minister, then to Ministry of Health and Social Security, then back to the Ministry of Youth and Community and Development and then to Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Sports (Moser 1993).

Additionally, an evaluation of the Bureau of Women’s Affairs in the mid 1990s had shown that it lacked the capacity and technical skills to collect data and assist Ministries in policy analyses and sectoral budgets to impact on women (Harris et al. 2001). This was mainly due to limited funding and inadequate staffing. As such, it is being recommended that the establishment of focal points in key Ministries be revisited. These focal points should have qualified personnel so that there can be the
integration of gender analysis in the government policies and programmes. The Gender Advisory Committee and the Policy Analysis and Review Unit in the Cabinet Office could provide oversight.

A Plan of Action for improving the social and working conditions of marginalized groups such as men and women working in the wholesales and domestic helpers, need to be formulated urgently. Although concrete numbers are unavailable, approximately 600 women are employed in the wholesales in downtown, Kingston - too substantial a number to ignore. In the same vein, social initiatives such as a ‘safety net’ programme need to be designed and implemented. It is being proposed that attempts be made to get the young women working in the wholesales enrolled in Adult Literacy Programmes.

The government must also be innovative in the use of its legal instruments to protect the vulnerable, an example of this is the setting of the national minimum wage. So far, it is seen that at the wholesales, one of the few areas of compliance is the payment of the exact minimum wage. Since the government cannot dictate to employers the amount of remuneration that should be given to workers, only a minimum standard can be set, it therefore means that it is crucial that the minimum wage figure be revised yearly to account for inflation.

Sensitization and Dissemination

There should be continued public awareness campaigns for educating the population about gender issues. The concept of ‘joined up government’ should be utilised as a public administration tool. It was seen where there was convergence of several issues which were dealt with by both the Bureau of Women’s Affairs and the MOL. As such, proper inter agency communication channels need to be implemented to facilitate referrals from the MOL to the Bureau.

With regards to the shop owners, it must be highlighted that most of these persons are not Jamaican nationals nor have most of them been residents in the island for a long time. Some are not even fluent in English, and while ignorance of the law is no excuse, they might simply be unaware of all the labour laws and certain rights and entitlements of workers. As such, an awareness campaign will have to be designed for this target group as well. When both parties, that is, workers and employers are fully aware that they both know the law, their rights and the mechanisms for seeking redress, they will be less inclined to act in a manner that is unfavourable to the other.

Organisational Change

The role of the MOL as an inspectorate needs greater enhancement both in terms of staffing and the areas of focus. Less than ten Labour Officers to serve the entire corporate area is inadequate and there is need for the employment of more persons to serve in this capacity. At present, the women complain that the Labour Officers usually visit just the specific wholesale that the complaint was lodged against, despite the same problem occurring in all wholesales. It could be that the inadequate number of Labour Officers limits them to just responding to specific complaints.

Additionally, there needs to be employment of more women Labour Officers, as it is being assumed that they would be more sympathetic to the plight of women in the workplace. With that being said, there needs to be training of the staff in gender analysis, on the relevant policy
documents, such as the National Policy Statement on Women and international standards as well as the government's commitments. In this vein, the Labour Officers will have to pay more attention to inspecting sanitary conveniences, ventilation, seating, and the observation of lunch hours in the wholesales. They are responsible for the monitoring of thirteen Acts, yet concentration has been too much on the Minimum Wage Act, the Maternity Leave Act and the Employment (Termination and Redundancy Payments) Act. However, once the staff's capacity is strengthened and scope of responsibilities widen, the remuneration will have to be increased to retain quality staff and attract competent persons to the profession.

**Way Forward**

It is clear that Jamaica, in terms of gender issues and women's rights, is on the right path, in line with international trends and developments. The legal machinery, technical competence and expertise and social organisations exist. However, these have to be translated into tangible outcomes that are beneficial to women. Therefore, the gap between principles and their application must be bridged. Social capital will have to strengthened or hence there will always be a pool of uneducated, unskilled and poverty stricken women vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace.
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