Female Workers in Agribusiness in Zimbabwe

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Any remaining shortcomings in the study are, of course, my sole responsibility.

L.M. Sachikonye

December 1994
1. THE RESEARCH ISSUES AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Introduction

The objective of this study was to investigate the working conditions of female workers in agribusiness in Zimbabwe. It intended to focus on the position of female workers in the plantation labour process and female labour utilization in the smallholder outgrower sector (Sachikonye, 1992). Together the plantation and smallholder sectors have become significant producers of coffee, tea, cotton, sugar and tobacco in post-independence Zimbabwe. Female workers have increasingly played a key role in various production processes on the plantation and outgrower sectors. So the study intended to explore the emerging patterns and implications of the gender division of labour and to document the more vulnerable position of female workers with respect to wages and working conditions.

Capitalist management of the labour process has been instrumental in the construction of the prevailing gender division of labour. It was our observation that the rationale for concentrating female workers in certain production processes rather than in others required careful investigation. There was a propensity of plantations to utilize female workers largely as casual or contract workers in predominantly manual labour tasks. The basis of this tendency towards the casualization of female workers, the feminization of particular labour tasks and the reluctance of plantations to impart skills to this largely unskilled segment of their labour force, therefore, required empirical investigation. Furthermore, the study sought to explore the gender division of labour within the context of both the emergent capitalist social relations, as evidenced by the unfolding social differentiation process, and the dominance of the patriarchal family structure in the outgrower sector.

The main justification for this study is that very little work has been attempted to the specific working conditions of female workers in the
agribusiness sector in Zimbabwe. Still less have there been any detailed studies on their participation in the sector particularly in relation to the nature of the gender division of labour and its implications.

1.2 Conceptual Issues

The conceptualization of female labour partly relates to the historical legacy of predominantly male-labour migration, to the mines and plantations in particular. In Southern Africa, wages in colonial capitalist industry were calculated on the assumption that the male worker was single, on the basis of which basic services such as accommodation were planned and provided. On the plantations, wage for female workers were calculated on the assumption that the husband was the main, if not the sole, bread-winner with the wife presumed to be playing a secondary role. Female workers were accordingly paid much lower wages and, in some instances, denied some of the benefits accruing to male workers (Clarke, 1977, Chipande and Vaughan, 1986). On tobacco plantations, for example, managers viewed women "primarily as 'wives' who constituted a pool of resident labour which could be drawn upon when required" (Chipande and Vaughan, 1986: 27). Until new post-independence legislation was enacted in Zimbabwe, women were mainly relied upon by the plantations as casual or seasonal workers. However, most of them did not qualify for 'food rations' so that

"their real rate of earnings per hour supplied tend to be below that for men. But the low wages of the household effectively require women to 'take up' wage employment when offered" (Clarke, 1977: 71).

In this study, we will observe continuities in the differential treatment towards female workers and the perpetuation of their subordinate status, notwithstanding labour legislation which ostensibly forbids gender-based discrimination. A related conceptual issue concerns the rationale or ideology underlying the gender division of labour itself at the work-place. Highly prized as qualities amongst female workers are
their manual dexterity or “nimbleness” of their fingers and higher concentration than that of male workers in repetitive and monotonous job tasks. This somewhat functionalist justification for concentrating female workers in certain production tasks such as tea plucking, coffee and strawberry picking, vegetable preparation and weeding has up to almost been adopted as the conventional wisdom on women in most of the plantation management as well as amongst some male workers. The notion of female “nimbleness”, “docility” and capacity for “delicate” and “monotonous” work has ideological overtones; even the evidence itself for these “special qualities” is far from unequivocal. The selective “feminization” of certain labour tasks has more to do with the conscious “cheapening” of the labour employed in those tasks. The reality is that women are employed in those particular tasks because their labour “is amongst the cheapest and most commendable” (Marcus, 1986). Plantations take advantage of the prevalent stereotype that any income earned by a daughter, wife or mother:

is an ‘extra’ over and above the main income of the father, husband or son. If such wages were paid to male workers, the low income and the instability of the job would be untenable in the long run; workers would either move to other jobs or organize and strike to get higher wages (Aranda and Arizpe, 1988).

However, this conventional stereotype, as our field findings would demonstrate, has little basis in contemporary social reality for the nature of the household on the plantations has undergone changes.

Finally, we need to take into account the conceptual issue relating to partial proletarianization. The casualization of female labour is an expression of this process of partial proletarianization. There is a pronounced tendency to employ women as contract or seasonal labour rather than on a permanent basis. On some plantations in Zimbabwe, female workers constitute as much as two-thirds of this force of temporary workers. In South Africa, the process of casualization was tied up with the feminization of certain labour tasks. The breakdown
and reorganization of full-time jobs into their 'part-time' components had been accompanied by a substitution of male 'regular' workers by female 'casual' workers (Marcus, 1986). In Zimbabwe, both on the plantations and in the food-processing sector, a clear pattern of the relegation of female workers to low-paid manual and 'unskilled' jobs was evident (Sachikonye et. al., 1984). The advantages to employees of engaging contract female workers was that labour costs were lowered, payment for pension, sick leave and paid leave benefits and for protective clothing was avoided. The lack of a permanent worker status by most females weakened their bargaining position. However, as we will observe from our field findings, most contract workers are in fact permanent workers except in terms of their legal status. The absence of legal recognition and the rights associated with it does not strengthen the position of contract female workers.

1.3 Methodology

Two main methods of research were utilized in this study of working conditions of female workers in Zimbabwe's agribusiness sector. The first was the analysis of both unpublished and published material on employment conditions in agribusiness. The unpublished material included commissioned studies on tea and coffee plantations concerning their commercial viability and employment conditions. Some of that material concerned the development of the horticultural sub-sector of agribusiness. The published material consisted chiefly of statistical reports compiled on agribusiness by the Central Statistical Office (CSO), by the Commercial Farmers' Union (CFU) and by the Horticultural Producers' Association. This material was useful in showing general trends in agribusiness especially those pertaining to employment and productivity levels and technology absorption. In addition, published statements by Ministry of Labour officials and the General Agricultural and Plantation Workers' Union (GAWPUZ) covered a broad range of issues including developments concerning collective bargaining, occupational health and safety and skills training. Journals such as the Farmer, Farming Gazette and the Zimbabwe
Agricultural Journal also carried pertinent materials relating to conditions in agribusiness. Much of these materials were consulted at the beginning of the research in 1992, and on an on-going business during 1993.

The second method used in the study were extensive oral interviews on selected plantations. These interviews were based on a questionnaire containing about 60 questions concerning:

a) the social profile of the worker
b) division of labour/tasks
c) access to skills training and promotion opportunities
d) assessment of supervision received
e) occupational health and safety
f) trends in retrenchment
g) wages and benefits received and
h) assessment of the role of the workers' committee (WC) and trade union at a particular plantation.

The interviews were carried out with a total of 120 workers of whom 100 were female. These were randomly drawn from four plantations specializing in tea, coffee and horticultural production. Interviews with 20 randomly selected male workers were intended to yield a broader comparative picture concerning gender-based differences in working conditions. In addition, interviews were conducted with management personnel drawn from the supervisor/foreperson category, and with representatives of workers' committees and the trade union. The field interviews were undertaken at different periods in the second half of 1993 and first half of 1994.

The location of the main field work was in Eastern Zimbabwe, approximately 400 kilometres from the capital Harare where tea and coffee plantations thrive in a higher-rainfall area. Further field work was conducted some 60 kilometres north of Harare in the centre of tobacco and horticulture production. Intensive production of export
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crops such as tobacco, strawberries, onions and beans, takes place in this location. In addition, processing of some of these commodities is carried out in the factories on the plantations themselves. This applies to tea as much as to packing of strawberries and onions for British other European markets. The value of the interviews in which the present researcher also participated were enhanced by physical visits to the various work places for first-hand impressions of the work processes involved at the tea and strawberry fields, the coffee and onion fields, the tea-processing and bean-packing factories. The social conditions under which workers lived were ascertained through visits to their housing compounds and health facilities.

There were however, several difficulties encountered during the course of this study. The original intention to cover the small holder outgrower sector as adequately as the plantation became much more difficult in practice. It was not possible to undertake interviews at the selected small holder sugar cane scheme because the consortium which owns it was not supportive of the study. Secondly, the drought in 1992 and its lingering effects in 1993 resulted in a downturn in the smallholder sector. Nevertheless, we were still able to carry out interviews albeit with a much more limited number of female workers in this sector. The implication of this limited coverage of the smallholder sector is the problem of comparison between the working conditions of female workers in the two sectors.

Finally, there are limitations inherent in the oral interview approach as a method of research. Although it elicits much useful material, it does not give space for extended observation of the objects of the research: the labour process and the workers themselves. There is also a tendency towards reticence on the part of interviewees, despite guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality. In some instances, low level of literacy precluded a more intelligent articulation of experiences and factual materials by the interviewees. The researcher as "an outsider" experiences these disadvantages which cannot be underestimated. In spite of these, however, the materials gathered
when pulled together, sifted and cross-checked provide a useful basis to assess agribusiness labour conditions.

1.4 The Structure of the Report

This report is divided into six chapters. The present chapter, spelling out as it does the objectives and justification of the study together with conceptual and methodological issues, constitutes the introduction. In the next chapter, an overview of Zimbabwe’s agribusiness is presented in a discussion which sets it in a historical context. The context shows the continuities and changes which have occurred in the conduct of Zimbabwean labour relations in agriculture. Generally, those labour relations are still tainted by a paternalism which is entrenched in the “total institution” characteristics which plantations still represent. These characteristics relate to the restricted character of the internal labour markets on plantations and very limited upward mobility within them and to the dependence of the labour force on accommodation, recreation and basic social facilities (clinics and schools) provided by the plantation. The chapter also discusses in general terms the composition of the agricultural proletariat and the gender division of labour. In addition, themes concerning the marginalization, occupational health and safety and trade union attempts to mobilize workers are outlined. These are picked up and pursued in greater detail in subsequent chapters which together constitute the second part of the report.

Chapter 3 draws from field findings and explores the nature of the work processes in which female workers are mainly concentrated in perennial crops and horticulture. A conscious attempt is made to draw as much as possible from the female workers’ own assessment and interpretation to the gender division of labour at the work place. The perspectives of management on the construction of this division of labour are also assessed.
The composition of skills and mobility within the internal labour market by female workers is then examined in chapter four in the light of their predominance within the contract and seasonal labour force. At the same time, their social background is surveyed in relation to their marital status, age and working experience. The field findings on these yield a profile of a female labour force that does not support the thesis of the traditional household headed by a male breadwinner. A different type of household seems to be emerging on the plantations which is not necessarily structured along the line of a patriarchal household.

In the fifth chapter, we evaluate occupational health and safety conditions on plantations as they affect female workers. Their weaker bargaining position as non-permanent workers, puts them in a legally disadvantageous, indeed vulnerable, position. This is due to not only the hazardous nature of some of the work processes they are involved in the fields but also in their contact with agrochemical residues. Lack of adequate protective clothing also exposes them to injury and inhalation of dangerous substances.

Finally, chapter 6 discusses the implications of these working conditions on relations between plantations' management and workers and their representatives in the workers' committee (WC) and trade union. Modes of the resistance to the onerous labour regime on the plantations are explored. The report concludes with a brief summary.

2. CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE LABOUR PROCESS IN AGRICULTURE

2.1 Introduction

The main features of the labour process in capitalist agriculture in Zimbabwe are evaluated in this chapter. The evaluation takes into account processes of continuity - in ownership structures and
employment practices - processes which underlie post-independence labour relations in this key sector. There exists differentiation in capitalist agriculture in terms of scale of operations and therefore, of levels of capital or technological intensity and employment levels. Some production units such as plantations which produce sugar, coffee, tea and tobacco, are huge, while others are medium or smaller in size. The ownership and control of these differentiated enterprises ranges from multinational and corporate to individual ownership. In this chapter, we largely focus on the plantations under state and corporate ownership. However, the chapter begins by assessing both the historical and current trends in capitalist agriculture.

2.2 Historical and Current Trends in Agriculture

Before the Second World War (1939-1945) agriculture together with mining, provided the mainstay of the economy of colonial Zimbabwe. Indeed, it was precisely the elusiveness of mineral finds on the scale of Witwatersand that agriculture received greater priority in the first decades of colonization. However, a major structural problem which confronted capitalist agriculture for nearly 60 years was scarcity of labour. African peasant producers in colonial Zimbabwe found little incentive given the comparative paucity of returns and the repressive labour regime to engage in wage-labour, until land expropriation and tax obligations made that engagement unavoidable. As in mining, there was recourse to imports of migrant workers from neighbouring countries principally Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia. As Table 1.1 shows, foreign migrant workers constituted as much as 62% of the labour force in capitalist agriculture in 1951 before declining to 33% in 1974.

Extra-market mechanisms had to be utilized to draw this labour; a role played by the Rhodesia Native Labour Bureau (RNLB) prior to World War II and by the Rhodesia Native Labour Supply Commission (RNLSC) after 1945. The contract labour system regulated by these institutions gradually became less significant in the 1960s, petering out
in the 1970s. Since 1958, the Rhodesian State had been systematically channeling foreign migrant workers onto capitalist farms and plantations. The RNLSC's role became defunct in 1974 when Malawi banned further contract labour exports to Zimbabwe.

Table 2.1: Foreign Migrant Workers in Agriculture 1941-72

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>% of Total Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>56083</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>84089</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>114878</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>137030</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>135330</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>130235</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>114693</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>119275</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>120964</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>118000</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>119000</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Clarke, 1977: 31

The gradual reduction in the number of foreign migrant workers from the 1960s was also made possible by the increase of local migrant workers. Labour tenancy arrangements authorised under the Private Location Ordinance (1908) - which had enabled capitalist farmers to draw upon labour supplies from peasants without land ownership rights, began to be phased out in the 1950s. By the 1970s, such arrangements had fallen away in law and in practice: Labour tenants were now regarded as squatters or 'illegal occupiers'. As it was observed:

the eviction of 'squatters' in the 1970s represented the end-phase of effective land alienation and proletarianization of Africans located in European lands” (Clarke, 1997: 18)

Proletarianization in capitalist agriculture had, therefore, been a chequered and protracted process. Chequered and partial because of the rotation rather than stabilization of foreign migrant labour; and
protracted because until the 1960s and 1970s local labour supplies were uneven and of a temporary rather than permanent character.

Even so, as we will observe below, the stabilization of labour in capitalist agriculture is not complete. There are still considerable elements of contract, casual and seasonal labour within the sector which constitute local migrant labour force. The incomplete proletarianization within the sector relates to the structure of capitalist agriculture itself. A significant proportion of farm and plantation production is that of seasonal commodities such as tobacco, sugar, tea, cotton and coffee. The winter and dry months (between May and September) constitute a slack season. The levels of technological intensity vary, tending to be higher on plantations which combine crop production with agro-industrial processing. Further, although certain processes such as ploughing and planting are amenable to mechanization others such as cotton and tea picking, tobacco harvesting and cane cutting have not yet been mechanized. Although there have been optimistic projections of the prospects of mechanization in capitalist agriculture, it must be questioned whether these were realistic in the first place. The assumption by Clarke that increased mechanization would overcome 'labour shortage' and accentuate stratification within the agricultural labour force was rather too sweeping the displacement of 'unskilled labourers' has not been a major feature of the labour process on farms and plantations. However, a notable development in the structure of capitalist agriculture from the 1950s has been the consolidation of production units into the hands of large and corporate producers as smaller and individual producers were squeezed out of production. The plantation sector - which is the focus of our analysis in this chapter - is entirely owned by corporate producers and the state. Most plantations have invested significantly in equipment and infrastructure such as irrigation and plants for processing produce. The integration of crop production and processing has been achieved in the case of sugar, tea, and vegetables. However, the investment in technology has not necessarily
eliminated reliance on general labour (also inaccurately termed ‘unskilled labour’) and casual and seasonal labour.

Our observation is that in the post-independence period, both the structure of agriculture and labour composition have not undergone fundamental change. In terms of land ownership, large-scale capitalist farms and plantations occupy approximately 60 per cent of specialised and intensive farming regions and 40 per cent of total land in Zimbabwe. There are about 4,500 such production units with an average size of 2,200 hectares; but, as we have already observed, the number of the units is the outcome of a decrease due to sale and leasing out to large-scale producers (CSO, 1989). However, as Table 2.2 shows there has overall, been a gradual decline in the contribution of agriculture to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) over the past 20 years.

Table 2.2: Contribution by Agriculture and Forestry to the GDP 1974-93.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>(At Current Prices)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>12.0 est.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CSO, 1993

A decisive factor in agriculture’s contribution to the GDP is the weather which fluctuates from good rainfall seasons to drought years. The decline in the contribution to GDP is not likely to be precipitous in view of the state support for the peasant sector (which had been
depressed before independence) and expansion in the growth of tobacco and horticulture.

Similarly, employment levels have not registered a substantial decrease. In 1977, there were 348,000 workers constituting 34.4% of the total labour-force in the formal sector; the figures were approximately 304,000 in 1991 after a dip to 265,000 in 1987. Agriculture and forestry workers constitute roughly 26% of the formal sector labour force. Thus the continued significance of agriculture's contribution to the GDP and formal sector employment demonstrate the limited degree of the industrialization process in Zimbabwe. Neither has the manufacturing sector expanded phenomenally to be able to absorb the unemployed and under-employed in the peasant sector. Nor has capitalist agriculture experienced labour supply constraints to force it to invest in technology which requires better trained and skilled workers. As it is, employers in agriculture draw upon a large reservoir of labour, including contract and seasonal labour which can be viewed as constituting "a reserve army" of labourers. The distribution of skills (according to conventional criteria) in agriculture is highly skewed as the 1981 national manpower survey indicated. Out of a total of 303,000 workers, 5 percent were "skilled", 14 percent "semi-skilled" and 81 per cent "unskilled" (Zimbabwe Government, 1981: 73). There have been no extensive surveys since then on skill distribution in capitalist agriculture but it would not be expected to have changed significantly in the past 13 years. Our own more limited survey on state and corporate plantations broadly confirm the above figures on skill grading of workers. On the whole, this skewed skill distribution ensures that capitalist agriculture is a low-wage sector. This emerges more clearly if the average annual earnings of agricultural workers are compared to those in other sectors such as mining and manufacturing (see Table 2.3).
Table 2.3: Average Annual Earnings by Sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Z$</td>
<td>Z$</td>
<td>Z$</td>
<td>Z$</td>
<td>Z$</td>
<td>Z$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agric. &amp; Forestry</td>
<td>1376</td>
<td>1466</td>
<td>1612</td>
<td>1809</td>
<td>2194</td>
<td>2444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining &amp; Quarrying</td>
<td>4450</td>
<td>4790</td>
<td>5513</td>
<td>6160</td>
<td>7467</td>
<td>8853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>5657</td>
<td>6331</td>
<td>7083</td>
<td>7986</td>
<td>9553</td>
<td>11137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity &amp; Water</td>
<td>8049</td>
<td>9061</td>
<td>10453</td>
<td>10830</td>
<td>13460</td>
<td>18831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>3914</td>
<td>4396</td>
<td>4382</td>
<td>4623</td>
<td>5269</td>
<td>6273</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


We should now turn our attention, albeit briefly, to the general framework of relations between employers and workers in the capitalist agriculture. More obviously than in other sectors, individual and corporate employers exert greater authority not only at the workplace but over aspects of their workers’ existence including housing, health and recreation. The strong element of authoritarian paternalism has suggested similarity with ‘quasifeudal’ labour relations. Unlike in urban industrial employment where wage relations presupposed a ‘free’ wage-labour force and labour relations which revolve around a ‘cash nexus’

"farm labour relations involve a high degree of non-cash and non-wage commitment on both sides of the contract. Worker links to the plantation are almost all encompassing. These links are not simply economic but also involve a high degree of socio-political subordination and dependence.... These unique features are also reflected in the totality of employer control over workers. The landlord is not only the sole employer of the worker’s family, but is also the land-lord of the worker-tenants" (Clarke, 1977: 51)

This pervasive subordination of workers undermines considerably the security and autonomy of workers; that is loss of employment also means loss of right of tenure or accommodation and basic subsistence. Political independence has not brought fundamental change to this authoritarian and paternalist framework of labour relations in capitalist agriculture.
Even so, resistance to this authoritarian labour regime has been organized by workers either through spontaneous industrial action or through mobilization campaigns by the workers' union in the industry. From the 1960s, the agricultural and plantation workers' union has articulated workers' interests but under very difficult social and political conditions particularly prior to independence. The colonial state through the Masters and Servant Act ensured that no collective bargaining rights were available to agricultural workers; and later, through the Industrial Conciliation Act, it undermined their position by not conferring registration to the union. The principal lobbying organization of capitalist farmers - the then Rhodesia National Farmers Union (RNFU) - strongly opposed "the threat of trade unionism". Individual farmers and plantation owners castigated union officials as 'subversive' and supported draconian measures such as detention against them. The union expressed its grievances which centred on increasing poverty amongst workers and their families and denial of collective bargaining rights. As the union argued:

our economic and social welfare has continued to deteriorate and we are placed in a most invidious position. Unrecognized in law, we cannot bargain on behalf of the workers, many plantations and estates have made it a condition in writing that they will not cooperate with the union unless the Industrial Conciliation Act is amended, our members are penalized for being left outside of protective legislation; they have no means to voice their grievances; there is no institutional apparatus to work through which we can secure them protection (APWU quoted in Clarke, 1977).

In the post-independence period, there was a slight amelioration of their social position and an improvement in their legal status. However, certain features of the paternalist labour regime have remained together with loopholes in the post-colonial labour legislation. The contests between the agricultural and plantation union now called (GAWPUZ) and capitalist employers in agriculture have continued unabated.
2.3 Firms, Technology and Labour Composition on Plantations

Plantations share certain similarities in spite of differences in ownership. They are substantial in size or scale of operations with most employing several thousand workers, and a few more than 8,000 workers each. They have had substantial layers of capital sunk in them by way of infrastructure and plant. Some have capital of more than Z$100 million. However, as we observed above, the technology adopted by the plantations, with few exceptions, has not necessarily made the production processes capital intensive. Such processes as weeding, fertilizing, tea plucking, cotton picking and cane cutting have remained predominantly labour-intensive. Mechanization has been possible in field preparation and in herbicide application (in some but not all cases). The manufacture of tea and sugar has of course, been mechanized. The ample supplies of comparatively cheap labour since the 1960s, as we observed above, lessened pressure on the imperative for mechanization. Even the existing levels of mechanization have been accomplished gradually. With the exception of Tanganda, founded in the 1920s, most of the plantations were established in the 1950s and most state-owned farms only after independence. The technological and managerial capacity of the plantations, especially that on private as against state-owned plantations, between the old and newly-established ones vary considerably. This has a direct effect on their productivity and profitability.

Let us now turn our attention to the composition of the labour force on the plantations. There are several outstanding features about the labour force composition in agriculture generally. First, there is a relatively higher participation by female labour in this sector than in others. This reflects both the proximity of the labour to the employers as a consequence of its residence and marital ties with male workers on the plantations. It also relates to the tendency of plantations to draw upon this reservoir of labour during seasonal peaks as contract or seasonal labour. Their rate of participation in tea production is relatively high, in some instances up to 40% of the work-
force. Female workers were mainly concentrated in tea plucking, nursery tending and weeding. These job tasks have largely been viewed as an extension of the tasks they undertake in peasant agriculture. Misleadingly viewed as “lighter” and requiring the “manual dexterity” and patience with the “monotonous humdrum” associated with these tasks, they are believed to be more “suited” to female than to male workers. The social division of labour on plantations has partly been rationalized in these terms. Male workers are also involved in tea pruning and cane cutting, tasks which require heavier physical exertion as well as assorted skills like repair, maintenance and utilization of mechanical equipment. Overall, there exists higher participation by female workers in tea and horticulture production and lower participation in sugar, dairy and poultry production. In poultry production, women are mainly engaged in the vaccination of newly-born chicks, a delicate operation at the best of times.

The second outstanding feature about the labour force in agriculture relates to its comparatively low levels of education. In a previous survey, about 10% of the sampled workers did not possess formal education of any sort while 50% had received primary schooling of several years, with few having completed Grade 7 (Sachikonye, 1991). That 60% of the labour force had either none or very little education adversely affected its capacity to acquire more sophisticated technical skills. Those workers who possessed secondary education and vocational or artisan skills constituted a minority of the labour-force. Broadly speaking, tea and cotton and dairy production did not require large numbers of technically skilled labour as much as the sugar industry did at the stage of the processing of cane into sugar and its various by-products, including livestock feed and ethanol. Still less did horticulture require formal qualifications in weeding and sorting of onions, tomatoes and strawberries.

Reflecting the low base of their education and skills, most of the sampled workers began their working career on plantations as so-called
‘unskilled general labourers’, who performed mainly manual jobs. Approximately a third of the sampled workers had either started as such general labourers or contract or seasonal workers, and some 10% as pluckers. Only about 12% of respondents had joined the plantation labour force already endowed with some skills such as clerical, drilling and welding. The pace of mobility to higher and better-skilled jobs is restricted for those who join as “general labourers”. Just over a third of the sampled respondents were stuck in the same job; these were those engaged in general labour and plucking and cane cutting. There is little scope for mobility in these range of tasks in any case. However, at other levels, there had been niches for mobility within the plantations’ own internal labour market. About 52% of respondents had changed their jobs through internal “upgrading” (see Table 2.4).

There exists a mechanism within plantations to identify workers more amenable to further skills training, hence the interesting cases of mobility within the internal labour market. The qualities which would be decisive in such mobility would include intelligence, diligence and loyalty to the management structure and avoidance of confrontation with it on working conditions. However, the range and number of jobs which necessitate “upgrading” are quite limited on plantation given the low technological intensity we referred to above. There are often too few jobs available for workers deserving such an upward mobility. Furthermore, the wage scales in the sector do not reflect comparable scales in other economic sectors. The low-wage structure in the industry is also reflected in wages paid to “semi-skilled workers” who tend to be the beneficiaries of upgrading within the internal labour market. It is mainly the formally qualified artisans and other skilled workers with related qualifications and skills who bargain and receive comparable salaries and working conditions as in similar grades in other sectors. But they constitute a very small minority of the work force on plantations.
Table 2.4: Examples of Mobility Patterns in Plantation Labour Markets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job at Joining</th>
<th>Job After Upgrading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contract Plucker</td>
<td>Permanent Plucker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Plucker</td>
<td>Permanent Plucker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Labourer</td>
<td>Head Fore-Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaner</td>
<td>Electrician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messenger</td>
<td>Fitter and Turner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contract Worker</td>
<td>Fore-Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officer Junior</td>
<td>Accounts Clerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td>Senior Factory Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprentice</td>
<td>Artisan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanic Assistant</td>
<td>Mechanic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The low skills-base on plantations is partly ameliorated by on-the-job training of an informal nature imparted to unqualified workers. In our sample, more than 85% of workers stated that they had developed their job skills on the plantations themselves. To that extent, plantations play a key role in developing and, in some cases, refining workers' skills in specific jobs even though the opportunities for upward mobility are limited. For instance, some 32% of respondents had acquired machine-operating skills and amongst some of the commonly used machines were drilling and grinding machines, tea and onion-sorting machines, milling and lathing machines, dryers and injectors, compressors and blowers. The machinery employed in tea processing is basic and not too complicated but sugar technology requires more sophisticated sets of skills.

As we observed above, technological change in agriculture is likely to be gradual rather than swift. The plantation as the leading edge of that change will determine the patterns of recruitment and training of a labour force that will need to adjust to that change. Presently, the investment by plantations on skills training of their labour force is still comparatively low, and this affects their overall level of productivity.
At the same time, the depressed wage structure in agriculture does not create incentives to raise levels to increase production and profitability.

An analysis of the composition of the labour force on plantations would not be complete without reference to the participation of student and child workers. On several plantations, student pluckers and coffee and cotton pickers play a key role at the harvesting stages. One major real plantation, students of both sexes are enrolled simultaneously as secondary school pupils as well as wage-labourers. Their secondary education is financed by regular stints of tea plucking; the wages earned also cover board and accommodation expenses. The agility of young tea pluckers is so much prized by the management of that plantation that students have become a permanent stratum of its labour-force. On a more ad hoc basis, those plantations which produce cotton draw upon additional, but nonetheless crucial, labour from child pickers. School pupils are periodically recruited, with the connivance of school authorities, to pick cotton. Similar arrangements are made on coffee plantations. Broadly speaking, therefore, child labour is a notable component on the wage-labour force on plantations, except those which produce sugar, dairy and livestock products. Furthermore, as we have previously observed elsewhere, children of plantation workers are sometimes drawn upon by their parent workers to contribute to their quota or targets or in order to earn incentive bonuses (Sachikonye, 1991). In the next section, we present an overview of labour relations on the plantations with specific reference to the role of management, unions and workers’ committees.

2.4 Labour Relations: Management, Unions and Workers’ Committees

The conditions on plantations prior to independence were generally gloomy as far as working conditions and legislative cover were concerned. The “quasi-feudal” labour relations were reflected in the repression of union activities, as seen above; but they also generated periodic eruptions of resistance from workers, despite repression. At
independence, the new political framework enabled tea, cotton and sugar and poultry workers to strike on a concerted scale for better working conditions. Both plantations in the private and state sectors became sites of struggles which periodically erupted into strikes. The first major strike wave occurred in 1980 and 1981 when plantation workers pressed for an improved wage structure. Strikes were organised at Tanganda, Triangle, and ADA Chisumbanje and at Crest Breeders. One outcome of these industrial upheavals was the promulgation of legislation by the post-independence state to guarantee a minimum wage as well as employment security for agricultural workers. These concessions by the state and plantations provided a breathing space for stable labour relations in the sector until the next phase of industrial action in 1985.

The labour relations crisis on the plantation in 1985 was sparked by the introduction of differential pay scales for plantation ‘field operatives’ and ‘agro-industrial workers’ engaged in processing rather than cropping activities. The refusal of employers to pay plantation operatives the new minimum wage directly led to strikes on tea plantations at Eastern Highlands Teas Estates and at Aberfoyle. The Crest Breeders Poultry Estate was also affected. According to the July 1985 wage guidelines, agro-industrial workers were entitled to a minimum wage of Z$143 per month. Workers engaged in purely agricultural tasks interpreted the new wage guideline as applying to them as well. It was therefore when plantations insisted that the new minimum wage was only payable to workers engaged in various aspects of processing that the workers felt piqued by the discriminatory scales. Quite spontaneously, the workers denied the stipulated minimum organized stoppages. However, the labour relations crisis was not entirely due to a wage dispute. The induced differentiation between the workers on the basis of different labour processes that they were engaged in was at the heart of the dispute. As we observed above, some of the plantation labour possessed reasonably high levels of skill and experience, and therefore commanded enhanced bargaining power with respect to salaries and benefits. But the attempt
to divide crudely the working class in the plantation sector on the basis of their participation in specific labour processes was therefore bound to encounter resistance, which it did.

Finally, other incidents of industrial action occurred in the 1988-90 period at several plantations again over wage conditions. One notable strike at one of the tea plantations in 1988 was that organized by student-workers over the intense supervision regime which entailed arduous conditions of work (Sachikonye, 1991). The student-workers complained of over-work both in the mornings (from 5 a.m. to 12 noon) and during the Sunday compulsory shift. In the ensuing confrontation, some estate property was damaged. It required the mediatory intervention of state labour officials to defuse the crisis. A concession won by the student-workers was an incentive in the form of higher pay awarded to them, especially for work undertaken on Sundays. This strike demonstrated that organized industrial action by child-workers is not beyond their reach as a strategy to defend their interests as workers. Furthermore, it revealed the intense labour regime to which under-privileged children were subjected due to their lack of means to enter the conventional school system. Much more recently, the deregulation under ESAP of labour legislation which provided some modicum of employment has enabled plantations to take more draconian measures. One notable example was the expulsion of 4,000 workers from Triangle estate in 1993.

However, it would be misleading to give the impression that industrial action is the distinctive feature of labour relations on plantations. In any case, most such stoppages tend to last a few days at most, and tend to be spontaneous rather than coherently organized. In an earlier survey, several aspects of the plantation labour regime stood out. First, the sampled respondents did not express radical opinions about the structure and content of the supervision structure on the plantations. About 52% of respondents believed the supervision structure (as based in ascending order on charge-hands, supervisors, fore-persons, section managers and then the personnel manager) was a generally “fair” and
"effective" set up. Second and significantly, almost one-fifth of respondents referred to imperfections in the supervision system; citing such problems as lack of supervision skills within some in the supervision hierarchy and nepotistic tendencies (in terms of recruitment and promotion of workers) amongst others.

Other observations by respondents related to the "too bureaucratic" nature of supervision and to inherent racism evidenced by allocation of additional benefits to white supervisors. Furthermore, the work targets set for workers were regarded as "unfair" and "communication" between management and workers described as "poor". Third, a majority (67%) of respondents thought that the individual fore-persons and managers under whom they worked were "alright" and "good" in their supervisory role and therefore had "no complaints". The remainder (33%) of the respondents had different experiences with these individual supervisory personnel whom they termed "demanding" and "bad", and their communications with workers as "defective". On the whole, however, there was an implicit acceptance of the present structure of supervision and the specific role of personnel at different levels of this hierarchy. The absence of a fundamental questioning of the management system on plantations implies an acceptance, or at least tolerance, of the pervasive authoritarian and paternalist social relations on the plantations. Dependence on plantation management for accommodation, health, recreation and education (for children) reinforces this unique form of social relations of subordination.

On the shop-floor itself, greater emphasis was placed on "punctuality" and "safety awareness" and "sobriety". This would reflect problems amongst workers regarding an informal "go-slow" posture and occupational health risks especially for those workers who apply agrochemicals and other hazardous substances. Concern with "sobriety" amongst workers would relate to limited opportunities for workers to afford and engage in recreation and sport instead of regular patronage of "beer halls". With respect to job-tasks, most plantations
set targets for their workers. Examples included 75Kg of leaf per day for tea-pluckers, 5 tonnes of cane for sugar-cutters and specific numbers of rows of cotton or vegetable fields to weed. Nearly 60% of sampled workers were required to meet the targets else they received “warnings”, “disciplinary action” or “reductions” of bonus. In other instances, workers were required to work overtime in order to fulfill the targets; and yet in others, workers had to provide reasons for inability to fulfill the targets. This is the broad context in which individual workers who need to meet targets in a specified time resort to family labour (including wives and children). The intensification of the work process necessitates the exploitation of family labour in this respect. This is a distinctive feature of the general labour process in agriculture.

Let us now shift our attention specifically to the relations between plantation management and the union and workers' committees on the plantations. From field interviews with representatives of workers' committees, it appeared that there existed regular communication between them and management. In spite of the occasional upheavals in the form of work stoppages, referred to above, relations between the two seemed tolerable. Most workers' committees (WCs) met with management on a monthly basis except when emergency situations arose. The two sides also met under the auspices of the works council, in which they were equally represented in terms of numbers. Until the formation of an Employment Council for agriculture in 1992, the WCs discussed with management a broad range of issues including general working conditions and the grading of workers, issues pertaining to bonuses and overtime. In addition, the social conditions on the plantations inevitably featured regularly on the agenda. These included the quality of health and school facilities as well as recreational matters like the funding of sport and organizing of dances such as 'tribal dances'. Until the Employment Council was established, the WCs also took up grievances pertaining to scarcity of protective clothing and the intensity of task or piece-work for both contract and permanent workers.
Management found the WCs a useful channel to motivate and exhort workers to work harder. The WCs were co-opted in the organizing of the "best worker of the month" or "of the year" competitions to set up role models for the entire work force. Management urged the WCs to "remove obstacles to productivity" and to interpret statutory regulations and work time-tables to workers. Furthermore, the WCs were relied upon to persuade workers to work during holidays, if need be and to engage in overtime without pay. This relationship is obviously a hierarchical one and it would be unrealistic to view the two sides as equal partners in the determination of working conditions on plantations. Given the almost "total institution" character of plantations, management with few exceptions exerted considerable leverage over workers' committees. At the same time, however, areas of argumentation included what were perceived as "delaying tactics" by management in the procurement of protective clothing; the undermining of WCs' authority when management contacted workers directly on issues which should be addressed by the WCs, and in situations of direct conflict, the victimization of vocal WC leaders. Thus, in spite of the advantageous position occupied by management, not all WCs are "toothless".

The establishment of an Employment Council in agriculture improved the powers of the trade union in negotiating for standard working conditions. But, prior to this, the Employment Board was a much weaker institution, hence the key role of the WCs as "watch-dogs" over work-place conditions. However, even before the advent of the Employment Council, WCs defined their role as one of supplementing that of the union (GAWPUZ). They periodically consulted the union in resolving work-place problems, and defined the union's role as one of "educating new member of WCs", conducting workers' education and research programmes, explaining statutory laws and economic conditions to workers, grievance handling and collective bargaining. WCs believed that the union was better placed to execute these functions although a few of the WC respondents acknowledged that there had been duplication in certain areas such as grievance handling.
On the whole, however, there were neither overt nor covert conflicts between the WCs and the union. There appeared to be mutual acceptance of each other’s complimentary role although it would generally suit management to play each of them against the other.

2.5 Occupational Health and Safety Conditions in Agriculture

Plantation agriculture is a sector in which conditions hazardous to occupational health and safety are considerable. As we have already observed in passing, the work processes involve the use of poisonous substances such as agrochemicals, use of machinery and equipment such as cutlasses, all of which can cause long-term and immediate injury. The heavy nature of some of the manual tasks can cause physical harm. The susceptibility of workers to injury and ill-health increases when basic protective clothing is not available. Contract and seasonal workers are more likely to have limited access to protective clothing than permanent workers.

A study conducted in the Mashonal and central province on exposure to agrochemicals established that levels of protective clothing, knowledge of correct practices of pesticide use and of associated hazards were found to be low amongst workers (Bwititi et. al., 1987: 120). The study revealed that on estates:

Organophosphate exposure in the sprayers increased during the course of the spraying season, as shown by a decline in blood cholinesterase activity, particularly between the months of December and February. During the spraying season, an almost two-fold increase occurred in the proportion of workers whose choline - serape activity implied clinical risk (Britui, 1987: 125).

It was further observed that some of the means of the application of the chemicals were antiquated and poorly maintained. For instance, some knapsack sprayers were leaky and therefore increased the exposure rate. Most workers engaged in agrochemical application to tea, coffee, cotton and sugar did not appear to receive regular medical
check-ups; they believed that pesticide exposure was principally a problem arising from lack of protective clothing (Brititi, 1987).

However, the common hazards encountered stemmed from scarce protective clothing such as overalls, boots, goggles and masks in the course of spraying agrochemicals pruning tea and operating factory machinery. In the tea processing factories, conditions could become quite hot and humid.

Some of the sampled representatives of WCs confirmed that protective clothing was inadequate and that management delayed the replacement of worn-out clothing and equipment. Others remarked that although protective clothing was adequate for permanent workers, it was not available to seasonal workers. In addition, there was limited consultation of the WCs by management on occupational health and safety issues. Three out of the seven sampled WCs had not been consulted at all by management. Finally, there were inadequate training facilities for workers in safety awareness.

3. WORK PROCESSES AND FEMALE LABOUR IN AGRIBUSINESS

3.1 Introduction

The work processes in agribusiness are the focus of this chapter. These processes do not depend on "unskilled" labour as is commonly assumed. They certainly demand an arduous application of physical labour, but, in addition require specific handling skills. In this chapter, we discuss the content of these work processes in the production of the perennial crops of tea and coffee, of a variety of horticultural commodities and their processing in factories on the plantations themselves. The discussion will enable us to see the rationale of the division of labour along the basis of gender and set the context for the evaluation of skills composition in chapter 4.
3.2 Content of the Work Process

Most crop production commences in the nurseries where the young plants of tea, coffee, tobacco and vegetables are developed. Nursery tending is a delicate process in that the fragile young plants require much care. Female labour is normally drawn to provide this delicate care in tea and coffee nurseries and in the green houses where strawberry plants and those of other vegetables are initially developed. The planting out of seedlings is an extremely labour-intensive process whose timing is absolutely crucial. In tea planting, for example, meticulous planning is essential to ensure that labour is used efficiently. Fields need to have sufficient soil moisture preferably following a recent fall of rain of at least 2 inches in a reasonably short period of time. Fertilizer, shade, mulch and the seedling plants should be on site at the correct time and in required quantities. Plantations undertake intensive planting with up to 14,000 plants per hectare. Female workers are in great demand at the planting stage. In the smallholder outgrower sector, more than 80 per cent of the growers are estimated to depend on hired casual wage-labour to enable several days’ planting to take place.

Following the planting stage, the major tasks are fertilizing, pruning and picking in tea and coffee production. From field observation, these appeared to be labour-intensive processes in the smallholder outgrower sector as well. The majority of outgrowers necessarily employed casual wage labour to supplement family labour in these three tasks. The newer outgrowers and those with smaller hectarages preferred to use predominantly family labour, including children, to apply fertilizer to tea. The major reason cited for the reliance on family labour was the difficulty in supervising casuals to apply the fertilization of the plants in an economical manner. The tasks of infilling spaces created by dead plants and of weeding are also important in the outgrower’s agricultural calendar. Most plant deaths usually occurred in the first few months of planting. The infilling of the tea or coffee has been described as an intensification of the
management process which contributes to increased crop yields. Weed control measures need to be carried out according to a planned programme worked out well in advance of each season, and the coordinated use of labour is critical. The pruning of tea bushes every second or third year is also of crucial importance. This is a heavier physical task involving the use of machetes and therefore normally restricted to male labour.

Although the basic labour process undertaken on plantation and outgrower tea fields is similar, there are major differences in the scale of operations and quality of labour supervision. The level of co-ordinated planning of all stages in production processes necessarily needed to be more highly developed on a plantation. The larger size of hectarage often required mechanized forms of production. The use of bulldozers and tractors in the cleaning and ploughing of the land required capital investment and a core of semi-skilled and skilled labour. The laying out of nurseries necessarily had to be on a vast scale as each hectare absorbed 14,000 plants.

Similarly, fertilizer and agrochemical inputs require synchronized ordering and timely application. The increased scale of operations during field preparation and fertilization entail mechanized processes. This was demonstrated by the widespread use of planes to apply fertilizer on tea fields. Zinc was also applied by air because it contributed to yield increases of up to 15 per cent; and planes were also now increasingly used for herbicide spraying. In contrast, there was only one instance of an outgrower using the services of such planes. The fertilizing of tea and coffee was critical for increased yields. The recourse to fertilizer application by air not only reduced the amount of time required but also facilitated even application across the fields. However, smaller hectarage of horticultural products such as strawberries, onions and beans did not require aerial fertilizing. Here female labour played a central role in fertilizer application. As in the production of these high-value crops, several other aspects of the
agricultural production process still remain labour-intensive. Pruning and plucking in tea use machetes and hand respectively.

Weeding has not been mechanized and hence many female workers do weeding of coffee, bean, onion, strawberry fields. The application of herbicides is still very limited even in the tea fields. There is a general assumption amongst most management that female workers are faster and more careful workers in weeding. It is a job task which is viewed as an extension of experience developed in weeding of the maize fields in the communal areas. Hoes are the major implement used in weeding. Contrary to conventional thinking amongst most plantation management which asserts that weeding is a light job task, it is made onerous by its common conversion into “piece-work” or “mugwazo”. Management often works out a certain daily target for the predominantly female labour force.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work Process</th>
<th>Minimum Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tea plucking</td>
<td>67 Kg/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeding in coffee fields</td>
<td>100 metres by 5 metres/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeding in bean and sweet corn fields</td>
<td>100 metres by 5 lines/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green leaf (tea) sorting</td>
<td>8 000 Kg per shift group/day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strawberry picking</td>
<td>a block of 20 beds per season</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The daily target varies from plantation to plantation, and from crop to crop. It could cover a portion of 150 metres long by 5 metres in coffee weeding and 10 lines of 100 metres in bean and sweet corn fields. Those who cannot complete the “piece-work” within the normal 9 hour working day are compelled to do so on the following working day.

Most plantation commodities - such as coffee, tea and strawberries - require agrochemical application to eliminate pests. This is a job task which is mainly confined to male workers. It does not only require the wearing of protective clothing but also the carrying of knag-sacks
containing the agrochemicals. Female workers are believed to react more quickly to exposure to these substances and so management has precluded them from this task. However, female workers work in those fields where agrochemicals have been applied and in the process can get contaminated.

In general, it is at the harvesting stages that there tends to be a predominance of female workers. Crop harvesting is a very crucial process because considerable losses can be sustained if it is slow or unco-ordinated. This is the case with most commodities ranging from tea to strawberries, from coffee to beans. Typically, the harvesting season often represents the peak period in a crop's cycle. In tea, for example, the height of the harvesting (known as plucking) season is the middle summer months, namely December, January and February.

On plantations, pluckers are required to pick a daily minimum of 67 kilograms of green leaf (GL) tea. Repeated failure to reach this target attracts verbal warnings from management. Previously, the daily target was tagged at 45 Kg. It was more than coincidental that the target had been increased when statutory wages for agro-industrial workers (including tea workers) were increased in the late 1980s. The increased productivity targets were clearly aimed at absorbing the considerable wage increases which ranged to nearly 40 per cent. This forced some pluckers to enlist relatives and children to contribute (during school holidays) to their plucking in order to reach the 67 Kg per day target. During the off-season dry months, it was even more onerous to reach the target. The introduction of “scheme plucking”, otherwise known as the “block system”, was a control measure to monitor the productivity and plucking standards of the plucker. Scheme plucking basically refers to assigning a demarcated portion of the tea plantation which is termed “a box” or “block” from which the worker plucked his or her tea on a continuous basis. Instances of bad plucking, if they occurred, were detected in this manner. The economic significance which plantations attached to regular plucking
cannot be overemphasized. Most plantations required workers to pluck the same bushes every 10 days, or alternatively every 14 days.

At the peak of the plucking season, plantations face a shortage of labour unless they recruit more female workers as contract workers. New pluckers often acquire the necessary plucking skills after a fortnight’s training. The contract workers are then paid on the basis of amount of the tea they pluck and the rate in mid-1994 was 15 cents per Kg. On most plantations, it often becomes necessary to hire more labour from outside, from neighbouring communal areas which may be 20 to 30 kilometres away. Plantation transport is often used to transport the female workers and juveniles during early morning and back to the villages in the evenings. This drawing on labour from villages engaged mainly in subsistence agriculture was also practised by plantations specializing in horticulture. The practice underlined the inability of plantations to ensure adequate labour supplies for year-round production, including for the seasonal peaks.

In strawberry picking, a system similar to “scheme plucking” was in use. Plantations relied predominantly on female workers because they were assumed to be more productive and careful than male workers. Just like tea plucking which requires a delicate extracting of the shooting bud and two tender leaves, so ripe strawberries need careful harvesting without severing them from the plant’s stem. On one of the surveyed plantations, only females constituted the entire labour force involved in strawberry harvesting. This was more or less replicated in the harvesting of pumpkins. Further, most labour engaged in coffee picking was also predominantly female. The conventional stereotype of female workers as more suited for delicate tasks which required much care was an article of faith amongst the supervisors and fore-persons who tended to be mainly male. However, this stereotype is not borne out by the evidence in plucking. Male workers can be efficient pluckers as well and can surpass the output of female workers. Indeed, the majority of interviewed workers stated that neither male nor female workers had demonstrated more superior
qualities than the other in the plucking. Owing to the segregation of labour tasks in strawberry picking, it was not possible to subject the conventional stereotype to the test of workers' real experience.

In those job tasks which require delicate handling, there is less insistence on daily targets in view of the losses that could accrue as workers struggled to meet these. In strawberry picking, a worker is assigned a block consisting of 20 beds per each picking season. In onion harvesting, groups of female workers are allocated several beds per day at a time to harvest and deliver the onions to the processing factory. However, in coffee picking and sorting, workers are expected to reach certain targets. Coffee sorters are required to reach about 6 kg per day.

The next major work process involves the processing of the harvested commodities. The capacity of plantations to engage in this production process is what makes them earn the sobriquet "factories in the fields", an indication of the emerging industrialization of agriculture in the Zimbabwean setting. The factories engage in the processing and packing of tea, onion salads, bean and pea products and strawberries. Modern plants consisting of tea processing equipment and refrigeration equipment for horticultural products exist as extensions of the production chain on the plantations.

Factory labour is largely composed of males in tea processing and of females in vegetable processing. The few job tasks that female workers carry out in tea processing are chiefly those in the intake section (where some sorting of the delivered green leaf is conducted) and in the packing section. The confinement of female workers to these sections has been explained in terms of their manual dexterity. In a few instances, female quality controllers monitor the processed tea. The rupturing, fermenting and drying processes are attended to mainly by male workers. In vegetable processing, however, the machinery is not complicated nor expensive but it has been arranged to facilitate an assembly-type flow of commodities and work. Much of the work
involves the grading of products such as carrots and beans, slicing beans, packing salad onions, sealing and labeling the packages before dispatch or export. Female workers are believed to be specially suited to this range of tasks in vegetable processing as these are viewed by management as an extension of the domestic tasks of women. Most quality control work is also carried out by women. Some of this "conventional wisdom" is encapsulated in such observations as "women are faster in grading", "better at slicing, wrapping and sealing" and "quality control is a job done better by females". This preoccupation with an efficient utilization of female labour was underscored at one of the plantations which drew over 80 per cent of its labour force in vegetable processing from female workers.

Like in most other job tasks, there is also an element of 'piece-work' at the processing stage. This may not be as pronounced due to the mechanization of some stages in the processing itself. Nevertheless, female workers engaged in the GL intake section need to synchronize their operations with those of their entire plant. They can not afford to be slow in ensuring that there is adequate GL for processing, which is undertaken 245 hours a day during the peak of the tea season. This requires that up to 8,000 kg of GL be "sorted" by the female workers per working day; and that a specific number of cartons are filled with vegetable products by the end of the day-time shift. In other instance, there are incentives for the fastest workers (often the first 3 to complete a particular job task), these centre on allowing them "to clock" earlier than other. In that way, they also force the pace of work amongst the slower workers.

3.3 Attitudes towards the Gender Division of Labour

As we have already observed, management on plantations has defined particular job tasks or processes as "male" or "female". This allocation of jobs on the basis of gender is justified on the practical experience and accumulated "wisdom" or "common-sense" which plantation supervisions and fore-persons have amassed over the years. However,
as we also observed, there is no scientific basis for the allocation of jobs on the basis of gender, that is, male and female workers have performed similar jobs (such as tea plucking and coffee picking) equally competently. The decisive factor in such instances has related to individual rather than gender-specific qualities, such individual qualities as physical fitness, intelligence and patience.

Nevertheless, we need to outline the specific forms in which management has allocated jobs according to gender. At the horticulture plantation which we surveyed, there is a clear structure of gender-based allocation of jobs and hierarchy of skills. The jobs which were defined as "predominantly male" jobs were in the intake and dispatch sections where greater muscular energy was required in lifting heavy packages. Other "male jobs" included the operating of fork lifts which alleviated the incidence of depending on muscular energy in carrying heavy objects from one section of the processing plant to another. Males were also assigned the task of "waiting", a euphemism for delivering products to female workers for sorting and grading. The role of these male workers has not yet been superseded by mechanical means such as the conveyor belt which is in use already in other sections of the plant. The making of wooden and paper containers for packing the processed commodities is also undertaken mainly by male workers. Finally, the supervision of the women allocated "predominantly female" jobs is also done mainly by males. This is quite significant in view of the fact that over 80 per cent of the workers at that horticulture plant are female. There are very few, if any, male workers engaged in "predominantly female" jobs which, as we saw above, are mainly in washing, grading and slicing vegetables, managing quality control, labeling and sealing containers of the commodities.

On the tea and coffee plantations surveyed, jobs defined as "male" jobs include those which require muscular exertion such as stumping, slashing, pruning and packing of tea and coffee containers. In addition, the application of agrochemicals, as we saw above, is mainly a task
carried out by males. The operating of machine equipment in the tea processing and coffee-processing plants is also a male prerogative. Even jobs such as driving have been defined as "predominantly male" jobs. Male workers are mostly the only group of workers drawn up for shift work, especially overnight shifts. Women workers have rarely been assigned shift work. Finally, irrigation work involving the use of water pipes and sprinklers has also been allocated mainly to male workers.

Female jobs on the tea and coffee plantations have already been referred to in the preceding section. They included weeding and plucking but also collection of firewood for boilers, laundry of workers' uniforms and, during off-season, grass-cutting. Female workers were also believed to be more adept at picking macadamia nuts, sieving coffee beans and grinding of commodities. The few typing jobs and receptionist positions that were available were also designated "women's work". Finally, baby tending where day-care centres existed and health care were another domain of women.

What do female workers think about this gender division of labour though? Some 72% of female workers sampled on tea and coffee plantations believed that each of the two sexes had special but different qualities and this provided the basis of gendered division of labour. Some of comments made by female workers were:

"males are better at packing and operating machines, and at other heavy tasks ... we cannot surpass males at work because our ribs are different ... men are better at tobacco planting and spraying with agrochemicals" (Interviews with female workers, October - December 1993).

Women workers interviewed at the same period also present some observations on the special or intrinsic qualities of their fellow worker:

"women's hands are "clever" at picking vegetables and coffee... their hands are more nimble ... women are more efficient at receiving and sorting green leaf because it involves a lot of bending which males find
difficult...women are used to picking corn...females are better at typing than males who perhaps do not like the job..." (Interview, October-December 1993)

Approximately 74% of sampled female workers at a horticulture plantation believed that females had different aptitude at certain types of work compared to male workers. As they observed:

"women are faster at grading, slicing, wrapping and sealing...Quality control is a job done better by females...males are not keen to engage in grading or sorting work...males also cannot seem to distinguish colours such as red, green or yellow when grading" (Interview, October-December 1993)

Table 3.2 Gender Division of Labour: Jobs Viewed as Predominantly 'Male' Jobs

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Stumping of new fields for planting tea and coffee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Application of Agrochemicals to crops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pruning of Tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tobacco planting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Irrigation work (tending to pipes and sprinklers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Heavy tasks especially packing and carrying tea/vegetable containers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Making containers such as card-boxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Construction work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Refrigeration work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Maintenance work on horticulture fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Tending of green-houses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>&quot;Waiting&quot;: delivering products for grading in processing plant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Driving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Carpentry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Factory work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Supervising</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Interviews, 1994
Table 3.3  Gender Division of Labour: Jobs Viewed as Predominantly ‘Female’ Jobs

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Strawberry harvesting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sweet corn, coffee and macadamia nut picking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tea and coffee sorting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Vegetable picking and preparation (e.g. onion washing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Vegetable grading and packing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Coffee planting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Weeding and grass-cutting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Nursery tending (tea, coffee and vegetable nurseries)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Fertilizer application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Labeling and sealing of vegetable containers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Quality control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Laundry work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Interviews, 1994

Table 3.4: Views on the Gender Division of Labour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Those who stated that male and female have different and special qualities</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those who did not think the male and female workers have each special qualities</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those who do not know whether male and female workers have special qualities</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Interviews, 1994

Most female workers were also candid about the job tasks which they believed males performed better. As we have observed, males were seen as better performers in jobs which required a great deal of muscular energy. Other tasks at which they were believed to perform better than females were in supervising the work gangs, at slicing corn and at shelling peas.

However, when it come to specifics, some women did not think that male workers were necessarily better all-round workers. As we have seen above, male performance in certain tasks was lack-lustre. But even their better performance in certain jobs was disputed by some
sampled female workers. Some of the comments made by these female workers were that,

"women can equally do supervision work ... except in pruning, women have the same qualities as men ... a female is able to do the same work as any male if they both have been provided with the same education and training ... although males have the voice, they are less objective as supervisors because they lack interest in the quality of grading work." (Field interview, 1994)

Thus, although a considerable proportion of sampled female workers drew from their practical experience and "common sense" to explain the present division of labour between the sexes, they were critical of the rationals of the basis of that division. From empirical evidence, they pointed out convincingly that some male workers were equally good if not faster tea pluckers than women. The observations regarding the nimbleness of women's fingers were challenged by the evidence that male's fingers in picking tea and coffee were equally dexterous. Supervisory skills were not in-born as some of the sampled female workers observed. In machine-related work, training opportunities would make female workers equally competent.

In sum, it emerges that plantation management has constructed a gender division of labour on the supposedly natural traits and physical attributes of their male and female workers. This division often assumes the form of segregated working places although this is difficult to manage in such tasks as plucking and weeding. The division of labour is interpreted by most female workers as confirming to the conventional wisdom that the two sexes have each special and different qualities which translate into differences in performance and output. However, the experience and empirical evidence suggest that there are no intrinsic qualities confined to one or other of the sexes except where individual qualities are determinant. The mystification of the special qualities is demolished when and where male workers do well in female jobs and vice versa.
4. COMPOSITION OF SKILLS, MOBILITY AND FEMALE WORKERS IN AGRIBUSINESS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter assesses the distribution of skills within the female labour force and patterns of its upward mobility. As we have already observed, the level of mechanization of production processes in agribusiness is not as high as in manufacturing proper. Although plantations have a comparatively higher capacity than individual producers to invest in machinery and processing plants, there are still significant areas of production which have not been mechanized. The present levels of labour costs are generally low and so there was little pressure to invest in mechanization. As we saw in section 2, the level of education amongst plantation workers are generally low; some of the sampled female workers were those who were illiterate. The low level of education affects the capacity of these female workers to acquire more sophisticated technical skills. In turn this places a constraint on their upward mobility within the plantation labour market.

4.2 Recruitment of Female Workers

In contrast to the widely-held view that most female workers on plantations are either spouses of male workers or part of male-headed households on those plantations, our survey suggests that a considerable proportion of them are recruited in their own right. Such women are drawn from an increasing number who seek financial and other material means for their won self-sustenance. Their social circumstances compel them to seek work on plantations in thousands. Those women who by virtue of their marital relationship to male workers are resident on plantations also enter into employment but are not main source of female force on plantations.
On tea and coffee plantations, a considerable proportion of female workers were drawn from adjacent communal areas which historically have straddled the border with Mozambique. So crucial has this source of labour supply been that the recent developments in Mozambique (which have created conditions of stability and peace) have contributed to an exodus of Mozambican plantation workers back to their country, resulting in a major shortage of labour faced in 1994. It is uncertain whether this labour shortage (of up to 10,000 jobs) will be temporary or permanent.

Comparatively speaking, however, the proportion of married female workers on tea and coffee plantations is much higher than that of those in horticulture. Some 58 per cent of the sampled female workers on these plantations were married compared to 42 per cent who were either single or divorced. This may be set against the 81 per cent of those single or divorced women workers at the horticulture plantation surveyed, and 77 per cent in the processing plant studied. The marital status of female workers is significant in the light it throws on the social factors which compel an increasing number of these workers to seek wage employment. Those who are divorced seek an independent source of income to support themselves and their children. The decision to seek wage employment, in this context, is not so much a choice as a compelling necessity. Those who are single and still unmarried also seek an independent means of income.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single/Divorced</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field interview, 1994
Table 4.2 Marital status of Female Workers on Horticulture Plantations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single/Divorced</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field interview, 1994

The plantation consciously seek these young women because they have those "special qualities" they seek in vegetable farming and processing. At the horticultural plant surveyed, it appeared to be a deliberate management policy to recruit mainly young women (preferably unmarried ones) for the washing, grading, slicing and packing of products mainly for export abroad. Of course, it is necessary to probe further the sociological context in which these women workers are compelled to seek work and how this relates to their relationships with males, and their prospects for re-marrying. We could not undertake this within the scope of this project.

Table 4.3: Age Structure of Sampled Female Workers on Coffee/Tea Plantations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-20 years</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30 years</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40 years</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50 years</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 and above</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.4: Age Structure of Sampled Female Workers on Horticulture Plantations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-20 years</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30 years</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40 years</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50 years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is also useful here to make a few observations regarding the age groups from which female workers are largely drawn. On the tea and
coffee plantations, the bulk of female workers are in the prime age of between 21 and 40 years. Approximately 80 per cent of sampled workers belonged to this age range while nearly 12 per cent were in the 15-20 year age group. This should be compared with those at the horticultural processing plant who constituted 88 per cent of those in the 21-40 year age group. It would not be a coincidence that the plantations' recruitment policy is geared towards young women at the height of their physically productive age, and preferably who are single to minimise the possibilities of family commitments which may result in absenteeism and erratic participation in the labour force. For women, especially those recently divorced, paid employment is one of the few options available to them to lead an independent existence and to support their children.

4.3 Skills Distribution and Job Allocation

The production structure on plantations does not presently depend on (in the formal sense) a highly-skilled work force, as we saw above. The range of jobs designated as "skilled" is therefore quite narrow. This is reflected, for example, in the present grading structure of the employment regulations of the National Employment Council of the Agricultural Industry. For those workers employed in field tasks, there exist five grades which are remunerated differently but the narrow differentials between general workers (in Grade 1 and received Z$185,000 in 1993) and the drivers and senior fore-persons (Grade 5 and received Z$234,000 in 1993) demonstrate the low-wage structure of the industry), as we observed in chapter 2. The differential between the lowest and highest paid worker amongst plantation field workers is a mere Z$50 per month. This is very narrow even after account is taken of benefits that accrue to permanent workers and supervisory grade workers. It implies that the more sophisticated set of skills (based on experience obtained over several years) which such categories of workers as charge-hands and supervisors, maintenance and workshop attendance operatives (in Grade 3) drivers and clerks in (Grade 4) are not realistically rewarded in comparison to workers in
other sectors of the economy. As we have observed elsewhere, with a few exceptions even relatively skilled workers in agribusiness have been pushed into wage grades normally reserved for unskilled workers in the manufacturing sector (Sachikonye, 1995). The wage-structure in the processing sub-sector of agribusiness is not much better. The highest paid workers in Grades 6 and 7 (who included the head clerks, factory supervisions and maintenance operatives) earned Z$245 and Z$213 per month respectively. Additional allowances paid to agribusiness workers started at about Z$20 per month, and like wages, the differentials between the lowest and highest paid workers are quite narrow. However, as we will observe below, certain workers are not placed within the existing grades but outside these where they command relatively large benefits.

How then are skills distributed amongst the female labour force? Most female workers are placed in the lowest job category, namely that of "general workers". The general worker category includes pluckers, coffee pickers, packers and graders or sorters. Approximately, 89 percent of the sampled female workers on the 3 plantations producing tea, coffee and horticultural products were classified as general workers. We have already argued in an earlier chapter how demanding of certain aptitude the various types of job tasks could be. The approach of plantation management tends to be one that is dismissive of the considerable value of such aptitude and skills because they are not "formally recognized" skills as such. There has been no independent job evaluation of the various tasks performed by "general workers" but it is quite clear that some of them (such as tea and strawberry picking) are crucial tasks in determining the quality of the commodities for the market-place. It was a recognition of the unsystematic approach to the valuation of workers' skills that in 1994 an exercise of job evaluation was instituted by the national employment council for the agricultural industry.

Meanwhile, those few skilled jobs that have been filled by female workers representing 11 per cent of the sample are those in quality
control, computer operating, clerical work and supervision. The additional area of skilled work is in the managerial grade into which several female workers have been recruited into. The work which involves quality control pertains to the evaluation of the processed tea to ensure the consistency of grade and tastes. Those workers who operate computers are mainly engaged in basic and routine recording of wages and stocks on the plantations. Such computerization as has occurred on plantations relates to statistical records concerning distribution of workers, labour turn over, stock taking and the pay roll and not to more sophisticated operations concerning research and development (R and D). However, the use of computers has not eliminated clerical skills which are still used by weighing clerks for example. On the whole, however, female workers tend to predominate as typists using both type-writers and word processors. Women supervisors or forepersons are a smaller proportion (less than 10 per cent) compared to males in similar positions. There tends to be a general attitude that female supervisors are not as effective as male supervisors as the following comments suggest:

"If we were under a female supervisor, we would slacken because we would think that we were all the same... males tend to be abler at supervising than females: female workers take longer to obey a female superior" (Interviews, 1994).

With such attitudes, it certainly can be practically awkward for female supervisors to manage work gangs consisting largely of male workers. To avoid such situations, management assigns female supervisor to those work processes where women workers are in the majority (such as in plucking and vegetable processing).

The overall picture which emerges suggests that most female workers find themselves mainly in "dead end" jobs in which no promotion prospects exist. However, those few sampled female workers who now held skilled jobs and started as general workers. There were cases of those who began as graders eventually becoming computer
operators, forepersons, and quality controllers. In other words, only in exceptional cases were female workers slotted into skilled jobs on recruitment. This was unlike males, some of whom were recruited into supervisory positions right from the start.

The scope for mobility within the plantation labour market is therefore very limited. Those workers who get "promoted" from tea or vegetable picking into "grading" or clerical work do not get awarded much better working conditions in reality; we saw too that the salary increments they would receive are quite marginal. The flattening out of the graded job structure and wage levels do not work out as advantages to workers. More ambitious and resourceful workers are more likely to better remunerated and prestigious positions elsewhere other than on the plantations.

Of course, any significant change in wage conditions would need to be related to productivity levels on the plantations. The general impression which one received was that currently productivity was not a major problem. However, as we saw in the case of the significant wage awards of 1985, management then sought to link them to a tighter work regime such as the considerable raise in daily work targets for individual workers. The issue of productivity itself is related to education levels, training and opportunities for on-the-job skills training. None of the surveyed plantations had attended any formal skills-training programmes. What occurred were ad hoc arrangements in which a few selected female workers received training as receptionists and filing clerks. Even fewer had acquired hands-on training to become quality controllers and computer operators. The level of education of the female workers is obviously an important factor in any consideration of skills training. As we observed in Chapter 2, about 10 percent of sampled workers in a previous survey had not received any formal education, while 50 per cent had obtained a few years of primary school education. There does not appear to be much interest on the part of the plantation management to recruit from better-educated work seekers or to raise the levels of education or
applied skills training amongst the existing work force. In one exceptional case, some plantations intended to establish an adult education course. The prospect for improved utilization of workers' existing and potential skills and, therefore, productivity hinge upon education and skills-training courses conducted on a systematic basis. The calculation that a low-wage structure sustaining a low skills base will continue to ensure the profitability of the plantations is a complacently short-sighted one. Some of the confirmation of the short-sightedness exist in the significant labour shortage that now grips some of the plantations in the aftermath of the return of thousands of Mozambican refugee workers.

4.4 The work Regime on the Plantations

There exists considerable pressure on female workers, especially those in 'general worker' category, to accomplish work targets. The target system is fairly widespread on the plantations. The target can be in the form of stipulated weight of tea to be plucked per working day, presently at 67 kg as observed in the previous chapter. It could be a defined plot which must be cleared of weeds. In the processing plants, the target could be a stipulated number of cartons or certain tonnage of the commodities in question. The regulations of agricultural employment council support such a work-target system. They define it as "task work" which translates as *mugwazo* in shona and spell out that,

"it shall be permissible to give out work to all employees on a task-work basis. An employee employed on a task-work basis may, with the consent of his employer, complete work over and above his basic task, for which he shall receive an incentive bonus" (Statutory Instrument 323 of 1993).

The object of much of the task-work is to ensure the speeding up of the work process itself and that each worker should accomplish a required portion of work. However, it is a system of work-allocation
and supervision which can be open to abuse, or at least work to the
disadvantage of the worker. For example, plucking targets can
reasonably be achieved only at peak season when the tea is flushing and
in a good state, and this presumes that the rains would be adequate.
This was not the case in the 1993-94 season.

One area of conflict in work-place labour relations concern the terms
of the task-work itself. A compromise has been to relate the amount
of task work to the seasonal availability of the commodities to be
harvested or processed. Thus the tea plucking target drops from 67 kg
at peak season to 40 kg at low season.

The fluctuations in the amount of task-work tend to prejudice the
earnings of contract workers more than those of permanent workers.
Whereas most contract workers are paid according to output,
permanent workers received a fixed daily wage. This means that some
contract workers receive well below the current minimum of
assistance from relatives tend to earn above this. The task work
system appears less successful where work-teams are assigned a
particular task. In one of the processing plants, the incentive for
workers who completed their task-work faster than others was early
"knocking off" during day. As it often turned out, only the fastest
three workers are singled out as "model workers" to set an example for
the rest of the factory work-force. The task-work system has its
obvious weaknesses, both when materials to be processed are few and
when orders have to be accomplished within a given time.

Those workers who are unable to accomplish set targets receive below
the minimum wage; and if they are permanent workers, they receive a
warning and are required to explain their performance anyhow. On
the whole, the task work system confers management with
considerable powers to dispense penalties. In some instances, female
workers indicated that failure to meet targets resulted in half-tickets
(which do not amount to a full day's rate of pay) or requirement to
complete the targets the following day. Under conditions of structural
adjustment, there has been a considerable tightening of the work regime. The ruling that employers should not require workers to work on "a ticket system" has certainly not been universally observed. The task-work system in practice is little different from the ticket system. Those few incentive schemes which conferred production bonuses were not a major feature on the plantations surveyed largely because even fewer workers could produce much more beyond the basic targets set.

Finally, we should not overlook the disadvantaged position which most female workers face as the majority of contract workers. As we observed in a previous chapter, this stratum has fewer rights and benefits than permanent workers, the larger proportion of whom are male. At the two tea and coffee plantations surveyed, female permanent workers only constituted 15.5 per cent of total work-force of over 3,000 workers. Similarly at the horticultural plantation, almost all (or 100 per cent) the sampled female workers were employed on a contract basis. Of course, most of the so called contract workers would have worked for several years on the plantation.

Table 4.5: Distribution of Sampled Permanent and Contract Workers on Tea/Coffee Plantations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contract Workers</td>
<td>84.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent Workers</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Interviews, 1994

Table 4.6: Distribution of Sampled Permanent and Contract Workers on Horticulture Plantations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contract Workers</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent Workers</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Interviews, 1994

One plantation puts such workers on eight months' contracts, lays them off for 1 month, and recruits them again on 8-months contracts.
This allows them to operate within the legal limits of the regulation on seasonal workers which stipulates that:

if a seasonal worker is employed for more than eight months in an period of twelve months, he/she shall be regarded as a permanent worker from the time when the eight months are exceeded (Statutory Instrument of 323, 1993).

This denies the contract workers the benefits (such as sick benefits, protective clothing, maternity leave and gratuities) which permanent workers are entitled to. The contract-work system is, therefore, open to abuse, even though the amount of work on plantations varies according to season. The observation here is that a substantial number of contract workers should have been accorded a permanent-worker status is employers adhered not only to the letter but also the spirit of the relevant labour legislation. Of longer-term significance is that there is no conscious attempt to ensure the stabilization of this important segment of the agricultural proletariat. Its skills are not fully recognized nor rewarded accordingly. Contract workers are excluded from those few on-the-job training schemes and other skills programmes. They also are not encouraged full participation in workers’ committees and union activities. Here, there is a wastage of human resources. The relative cheapness of contract labour, which is predominantly female labour, represents a short-term advantage to agribusiness capital but is also a major structural weakness of the sector in terms of long-term skills build-up and productivity. In the next chapter, we pursue our discussion of the difficult conditions under which female workers labour, when we examine the environment of occupational health and safety.
5. OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS ON PLANTATIONS

5.1 Introduction

In chapter 4, we examined the labour regime and concluded it was becoming tighter, particularly under conditions of de-regulation in the context of adjustment. We also observed how the bifurcation of the labour force into (a) permanent and (b) contract workers was not to the material advantage of the latter, in which most female workers were concentrated. In this chapter, we assess the social conditions under which female workers utilize their labour; we focus on their occupational health and safety and on the reward system (consisting of wages and related benefits).

5.2 Major Issues in Occupational Health and Safety

Agribusiness is a sector in which conditions that can be hazardous to safety and health exist as a consequence of both the outdoor location of most work tasks and use of machinery in processing plants. The significant reliance on agrochemicals in crop production to eliminate pests and weeds provides another source of hazards due to exposure to contamination.

We observed that in the tea and coffee plantations several hazards are encountered by workers. The first common source of injury was that from cuts on feet and hands while picking tea and coffee. Those tea bushes which would have been pruned the previous season would often have sharp edges which are disguised by their flat-topped appearance and leaf. Some female workers sustained swollen fingers from the cuts and from prolonged picking. Wounds or blisters on unprotected legs were sometimes caused by cuts as well as by crawling insects known as "zvichisa". Wet conditions during picking exacerbated some of these hazards when rain-related pimples and sores result. Malaria on several plantations was associated with working
under these arduous conditions. Horticultural field workers complained of cuts from wires which they set up in the bean field to support the plants. Others experienced fatigue and bodily pain from the constant carrying of barrels of harvested onion, and colds from regular use of large amounts of water for washing the onions. Still other workers cited bee stings as a constant distraction because man-made bee-hives had been set up in the strawberry fields. Since crops which female workers handled either during harvesting or processing and the fields which they weeded would have often been treated with fertilizer and agrochemicals, naked contact with these affected their health. Diarrhoea and headaches were cited as some of the symptoms of exposure to agrochemical residues.

The second set of hazards were encountered in the processing plants while operating machines. Although much of the machinery in the plants was basic, those such as conveyor belts, wrapping and sealing machines and driers could cause injury if improperly operated. There were reported instances in which up to 5 female workers had been injured by moving conveyor belts and fork lifts. In some instances, worn clothes could be caught by the rotating belt and drag the worker in the process. One woman was reported maimed in this way. Reports were made of workers being injured by tea wagons or containers as they rolled them onto the conveyor belt; others referred to a worker having three fingers lopped off by a machine. Other sources of occupational injuries in the processing plants were those from rails and buckets in the green leaf intake section and from the tea fermenting machines. Two widely-cited cases involved a worker whose leg was amputated after being entangled in a through and two female workers injured while cleaning "rings" on one of the machines. Finally, the regular use of sharp knives in slicing vegetables in the process plant was another source of injuries especially to fingers.

The third set of health problems relates to exposure to material which affects eye-sight or the physical body as a whole. Female workers cited eye-sight difficulties as a consequence of using the computer. Eye
problems were experienced by women involved in the processing of salad onions. After a full day's work in the processing plant, some female workers stated that they developed painful "yellow eyes". During one's first few months in the plant, eyes tended to be tearful most of the time working. Other female workers pointed to bodily pain that was caused by prolonged standing in gumboots while working on materials being incessantly churned by the conveyor belt. Heavy tea baskets strapped around shoulders were another cause of such pain. Excessive dust, especially tea dust was inhaled in the tea-sorting section leading to health complaints.

Finally, while both male and female workers are equally prone to the occupational hazards cited above, there are specific ones that the latter are more vulnerable to. We have already observed that most females are engaged in crop production and harvesting rather than factory production with the exception of the horticultural processing plant where they constitute the majority of the workforce. Here they are exposed to agrochemicals whose effects may not be visible in the short-term. There was little concrete evidence of the cumulative effects of women's exposure to the residues by stepping barefoot on the contaminated tea, coffee and strawberry fields. Nor do the plantations have a system of monitoring the levels of contamination. The more visible marks of cuts from coffee and tea bushes were scars on the feet, legs and hands. Such cuts could be minimized if basic protective clothing had been made available; the wearing of boots, for example, would reduce the incidence of swollen feet. Most pickers did not have protective clothing except plastic rain coats which they often converted into aprons to minimise cuts. Otherwise, female workers had to do with sack aprons and plastic sheeting to cover their legs. On the horticulture plantation, workers had no protective clothing of any sort while weeding and harvesting. In the factories, however, workers are provided with dust-coats or overalls but rarely with protective gloves and safety shoes or hats.
Generally, the unavailability or shortage of necessary protective clothing was a problem faced particularly by contract workers. Although this implies that employers cut costs by not making outlays for such clothing, the health of the workers continue to be affected. There is an ad hoc approach taken towards the issue of protective clothing. While some plantations provided basic clothing such as apron sacks or raincoats for pickers, others do not do so despite the regulation which stipulates that:

> every employee shall be provided with protective clothing as required in terms of the Hazardous Substance and Articles Act (Statutory Instrument, 323, 1993).

The repercussions, as we observed above, can be serious for unprotected workers. As one occupational health and safety officer observed with regard to the tea industry:

> during the tea picking season, which is done mostly by women, lacerations and callouses on the plucking fingers are common. The intertwined branches of tea bushes also cause scratch wounds know as 'tea ulcers' on the hands and legs of the tea pluckers (Department of Occupational Health and Safety, undated).

The need for basic protective clothing cannot be over-emphasized: the wearing of boots and thick clothing in the lower body would reduce the incidence of injuries and contamination. Gloves are also a necessity to reduce finger injuries.

Clearly, dialogue between employers and workers’ representatives is necessary in resolving occupational health problems such as eye-sight complaints resulting from computer use and in the preparation of certain vegetables. Some of those problems are relatively minor like avoiding the sharing of dust-coats by factory workers. Noise levels in the factory can be deafening and hence the workers’ quest for earmuffs.
To what extent have plantations attempted to address these occupational health and safety problems and with what outcomes? There are three main methods by which they have sought to address these issues. We have already seen the gaps which exist in their investment in protective clothing for workers. There are different levels of seriousness in which different plantations approach this issue. While some provide at least one set of protective clothing (rain coats or apron sacks or "fertilizer bags"), others do not provide any. For factory workers, all the surveyed plantations provided dust coats and overalls. However, certain articles such as dust masks, hard hats and gum boots were still in short supply. No goggles or safety glasses were available to female workers who encountered eye pains. In addition to protective clothing, there needs to be a regular monitoring of workers' health. None of the surveyed plantations conducts such periodic health checks. One of the plantations did not even carry a medical check-up on employing first-time workers. It was not possible to obtain comparative information concerning disease statistics and miscarriages in relation to women workers. But some of the sampled workers referred to several in the work force who had contracted tuberculosis. If some of the workers had contracted agrochemical-related diseases, there was no mechanism in identifying and treating them.

Finally, there was limited opportunity for education on health and safety awareness. There was no systematic approach by plantations on this question. Some assigned the responsibility to work-place supervisors who gave workers some pep talks on avoiding injury; others invited occupational safety experts to address workers as well as show posters and films on preventive measures. At one plantation, speeches of occupational health and safety were made at the annual festival. With several exceptions, there were few health and safety committees which regularly met to provide a dialogue on preventive measures between management and workers' representatives. As a consequence, the level of safety consciousness is still generally low
except on one plantation which had a full-time adviser on occupational health and safety.

5.3 Wages Benefits and Consumption Patterns Amongst Female Workers

The wage structure on plantations (and indeed in the entire agribusiness sector) has been formalized to the extent that it is based on a collective bargaining agreement negotiated annually by employers and workers' representatives in the Agricultural National Employment Council. As we have already observed in a previous chapter, the agreement specifies in great detail what the workers in the different skill categories would receive per week or month. For example, the monthly wages of general workers (or the so-called unskilled workers) was Z$245 or approximately US$30 per month in September 1994. It was statutory requirement binding on employers in the sector (unless formal exemption had been granted) to pay workers in this category this minimum wage. From mid-1994 the wages ranged from $245 to Z$343 for the seven grades of workers ranging from the "unskilled" to "skilled" workers. Permanent workers are, however, the main beneficiaries of this wage settlement. Contract or seasonal workers are not necessarily always paid this minimum wage. We observed that they are mostly paid according to output and this can mean wages below or above the minimum wage. Some of the sampled contract tea and coffee pickers stated that they were paid on the basis of their output. However, according to collective bargaining agreement referred to above;

an employer shall pay a seasonal worker no less than the amount prescribed in the First and Second Schedules for the occupation in which he is employed.

So those employers who ignore this agreement and pay workers on the basis of output are essentially violating it. Some of the sampled female coffee sorters complained bitterly about this illegal arrangement. Some
of those sorters earned as little as Z$2 per day or $75 per month. Other sampled tea pluckers received some $127 per month or about half the fixed wage of permanent pluckers. Indeed, for the permanent workers and those contract workers who are not paid on the basis of output, the monthly wage is calculated per number of days actually worked. The rate was about Z$9.60 per day but when a worker was absent for one reason or another, she was not paid for those days.

Most of the workers in the seven stipulated grades did not receive an annual bonus at year-end as is the case in the public sector and in some private firms in other sectors of the economy. In those few instances where bonuses were paid, they tended to be token ones ranging from Z$10 to Z$30. This is in contrast with managerial staff who were entitled to more substantial bonuses. Indeed, those skilled workers who were graded outside the present structure based on the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) were in a more favourable position. For example, a female foreperson at one coffee plantation earned Z$1300 and a confidential secretary some Z$2140 per month plus bonus. A computer operator at the same plantation received Z$600 per month, while a female cashier at another plantation received Z$900 per month. At a horticulture processing plant, one of the female clerks was paid Z$747 per month. These cases of relatively better-paid female workers are very few, almost exceptional, but they illustrate the point that employers can negotiate individual contracts of employment in order to retain scarce labour. In any case, the existing CBA for the agribusiness sector does not specify the wage conditions for specialized female staff such as computer operators, data analysts and confidential secretaries.

One of the principal arguments used to justify the low-wage structure in agribusiness is that workers have access to free accommodation and health facilities provided by the plantation. It is certainly a major cost borne by the employer. If such accommodation and health subsidies were added onto existing salaries, they would probably go up by 50 per cent or more. However, the unquestioned assumption here would be
that such accommodation and health facilities as were provided were of a "reasonable standard". On some plantations it is of a "reasonable standard" but on others it is of a "low quality". On the surveyed horticulture plantation, thatched hut houses were the main form of accommodation for workers. Workers observed that the construction materials were often of a poor quality and there was a constant danger of the huts catching fire because they were too close to each other. The huts had neither running water nor lights. They were rudimentary and workers complained that the plantation had not been serious about constructing more permanent dwellings. What particularly riled workers though was that after investing in the construction of an additional hut they could be forced to hand it over to the plantation. Further, on retrenchment workers received no payment for the materials and labour they have invested in the construction of the huts.

Regarding health facilities, some female workers complained of lack of medicines in the plantation clinics. One of the plantations had neither a clinic (for a work force that runs to over 500) nor a school to cater for the workers' children. In view of the variable quality of accommodation and health and education facilities, the argument that agribusiness workers' wages are justified should not be accepted at its face value. This is not to overlook certain attempts by some plantations to provide a number of "unpaid services" to workers. These include lunch of the staple-food (sadza) and a corn-brewed drink (mahewu) on some of the plantations; but these had recently been provided and workers were still unclear to if these would really be "free". Other 'benefits' include access to "rejects" of commodities such as carrots, beans, onions and so forth which could not meet grade requirements. Finally, day-care centres for children were available on some but not all plantations. This entails problems for female workers who had to make necessary arrangement with friends or neighbours to care for their children. Those who could not obtain assistance took their children with them to the sweetcorn and coffee fields with all the
attendant problems of distraction and exposure of children to agrochemical residues.

To what extent then can female workers meet their basic needs in the context of an adjustment programme which has significantly eroded the value of wages? The marginal incomes which they receive make it very difficult for them to afford basic needs. Their patterns of social consumption reveals a section of the proletariat vergeing on economic distress. In a survey undertaken in 1993, it was observed that while about 73 per cent of sampled workers (both male and female) could still afford to purchase mealie-meal before the next month-end pay, only 41 per cent, 36 per cent and 33 per cent could still afford to purchase milk, bread and beef respectively (Sachikonye, 1994). Increases in the order of 30 per cent in 1994 in prices of bread, beef and sugar further reduced access by workers to these essential commodities. In that same survey, 47 per cent of respondents stated that they could no longer afford to purchase certain food items which they regularly purchased before, and 39 per cent also could no longer purchase clothing regularly.

The case of single or divorced female workers, often with children to support in financial terms, is therefore pathetic. Although they cherish an independent source of income, making it meet ends is impossible. At the same time, they cannot afford not to work as there are very few alternative sources of a similar and regular income. Their capacity to organize for better working conditions are limited by their marginal participation in union activities and in those of the workers' committees. It is therefore, like a Hobson's choice for most of these women.

In the next chapter, we shall discuss some of the factors which explain this weak bargaining position of women workers as well as cases where they have supported workers' struggles for a better deal.
6. LABOUR RELATIONS: MANAGEMENT, WORKERS COMMITTEES AND THE UNION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores female workers’ experiences and their perception of the structure of supervision, and of the roles of workers’ committees and the trade union in the agribusiness sector. It draws largely on the field interviews on the four agribusiness establishments surveyed in this study. In any analysis of the experiences and perceptions of workers in agribusiness, account should be taken of the somewhat unique conditions which prevail in the sector in comparison with such other sectors as mining, manufacturing and the services. We have already observed that plantations exert considerable control over workers beyond the work-place. Their control and influence extends to housing, recreation and often over health and education facilities for workers’ families. In most cases, it explains the considerable investment in infrastructure for these services by plantations. This can be so substantial that in a few cases, (such as at sugar plantations not covered in this particular study), a plantation can resemble a small town.

At the same time, the autonomy of individual worker who depends on such an infrastructure is considerably reduced compared to the town based industrial workers. There is a general tendency on the part of plantations to cultivate an image of benevolent paternalism towards workers. The generally low level of education amongst most plantation workers makes it difficult for them to contest the plantations’ pervasive control and ideology of paternalism. As a consequence, plantations have historically not felt as much pressure as industrial or mining firms to improve wages and living conditions. Furthermore, the relatively greater proportion of contract or seasonal workers implies that most of them are not active within workers’ organs - the workers’ committee and trade union which articulate workers’ interests. Both these organs have not consciously sought to
promote the participation of the significant section of the work force in both their leadership and activities. The marginalization of contract and seasonal workers negatively affects their perception of the workers' organs and their contributions to them, as will be observed below. Since female workers constitute the bulk of the stratum of the work force, it means that their potential contribution is largely ignored and missed.

6.2 Structure of Management and Female Workers' Perceptions

The structure through which supervision is exercised on plantations is much simpler than in other sectors. At the apex of the structure is the general manager or managing director who is in overall charge of all departments including the personnel department. The personnel manager refers difficult labour relations issues to the general manager. On most plantations, the personnel manager is black while the ownership and overall management is exercised by a company or white owner. All the surveyed plantations were under companies owned by whites. There are few white employees on the plantations but those few almost exclusively occupy managerial positions which do not require them to report through the personnel manager. In practice, the personnel manager is often in charge of labour relations in so far as they apply to black workers, and not white workers in managerial and other positions. This is one legacy of the formerly strongly entrenched racism prior to independence.

Not all the surveyed plantations have full fledged personnel departments. The horticulture plantation and processing plant does not have such a department, but recently hired a personnel manager following recurring labour relations problems. Below the personnel manager are the "foremen" to whom field supervisors report; on some plantations, foremen come under supervisors. The important point here, though, is that both supervisors and foremen handle the day-to-day labour issues in the sections in the field and report the more intractable ones to the personnel manager, working on the same shift.
and doing similar work are "charge-hands", also variously referred to as "leading hands" or gang-leaders". These are the equivalent of shop-floor supervisors who then report cases which require decisions at a higher level to the section foremen or supervisor. This is a hierarchy mainly dominated by males.

What are the perceptions of female workers concerning the supervision which they receive? and what is their understanding of the procedure of having their grievances resolved? Most sampled workers tended to be uncritical about the supervision which they experience; they gave the impression of 'smugness' answering and presumably the general or ambiguous nature of the questions asked to the respondents. The general response was not different from that of an earlier but more extensive sample referred to in chapter 2. We noted that about 52 per cent of respondents (consisting of both male and female workers) believed that the supervision structure based, as it was in an ascending order was generally a "fair" and "effective" set-up. At the same time, however, about 20 percent of respondents did refer to imperfections in the supervision system; they cited problems such as the lack of supervision skills within some in the hierarchy and nepotistic tendencies (in terms of recruitment and promotion of workers) amongst others. Other observations by respondents in the survey related to the "too bureaucratic" nature of supervision and to inherent racism evidenced by allocation of additional benefits to white supervisors.

In our survey on female workers' perceptions, about 26 per cent of the respondents were critical towards supervisors or forepersons or generally towards the system of labour relations as presently organized on plantations. Some of the comments about forepersons were that:

a few are quite cheeky ... some are rough... They use rough words to us for minor mistakes... Each of them wants their work to be done first and quickly... The supervision is unsatisfactory and we are often to be threatened that we would be demoted ... Others are vulgar and use
such language as “stupid” and “dogs are better” against us... they do not treat us as human (Interviews with female workers 1994)

The causes of these altercations, of course, vary from plantation to plantation but they often related to the size and pace of work and overtime. Workers' statement of interviews have captured reactions as follows:

there are different types of foremen, some give us a reasonable amount of work, others too much... the time for knocking off is often contentious, it is often an hour late... We often enter into conflict with foremen over completing time, we sometimes work beyond 6 p.m.

Table 6.1: Sampled Workers' Ranking of Rules and Obligations at the Work-Place

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rule</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obedience to Supervisor Staff</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuality or Time-keeping</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety Awareness</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Hygiene</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of course, the task of forepersons is a difficult one in ensuring that the work performed is a good quality. Hence the specific references to contention over the plucking standard in tea-picking, for example, and the insistence that only good quality tea should be delivered and coarse tea left out. But some workers are dissatisfied with the sequencing or timing of certain types of work: delays in the delivery of certain vegetables for preparation before packing means the extension of the working day but without extra pay.

The forepersons themselves admit that supervising is difficult and contentious in that they are caught between pressure emanating from top management pressing for greater output and the worker resisting or obstructing the pace of work. They have to tread gingerly between these different sources of pressure. However, there are certain areas where conflict can be avoided without much difficulty through
negotiation. For example, the issue of work targets such as in tea and coffee picking can be resolved once both parties acknowledge that the amount that can be picked varies not only with season but with the regularity of rainfall. To be dogmatic about uniform minimum target throughout the year can only be contentious.

Female workers are relatively less likely to be vociferous owing to weaker terms on which they are employed as contract or seasonal workers. We have already seen that they tend to be marginalized in the operations of the workers' committees and union branches. Further, the majority of the forepersons on the plantations are male; the one exception is the horticulture processing plant where female supervisors make up nearly half the number of the supervisors. The explanation for the exceptional circumstances at that plant relates to the significantly higher proportion (over 80 per cent) of female workers employed there. Otherwise, most female workers are supervised by males at the levels of charge-hand in the field and supervisor or foreperson at the level of section or department.

There is still a strong belief expressed that male supervisors are more capable than the few female ones. Clearly, there is a very shaky comparative basis for this conclusion. However, some of the expressed opinions by female workers were that;

if we worked under a female supervisor, we would slacken as we would think that we are the same as them... Women supervisors are not 'feared' by fellow women... women are easier to supervise than males ... Males are foremen mainly because they went to school (Interviews with Female Workers, 1994).

The general impression was that male supervisors were more authoritative and experienced. Only tentative moves appear to have been attempted to promote experienced female workers into supervisory positions over males. However, in one processing factory, a woman foreperson controlled a predominantly male work-force of
about 40 and was respected and obeyed. On another plantation, an attempt had been made to avoid the situation of a female supervisor being in charge of male tea-pluckers by segregating the plucking gangs by gender. The female supervisor was put in charge of the female section of the gang. The tentativeness which attends to such an appointment reflects the complicated character of the supervision regime on most plantations. In practical and in psychological terms, it is quite acceptable to have female supervisors being in charge of women workers and male supervisors in charge of both male and female workers. As we observed above, this is not difficult to explain in view of the concentration of female workers in unskilled and contract grades; in addition, the paternalist and patriarchal context are supportive of a male-dominated supervision system. There are no convincing reasons that female supervisors with sufficient assistance from top management may not perform as ably as their male counterparts.

Although often expressed the sentiment was that female workers are easier to supervise because they are docile and 'fearful' of male supervisors, this was difficult to gauge from responses to the interviews. There was no specific question on comparison between their assessment of male and female supervisors. In any case, not many of the workers were under female supervisors. One would, however, expect that female supervisors would have more empathy for female workers especially when nursing commitments interfered with attendance at work, or resulted in lower output. The seeming docility may have less to do with natural attributes and more with their response to difficult circumstances of contract workers rights, particularly to their employment in security. Some of the insecurities were expressed in these terms:

As I have no husband, I am worried about job security... I would be afraid to be elected into the workers' committee because you then would be sought after by management and victimized... (Interviews, 1994).
The lack of security together with lack of power and influence in the workers; organs do inhabit women workers from taking confrontational steps.

Let us now briefly outline what female workers consider to be the more important obligations or rules in order of importance which they must follow at the work place. The rules which have been instilled in them most concern mainly these aspects (a) obedience to management (b) punctuality or time-keeping (c) safety awareness and (d) personal hygiene. The greater proportion (50 per cent) of workers at a tea/coffee plantation cited obedience to supervisors as the more important rule, but at the horticulture plantation the most important requirement was punctuality as cited by 76 per cent of the respondents.

Still at another plantation 55 per cent stated that safety awareness was what management advised them to pay most attention to, and those (about 40 percent) at a processing plant cited personal hygiene, as the more important requirement. Certainly, the emphasis of management on the different facets and objectives does vary. Generally though, an unquestioning attitude towards authority was what plantation management sought from their work forces.

6.3. Workers’ Understanding of the Grievance-Handling Structure, and of the Roles of the Workers’ Committees and of the Union

The procedure whereby an individual worker or group of workers can present the grievances to management is defined in the code of Conduct which is part of the collective bargaining agreement in the agricultural industry. The purpose of the procedure “is intended to provide a method whereby individual employees, in an orderly fashion, can have any grievance which affects them” heard by management (Statutory Instrument 323, 1993). According to the instrument employee brings the attention of the workers’ committee, which would then investigate the matter, take written statements and
make a decision on that particular matter within three days. In such cases, the worker would be entitled in the first instance to be assisted by a workers’ committee representative, and failing agreement, any other third party. The representative often intercedes to management on behalf of the aggrieved worker.

In our survey, we sought to ascertain whether female workers were familiar with this grievance and reporting procedure. The findings were interesting in that they indicated that most workers stated they would first present their grievance to the foreperson or supervisor in charge. Nearly 75 per cent of sampled workers stated that they would first approach their workplace supervisor rather than seek the advice of a workers’ committee representative. 19.6 per cent, however, stated that they would approach the representative at first, while the remainder (about 15 per cent) did not know the procedure of presenting their grievances. As we will see below, this is commentary on the general standing and weak influence of the workers’ committees themselves, particularly amongst female workers.

For example, at the horticultural processing plant some 27 per cent of respondents did not know what the workers’ committee stands for while another 20 per cent thought that it was mainly ineffective anyway. This is a significant proportion (almost all of the sample at the plantation) that does not have knowledge about the key institution in an enterprise. At the horticulture plantation an even higher proportion (63 per cent) were ignorant of the existence of the workers’ committee. However, these were not isolated cases, as the proportion (64.5 per cent) was even slightly higher at one of the tea and coffee plantation. The exceptional case was the second tea plantation where only 13 per cent of the workers did not know about the workers’ committee; they also rated it highly with only 16 per cent of them believing that it was ineffective.

Clearly, the effectiveness of a workers’ committee is also expressed in how seriously it seeks to communicate with the rest of the work force.
Not many workers' committees are active in this regard. Workers' committees require both communication and negotiating skills and most respondents did not rate these highly.

Table 6.2: Workers' Awareness of Workers' Committees and their Role

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<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Those workers who did not know of the Workers' Committees and their Role</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those workers who did know of the Workers' Committees and their Role</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those workers who think the Workers' Committees are ineffective</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 6.3: Female Workers' Membership in Union

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Those sampled workers who belonged to the union</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those sampled workers who did not belong to the union</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Of course, one explanation for the low ratings of workers' committees is that most of the respondents, being contract or seasonal workers, were often not considered for election into the committees nor were they intended as their main beneficiaries. Indeed, one of the misgivings amongst the sampled workers was that the workers' committees tended to neglect to articulate their own specific problems and rights as both contract and female workers. Only on two of the plantations had female representatives been elected into the workers' committee. Clearly plantations' workers committees have great challenges and constraints. But they need to find improved interaction mechanisms with the work forces they represent, otherwise their reputation will continue to remain low. This is notwithstanding the exceptions and the pressure exerted by management on the committees to "toe the line". Some of the respondents did refer to cases of victimization of certain vocal representatives. Because such
victimization can take the form of being sacked, getting elected into the committee is insecure.

The position of the union which represents agribusiness workers is much more conductive to its independence from management than is the case for the workers' committee. Union organizers need not be employed by the plantation where they seek to mobilize workers into membership. However, it would appear the union, the General Agricultural and Plantation Workers' Union (GAWPUZ), has not succeeded in massive recruitment of female workers, if the results of our admittedly limited sample are a reliable indicator. Approximately 72 percent of the sampled female workers did not belong to the union. While on one plantation the proportion of non-members was 53 percent of the sampled total it was as high as 91 percent on another plantation. On the reasons for no membership in, response included:

"I see no reason for joining it ... there is no reason why I am not a member ... I do not know what the union stands for ... I do not know how to become a member ... There are no benefits to members or whatever benefits there are, the non-members also share" (Interviews with female workers, 1994).

Other workers find the monthly subscriptions onerous for their low wages. There was not much genuine interest nor enthusiasm demonstrated for the union which appeared somewhat remote even to those workers who were aware of its existence.

The same factors which have militated against worker's attitudes or knowledge about the workers' committees can be drawn to explain the low levels of union membership on the plantations. The "total institution" character of the plantation places enormous obstacles on the path of agencies which compete for the workers' allegiance vis-à-vis management. The limited universe of plantation workers is difficult to penetrate, coupled with employment insecurity and management hints against flirting with "union trouble-makers" from outside the
plantations, the average female worker is not an ardent unionist. Furthermore, their domestic responsibilities make participation in union meetings and other mobilization activities rather problematic. Finally, like the workers' committees, the union does not appear to have made concerted attempts to recruit from contract workers. As we observed in a previous chapter, some of the contract workers are not seasonal but permanent workers. The union needs to define terms on which they can recruit this untapped but significant proportion of the agribusiness proletariat.

6.4 Signs of discontent and Resistance

Although formidable constraints exist on the mobilization of workers into unions and into an explicit movement for rights and privileges, there have been significant stirring which cannot be ignored. We saw in chapter 2 some of the industrial action organized on plantations in different parts of the country. Female workers participated fully in the industrial action despite its main objective being of the improvement of wage conditions rather than their specific grievances. In the past four years, the erosion of wage incomes has been accelerated under conditions of structural adjustment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6.4: Social Consumption amongst Sampled Agro-Industrial Workers in 1993</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workers who could still afford the following items at month-end before the next pay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mealie meal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beef</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft drinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toothpaste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Interviews, 1993
One of the major strikes under these conditions was organized not on the surveyed plantations, but on a sugar plantation which employed 8,000 workers. The bitterly contested strike in 1992 was over the terms of a short-time working arrangement at the high of a severe drought, and eventually over terms of retirement for those who opted for it. The outcome of the strike was the sacking of approximately 4,000 workers there by reducing a 50 per cent reduction of the work force. As a consequence, nearly 1,000 migrant workers trekked back to Malawi while others returned to the adjacent communal areas from which they had been drawn. On the surveyed plantations, two cases of strikes were organized on the tea and coffee plantations and both were related to wage issues. The strike in 1990 was organized by plucking and factory workers in one of the divisions of the plantation, but after initial support from the other divisions, it pattered when its leadership was isolated and some expelled. The strike in 1994 on another tea and coffee plantation was also centred on a wage issue but specifically against unauthorized deductions to a workers' social security scheme recently established by the National Social Security Authority (NSSA).

The striking workers were not so much against the concept of social security contributions (from which they would gain after retirement or retrenchment) as against the arbitrary fashion in which it has been introduced without any consultation. For three days, workers withdrew their labour until the NSSA and government officials arrived to address them on the objectives of the scheme. Generally, when strikes occur, they tend to be on a collective rather than gender basis, and to be over wage rather than other peripheral issues. The hope of most female workers is that when such industrial action occurs, their own specific grievances would be tabled. Their grievances relate to the terms of contract and seasonal employment, maternity and sick leave and aspects such as accommodation and baby care.
7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore the emerging patterns and implications of the gender division of labour and to document the more vulnerable position of female workers with respect to wages and working conditions in Zimbabwe’s agribusiness sector. Our basic hypothesis was that the capitalist management of the labour process had been instrumental in the construction of that gender division of labour. We believed that there was a tendency towards a propensity by plantations to utilize female workers largely as casual or contract workers, and that, therefore, this tendency towards their casualization, the feminization of particular labour unskilled segment of the labour force required empirical investigation.

On the basis of an analysis of both primary and published sources, and field interviews with over 100 female workers, supervisory staff and union officials, the study reached several broad conclusions. A survey of the plantation work processes in which female workers predominated revealed the following trends.

First, there was a discernible division of labour on explicit gender lines; certain jobs were designated “male” and others “female” jobs. From interviews and field observations, the division related to the assumed “manual dexterity” amongst female workers and muscular energy and mechanical aptitude among male workers. We observed, however, that although a considerable proportion of sampled female workers drew from their practical experience and “common sense” to explain the present division of labour, they were critical of the rationale of the basis of that division. From experience, they pointed out convincingly, for example, that some male workers were equally good, if not faster tea pluckers than women. Thus the observations regarding the nimbleness of women’s fingers were challenged by the evidence that male workers’ fingers in picking tea and coffee were equally dexterous. Furthermore, it was observed that such supervisory skills
as male workers had were not in-born but inculcated through practical experience.

Yet plantation management appeared to have constructed a gendered division of labour on these supposedly natural traits and attributes of their male and female work forces. It was observed in the study that this division often assumed the form of segregated working places although this was difficult to manage in such tasks as plucking and weeding. This division of labour was interpreted by most female workers as confirmation that each of the two sexes had special and different qualities which are translated into differences in performance and output. However, available empirical evidence both from the experiences of sets of workers suggested that there were no intrinsic qualities confined to one or other of the sexes except where individual qualities were determinant.

Second, the study assessed the relationship between the gender division of labour and distribution of skills as well as upward mobility within the female labour force. It was noted that plantations' recruitment policy appeared geared towards young women workers at the height of their physically productive age. Preference was given to those who were single to minimise the possibilities of family commitments which might result in absenteeism and erratic participation in the workforce. The study observed that most female workers have been placed in the lowest job categories, namely those of "general worker" status (in one estimation up to 89 per cent of them). Those few "skilled" jobs filled by 11 percent of sampled female workers were located in quality control, computer operating, clearing, clerical work and supervision.

A major segment of the female work force consisted of contract workers, a stratum with fewer rights and benefits than permanent workers. It was observed in the study that a substantial number of contract workers should have been accorded permanent-worker status if employers adhered to both the letter and spirit of the relevant labour legislation. Of longer-term significance was that there was no
conscious attempt to ensure the stabilization of this important segment of the agribusiness proletariat. While the relative cheapness of contract labour, which was predominantly female labour (as we have observed), it also constituted a major structural agribusiness capital, it also constituted a major structural weakness of the sector in terms of long-term skills build-up and productivity.

Third, the study explored the related issues of occupational health and social conditions on plantations to the extent that these affected female workers. Several common sets of health problems were observed: injuries on hands and feet while tea plucking, those sustained while operating machines such as conveyor belts, driers, wrapping and sealing machines; and finally, those relating to exposure to material which affected eye-sight or the physical body as a whole. It was noted that gaps existed in the sampled plantations' investment in protective clothing for workers. While some provided at least a set of protective clothing such as rain coats or apron sacks or "fertilizer bags", others did not provide any. In addition to protective clothing, there needs to be regular monitoring of workers' health. None of the surveyed plantations conduct such periodic health checks. Furthermore, there was limited opportunity for education on health and safety awareness. With one exception there was generally no systematic approach by plantations on this issue.

Fourth, the remuneration patterns for female workers made it extremely difficult for them to make ends meet. The patterns of social consumption revealed this section of the proletariat to be verging on economic distress. The case of single or divorced female workers, often with children to support in financial terms, was pathetic. Although they cherished an independent source of income, meeting their basic needs was well-nigh impossible. At the same time, they could not afford not to work as there were very few alternative source of a similar and regular income. The study observed accommodation and health facilities provided to them by the plantations varied between reasonable basic to poor.
Finally, the study probed the content and structures of labour relations in the agribusiness sector. It did so by exploring female workers' experiences and their perception of the supervision system, and of the roles of workers' committees and the trade union. In the assessment of these factors, due account was taken of the somewhat unique conditions which prevail in the sector in comparison with such other factors as mining, manufacturing and the services. Plantations exerted considerable control over workers beyond the workplace; it was control and influence which extended to housing, recreation and often over health and education for workers' families.

Most sampled workers tended to be uncritical about the supervision which they received; they gave the impression of a smug attitude. However, this attitude might have been a misleading one due to tiredness by the interviewees, an indication of the limitation of the interview method utilized. Even so, approximately a fifth of the sampled workers cited imperfections in the supervision system. They cited problems such as poor supervision skills, a "too bureaucratic" system of supervision, nepotism and racism. Further, the majority of supervisory personnel on sampled plantations tended to be male except in one case where female supervisors constituted up to half the number of the personnel. On the whole, therefore, the study observed that females were lowly represented in the supervisory structure.

The understanding by female workers of the grievance-handling structure and of the roles of the workers' committees and the union was ascertained. The majority of sampled workers were hazy about the structure and the roles of the committees and the union. Almost 70 per cent of those sampled first took their grievances to the supervisor rather than to the workers' committee. Although the proportion varied from plantation to plantation, nearly half of sampled female workers pleaded ignorance of the role of the workers' committee. An even higher proportion (about 70 percent) did not belong to the trade union in the agribusiness sector, GAWPUZ.
It appeared that the "total institution" character of plantations placed enormous obstacles on the path of agencies which competed for the workers' allegiance vis a vis management. Coupled with employment insecurity and management hints against flirting with union organizers, the average female worker was not an ardent unionist. Furthermore, their domestic responsibilities made participation in union meetings and other mobilization activities rather problematic. At the same time, however, workers' committees and the union did not appear to have made concerted attempts to recruit from contract workers. In particular, the union needed to define terms on which they could recruit this untapped but significant proportion of the agribusiness proletariat.

APPENDIX 1

Notes on the Plantation Covered

Four plantations were covered in this study. Two of the plantations specialize in perennial cropping of largely tea and coffee but also of macadamia nuts. They are both privately owned. The larger of the two plantations is the Eastern Highlands Plantations in a workforce of approximately 2,300 and Southdown Holdings with some 1,750 workers. In 1994, Eastern Highlands Plantations issued some shares to the public to widen its ownership. Both plantations are located in the high-rainfall area of Zimbabwe Eastern Highlands. Both the climate and soil have proved highly suitable for tea, coffee and timber production.

The remaining two plantations are Chipunza and Hortico which are located some 50 kilometres, north-east of Harare. They specialize in horticulture. The Chipunza plantation produces a variety of products ranging from sweetcorn and onions to beans and strawberries. These commodities are delivered to the adjacent Hortico Plantation which concentrates on processing them mainly for overseas markets. The
processing is conducted in a "factory-in-the-field"; the packaging of the commodities is also carried here before their dispatch to the Harare Airport for airfreight to Western European supermarkets. Both Chipunza and Hortico are privately owned; the major shareholders are local white land-owners. However, the sizes of their workforce varies with seasons; at peak season in summer, Chipunza employs up to 900 workers and Hortico some 800 workers.

APPENDIX 2

Questionnaire Used in Interviews with Female Workers

I. Profile of Worker

1. Gender ..............................................
2. Marital Status ......................................
3. Date of Birth .....................................
4. Date of Joining the Company or Enterprise .............................
5. Title of Job on Joining ..................................
6. Present Title of Job .................................

(II) Work Process

7. Specify the type of job or jobs you carry out in the enterprise?
8. Did you receive any prior training for the job?
9. Did you receive on-the-job-training?
10. Does your job process require the use of
    a) hands
    b) feet
    c) metal work
    d) machinery
If so, elaborate.

11. If you operate machinery in your work, what type of machinery is it?

(III) Division of Labour in the Enterprise

12. Which are the job processes in which male workers are concentrated and why?
13. Which are the job processes in which female workers are concentrated and why?
14. Do you think male workers have special qualities which females ones don't have, and if so, elaborate?
15. Do you think female workers have special qualities which male workers do not have, and if so, elaborate?
16. Do male and female workers have equal access to:
   a) training opportunities
   b) supervisory opportunities
   c) placement in skilled jobs
   d) and remuneration?

If so, or if not, elaborate.

17. Is there solidarity between male and female workers at all levels in the workplace, and if so, elaborate?
18. Are there grounds for differences or misunderstandings between male and female workers, and if so, elaborate?

(IV) Control at Work Place

19. What is your view of the role of fore-persons and line managers?
20. Are there specific rules that you are required to observe on the shop-floor, and if so how are they enforced?
21. What is your view towards "time-keeping" control ("clocking-in" and "clocking-out") in the enterprise?
22. Does management set work targets for you?
23. If so, are there penalties for not achieving the targets?
24. How long and how frequent are the breaks for meals and bathroom/toilet visits?
25. Is there a machinery for reporting grievances on the shop-floor?
26. If so, what are its structure and procedures?

(V) Training, Promotion and Retrenchment

27. Are you provided with any training or re-training opportunities or assistance by this enterprise?
28. If so, elaborate on the skills acquired as a result.
29. Were there any promotions as a result of the acquisition of new skills?
30. Do barriers to promotion exist due to these factors:
   a) education
   b) skills
   c) race
   d) gender

If so, elaborate

31. Have there been instances of retrenchment in this enterprise?
32. If so, what were the causes for the retrenchment?

(VI) Remuneration and Collective Bargaining

33. What are your monthly wages?
34. Are they above or below or at par with the minimum wage for the industry?
35. What, if any, bonuses do you receive?
36. To what extent are shop-floor workers involved in the collective bargaining process?
37. Do you engage in collective bargaining over other aspects of working conditions and benefits, and if so, elaborate?
38. Do you receive any free company goods or services?
39. Do you receive any free
   a) medical assistance
   b) transport assistance
   c) accommodation assistance
   d) education assistance
   e) pension contribution assistance
   f) insurance contributions assistance
   If so, elaborate

(VII) Occupational Health and Safety

40. What are the common problems of occupational health and safety experience in this enterprise?
41. Which are the potentially hazardous aspects of the work process?
42. How many workers were injured at work during the past financial year?
43. How many workers were killed at work during the past financial year?
44. What preventative measures, if any, have been taken to reduce danger to occupational health and safety?
45. Do you, workers wear protective clothing on the job?
46. Do workers undergo medical examination on (a) recruitment and (b) periodically?
47. Are workers consulted on occupational health and safety issues?
48. What do you think of the performance of your workers' committee?
   - average
   - good
   - bad?
49. Do you think it is representative of shop-floor workers?
50. Are you a workers' committee member?
51. How would you describe the workers' committee's relations with management?
52. What do you think of the performance of your union branch?
   - average
   - good
   - bad?
53. Are you a union member?
54. Do you think it is representative of shop-floor workers?
55. How would you describe its relations with management?
56. What do you think of the performance of visiting labour relations officers?
   - average
   - good
   - bad?
57. How would you describe their relations with the:
   a) workers' committee
   b) union branch
   c) management?
58. Have there been any disputes or strikes in this enterprise during the past financial year?
59. If so, elaborate on the cause of the disputes or strikes.
60. How many man-day hours were lost as a result of the dispute or strike?
61. Were any dismissals or disciplinary measures instituted against the strikes or leaders and if so, elaborate?
62. How was the strike or dispute resolved?