The Plight of Women's Work in the Early Industrial Revolution in England and Wales

Match Makers Outside Their Factory

The Industrial Revolution in part was fueled by the economic necessity of many women, single and married, to find waged work outside their home. Women mostly found jobs in domestic service, textile factories, and piece work shops. They also worked in the coal mines. For some, the Industrial Revolution provided independent wages, mobility and a better standard of living. For the majority, however, factory work in the early years of the 19th century resulted in a life of hardship.

The following selections are testimonies from England and Wales collected by Parliamentary commissions who began to investigate the industrial employment of women and children in the early 1840s. Inspectors visited mills, mines and shops taking evidence from workers to see ways in which the Industrial Revolution affected women and families. The sources, along with illustrations and a workforce chart, reveal the following points:

▸Working conditions were often unsanitary and the work dangerous.
▸Education suffered because of the demands of work.
▸Home life suffered as women were faced with the double burden of factory work followed by domestic chores and child care.
▸Men assumed supervisory roles over women and received higher wages.
▸Unsupervised young women away from home generated societal fears over their fate.
▸As a result of the need for wages in the growing cash economy, families became dependent on the wages of women and children
▸There was some worker opposition to proposals that child and female labor should be abolished from certain jobs.

# Textile Workers

▸1) Courtauld Silk Mill Workforce:
Samuel Courtauld built a silk mill in 1825 in Halstead, Essex (South East England).

Before the Industrial Revolution, Halstead was an agricultural community with a cottage industry producing woolen cloth. In Halstead, as elsewhere in England, unemployment among depressed farming households and former wool workers forced people to find work outside the home. Because their labor was cheap, women more than men were recruited into the textile factories that sprang up all over Britain in the 19th century. This is a chart of the Courtauld workforce in 1860. The wages are in British schillings.

Number	Weekly Wages	MALES
1	1000 pounds per year	Mill Manager (Also got 3 per cent of the profits)
26	15s-32s	Overseers and clerks
6	17s-25s	Mechanics and engine drivers
3	14s-21s	Carpenters and blacksmiths
1	15s	Lodgekeeper
16	14s-15s	Power loom machinery attendants and steamers
18	10s-15s	Mill machinery attendants and loom cleaners
5	5s-12s	Spindle cleaners, bobbin stampers and packers, messengers, sweepers
-	7s-10s	Watchmen
-	5s-10s	Coachmen, grooms and van driver
38	2s-4s	Winders
114		**Total Males**
Number	Weekly Wages	FEMALES
4	10s-11s	Gauze examiners
4	9s-10s	Female assistant overseers
16	7s-10s	Warpers
9	7s-10s	Twisters
4	6s-9s	Wasters
589	5s-8s	Weavers
2	6s-7s	Plugwinders
83	4s-6s	Drawers and doublers
188	2s-4s	Winders
899		**Total Females**
1013		GRAND TOTAL WORK FORCE

QUESTIONS

▶Make a list of jobs only men did. A list of the jobs women did. Can you think of any reasons for this? Were women less capable than men of doing this work? (You might have to find out what some jobs were!)
▶What do you notice about the wages for men's jobs compared with the pay for the women's jobs?
▶What is the highest paying job? the lowest?
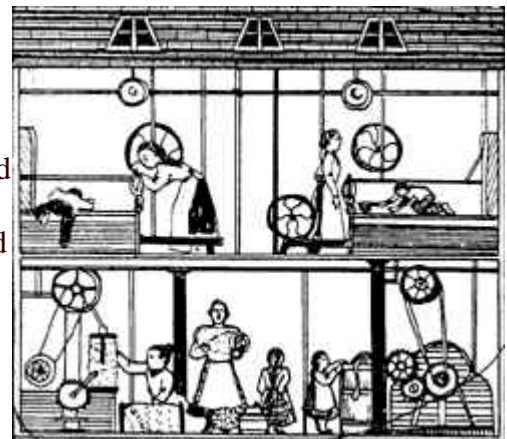
‣In what job do males and females receive the same pay?
‣In what job are the majority of men employed?
‣In what job are the majority of women?
‣What is the approximate ratio of male workers to female workers?
‣Think about the pattern of the employment at the factory of a man and of a woman. Who might be able to work their way up the ladder? Who will most likely end up in a "dead end" job? What factors might have contributed to this pattern of lifetime job difference? What implications might this have on the status and power of women within the community? Within the family?
‣In factories that mainly employ women today, can you find out what percentage of men or women hold the best paying jobs?

[Source: Carol Adams, Paula Bartley, Judy Lown, Cathy Loxton, *Under Control: Life in a nineteenth-century Silk Factory*, Cambridge University Press. The full unit contains illustrations, first person accounts and biographies of the workers - well worth locating]

‣**2) Evidence of Textile Workers in Wilson's Mill, Nottingham:**
Hannah Goode: "I work at Mr. Wilson's mill. I think the youngest child is about 7. I daresay there are 20 under 9 years. It is about half past five by our clock at home when we go in....We come out at seven by the mill. We never stop to take our meals, except at dinner.

William Crookes is overlooker in our room. He is cross-tempered sometimes. He does not beat me; he beats the little children if they do not do their work right....I have sometimes seen the little children drop asleep or so, but not lately. If they are catched asleep they get the strap. They are always very tired at night....I can read a little; I can't write. I used to go to school before I went to the mill; I have since I am sixteen."
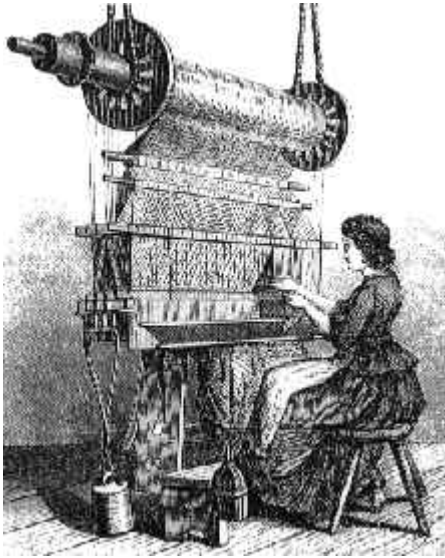
Mrs. Smith: "I have three children working in Wilson's mill; one 11, one 13, and the other 14. They work regular hours there. We don't complain. If they go to drop the hours, I don't know what poor people will do. We have hard work to live as it is. ...My husband is of the same mind about it...last summer my husband was 6 weeks ill; we pledged almost all our things to live; the things are not all out of pawn yet. ...We complain of nothing but short wages...My children have been in the mill three years. I have no complaint to make of their being beaten...I would rather they were beaten than fined."

[Source; Factory Inquiry Commission, Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers, 1833. Found in Hellerstein, Hume & Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Accounts of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France and the United States,* Stanford University Press]

QUESTIONS
‣What do you think happened to younger children when the family was away at work in mills?
‣What might be different about work done at home compared to work in the factory?

▸Why did some workers oppose the imposition of laws restricting women and children's work?▸ Today women are the majority of workers in textile and electronics industries around the world. What reasons do you think are given for employing mainly women? Does the problem of women's work being a "dead end" job exist in these plants too?

The Coal Mines

Women and children at first worked alongside men in the coal mines, although there were differences in jobs they did. Before 1842, there were no protection laws, nor limits for the age of child labor.

VOCABULARY

▸**Hurriers** were people that moved the coal from the face (where the coal was cut) to the horses - ways.

▸**Horse-ways** were the main passages where horses could be used for hauling. Sometimes they used a pulley system to wind up the trams.

▸A **level** is a tunnel into sloping ground, like a cave. The coal was mined without having to dig a shaft.

▸1) ILLUSTRATING MINE WORK:

Teams of women were employed to use a windlass to lift coal and workers. Men refused to do such work.

Hauling a tub of coal by means of a rope and chain. The chain usually passed underneath the body between the legs.

QUESTIONS

▸Illustrations like these were used to solicit outrage against the use of women and children in mine work. Given that women engaged in heavy labor in agricultural work as well, why do you think mine work elicited particular concern?

▸What can these illustrations tell us about the level of technological development in this period? Why was human labor so necessary?

▸2) Testimonies from South Wales Mines:

Six year old girl:
"I have been down six weeks and make 10 to 14 rakes a day; I carry a full 56 lbs. of coal in a wooden bucket. I work with sister Jesse and mother. It is dark the time we go."

Jane Peacock Watson.
"I have wrought in the bowels of the earth 33 years. I have been married 23 years and had nine children, six are alive and three died of typhus a few years since. Have had two dead born. Horse-work ruins the women; it crushes their haunches, bends their ankles and makes them old women at 40. "

Maria Gooder
"I hurry for a man with my sister Anne who is going 18. He is good to us. I don't like being in the pit. I am tired and afraid. I go at 4:30 after having porridge for breakfast. I start hurrying at 5. We have dinner at noon. We have dry bread and nothing else. There is water in the pit but we don't sup it. "

Mary and Rachell Enock, ages 11 and 12 years.
"We are door-keepers in the four foot level. We leave the house before six each morning and are in the level until seven o'clock and sometimes later. We get 2p a day and our light costs us 2 1/2 p. a week. Rachel was in a day school and she can read a little. She was run over by a tram a while ago and was home ill a long time, but she has got over it."

Isabel Wilson, 38 years old.
"I have been married 19 years and have had 10 bairns [children]:...My last child was born on Saturday morning, and I was at work on the Friday night... None of the children read, as the work is no regular..When I go below my lassie 10 years of age keeps house..."

QUESTIONS

▸What do you think coal was used for in this period? How crucial was it to the Industrial Revolution?

▸Generally, how many hours did these women and children work each day?

▸What health problems were generated by mine labor?

▸Name some ways this type of work affected family life?

▸Do women work in coal mines today?

[Source: *Children Working Underground* Amgueddfa Genedlaethol Cymru National Museum of Wales, 1979.]

SEAMSTRESSES - Industrial Revolution

As the demand for clothes grew among newly wealthy middle class women, jobs in the dress-making work industry increased. Young women coming to the cities sought work as seamstresses in homes and sweat shops. Some noted, however, that young women living on their own without a family were compelled to seek other ways to earn some money.

▶1) EVIDENCE TAKEN BY
Children's Employment Commission
February 1841

"Miss --- has been for several years in the dress-making business...The common hours of business are from 8 a.m. til 11 P.M in the winters; in the summer from 6 or half-past 6 A.M. til 12 at night. During the fashionable season, that is from April til the latter end of July, it frequently happens that the ordinary hours are greatly exceeded; if there is a drawing-room or grand fete, or mourning to be made, it often happens that the work goes on for 20 hours out of the 24, occasionally all night....The general result of the long hours and sedentary occupation is to impair seriously and very frequently to destroy the health of the young women. The digestion especially suffers, and also the lungs: pain to the side is very common, and the hands and feet die away from want of circulation and exercise, "never seeing the outside of the door from Sunday to Sunday." [One cause] is the short time which is allowed by ladies to have their dresses made.

Miss is sure that there are some thousands of young women employed in the business in London and in the country. If one vacancy were to occur now there would be 20 applicants for it. The wages generally are very low...Thinks that no men could endure the work enforced from the dress-makers."

[Source: Hellerstein, Hume & Offen, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Accounts of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France and the United States,* Stanford University Press.]0

QUESTIONS

▶Why do you think young girls wanted to become seamstresses?

▶What health problems occurred with this type of work?

▶What health problems have been cited with regard to similar types of small muscle and close eye work in the sewing and electronic industries today?

▶Imagine the types of clothing and the life of the Victorian era middle and upper class woman. Name some ways this was in sharp contrast to the life of working class women.