

Working Class Women in the Workplace

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For women there were many possibilities for earning a living in small and insecure ways. They could sell things-- flowers, foodstuffs or other commodities-- in the streets. They could 'take in washing' or look after other people's children ('baby-farming'). Many thousands of them pursued an older profession, and this had the 'advantage' that it could be a part-time activity. Milliners and servant girls often supplemented their incomes in this way.

However deplorable this may be from a moral point of view, it is worth remembering that such an activity gave them a certain independence. Female servants, especially if they were young and pretty, had often been 'ruined' by male counter-- parts or by employers, and thus fallen off the ladder to respectability. With nothing left to lose-- and possibly having been dismissed from their position-- they worked on the streets, but by doing so they were able to earn much more than they could in their former occupation, and they could also choose their hours and dress as they liked (respectable ladies sometimes met their former maids in the street, and were scandalized by their expensive and fashionable dress, for it would have been obvious at a glance how it had been ob-

40

tained). If they were successful they would consort, on more or less equal terms, with men of their employers' class. The most fortunate of them might well be set up as 'kept women', and for a few years have their own household. As a result many of them found 'ruination' a positive, even desirable state, and moral campaigners lamented that many young women actually looked forward to it. Ironically-- at least for the few short years before disease, imprisonment or the loss of beauty ended their careers-- it made them freer and more self-respecting than they had been as part of the official world of work. The temptations of this way of life were described by superintendent James Dunlap of the Metropolitan Police. In his evidence to the Select Committee on the Protection of Young Girls in 1881, he related how servants 'get small wages; they come out on errands; they see these girls walking about the streets, their equal in social standing; they see them dressed in silks and satins; they say: "You can go and dress in silks and satins, while I am slaving"; they talk to the girls, and they are influenced.'

Factory work claimed large numbers of young women, especially in the North and Midlands. This too was repetitive and exhausting, frequently involving long hours standing at machinery. It might also be highly dangerous, not only because unprotected machinery could be lethal, but because the constant breathing of fumes could kill by degrees those who worked in confined or unventilated spaces. Reports into working conditions refer incessantly to this:

The duties of the powder-packer consist of filling casks with bleaching powder. To do that he has to enter the chamber, which for several days has been filled with chlorine gas. The heat is sometimes tremendous, especially as the poor wretch who has to endure it is swathed about the head in a way that

41

would protect him from arctic cold. With the muzzle on, the effort of breathing appears to be most painful even in the open air. The chest heaves like that of a man struggling for breath in

the violent stages of lung disease. The appearance of the face gives you an impression that he is being suffocated; the eyes seem distended as they stare through the goggles.

Even with dry-cleaning, or 'French cleaning' as it was called, there was danger of:

Giddiness, nausea, vomiting, and headaches, sometimes of tasting the spirit, and usually loss of appetite, intoxication with hysterical symptoms, sleepiness and, in the more severe cases, of loss of consciousness.

The girls and young women who worked at Bryant and May's match factory in London's East End were the subject of public interest when they went on strike in 1888 under the leadership of the socialist Annie Besant. She reported that:

One girl was fined 1 shilling for letting the web twist round a machine in the endeavour to save her fingers from being cut, and was sharply told to take care of the machine, 'never mind your fingers'. Another, who carried out the instructions and lost a finger thereby, was left unsupported while she was helpless.

While these conditions-- created by unregulated industrialization-- are shocking to us, we must remember that they were also shocking to contemporaries. The mere fact that they were recorded indicated that there was concern and that something was being done about them. To the Victorians' credit there were constant enquiries, reports-- and Factory Acts. The

42

improvement of conditions was gradual, piecemeal and unfinished by the end of the reign, but it was nevertheless being pursued. It must also be remembered that nineteenth-century workers did not simply exist in pathetic misery. There were trade unions-- the movement had been particularly active in the early part of the century-- and a host of societies had been formed by these men and women, supported by modest regular subscriptions to pay the costs of sickness and other distress.

We would also be mistaken in imagining young factory workers merely as sunk in exploitation and misery. A contemporary description shows them to have had, in spite of the awful hardship of their lives, a certain spirit and sense of fun:

Factory girls are often the daughters of dock labourers or other irregularly employed workmen, frequently of drunkards. They have been brought up in stifling rooms, with scanty food, in the midst of births and deaths, year after year. They have been accustomed to ups and downs; one week they have been on the verge of starvation, another they have shared in a 'blow-out'. They have learnt to hate monotony, to love drink, to use bad language as their mother tongue, and to be true to a friend in distress. They care nothing for appearances, and have no desire to mix with any but their equals.

On the whole these girls, outside their homes, lead a healthy, active life. They do not over-exert themselves at the factory. They rise early and have plenty of open-air exercise, both on their way to and from the factory and in their evening walks. They are rough, boisterous, outspoken, warm-hearted, honest working girls. Their standard of morality is very low, so low that to many they may seem to have none at all.

Their great enemy is drink; the Jove of it is the curse they have inherited, which, later on, when they are no longer factory

43

girls, but dock labourers' wives, will drag them down to the lowest level, and will be transmitted to the few of their children who survive. They are nearly all destined to be mothers, and they are almost all entirely ignorant of any domestic accomplishments.

44
