

# **WORKING CLASS WOMEN IN THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD: MID 18TH C - MID 19TH C.**

The development of industrialization in Europe and America from the mid eighteenth century onward brought dramatic changes. England was where the Industrial Revolution first started, and then over the next century spread to the rest of Europe and beyond. This chapter will focus on the nineteenth century when the most serious affects were felt on women, and consequently on society. Both men and women went from working basically on their own schedules to a schedule set by others. As industrial time developed, family time diverged increasingly. Traditional family responsibilities did not yield easily to industrial life. Women often were caught in the middle. Historians today are debating how oppressed women were and how displaced families became. Commentary at the time the industrialization process was taking place varied. Some of the most vocal detractors like Frederick Engels received more publicity then and later compared to the supporters. New studies are analyzing statistical data to arrive at a more balanced assessment, including what occurred for women.

Why this movement to industrialization took place at this time is a long and complex process. Many factors account for why society shifted from man power to machine power. Traditionally, it was textile manufacturing where the earliest evidence of industrialization occurred. As women down through the centuries have been integrally involved in every step of the process from production, to manufacturing, to selling, this industry is a good starting point. On the eve of the Industrial Revolution, spinners of thread could not produce as much thread as weavers needed. This imbalance had been created during the 1730's by James Kay's invention of the flying shuttle, which greatly increased the productivity of weavers. Prizes were offered for someone to invent a machine to eliminate this bottleneck. By 1765 James Hargreaves developed his spinning jenny, a device to multi-spin thread. Still, these machines were used only in cottages, there were no factories. It was Richard Arkwright's water frame, patented in 1769 that moved the manufacturer of cotton into the factory. By the end of the century James Watt had perfected the steam engine that ran the textile machinery.

There are many other reasons in addition to the invention of machinery that accounted for England's being the first to industrialize. In the 17th and 18th centuries, an Agricultural revolution had come to England, allowing for a gigantic increase in crop production, resulting in a population explosion that would eventually migrate to where the industrialized jobs were. With the profits from farming, the capital was used to invest in industrialization. In England, the government was favorable to the business and merchant class. The complete opposite viewpoint occurred in France, Spain, and other European countries. England had an overseas empire that had been secured, and these lands provided natural resources and consumers for English

manufactured goods. Natural resources of coal and iron were available in England for optimum utilization. Transportation, communication changes and inventions were ongoing and productive. In all these areas women were represented either as active workers or as active recipients, further fueling the industrialization and economy.

Much has been made about the horrific conditions of workers in the mines, factories, homes and cities, but then previous to this era, wonderful working conditions were not always available either. Generally the work that women did before the advent of the Industrial Revolution continued to be the same work, but now machinery replaced hand power. There were five chief ways for a young woman without children to earn money in the cities and countryside: domestic service, factory work, street-selling, manual labor, agricultural work, mine work, and prostitution. For women in the cities who had children there were less options: piecework in the home, or taking in lodgers, which paid considerably less than the jobs available to women without children. Types of piecework included: making matchbook covers (hence our folk tale about the "Little Match Girl"), matches, plaiting straw for bonnets, lace-making, and sewing. We do show that in Hamburg, Germany, one-quarter of the working class households kept lodgers. Piece-work and taking in renters were usually undercounted in censuses and surveys. Justification for low rates of pay for this type of work was based on the assumption that women did not need the money as they were married, and their husbands supported them.

Between one-third and one-half of all women who earned income outside the home were domestic servants. As the middle class grew in size and wealth, then their need for domestic workers expanded too. During this time in England, it was thought prudent that at least one-fourth of your income needed to be spent for servants. Prior to the Industrial Revolution men were domestic servants in about equal numbers with women. However, after industrialization the statistics change dramatically. By the beginning of the twentieth century, 91.5% of English servants and 82.9% of French servants were women.

Working conditions were bad for domestics. Most all single women resorted to this type of work after all other avenues failed. Domestic servants were expected to work sixteen plus hours per day. If they got sick or pregnant they were usually fired. Older servants routinely were dismissed, and servants were expected to save for their old age. Separate law codes were often the case for servants. Many servants were degraded by their employers, and often raped and abused.

In coal mines, it was said that women did the worst tasks: "Females submit to work in places where no man or even a lad could be got to labor in". Women worked up to their knees in water in passages eighteen inches high or less. They carried hundreds of pounds of coal in baskets suspended from their foreheads or pulled carts of coal.

Some generalizations can be made about women and work during this time. The entry of women into

a specific trade signaled a downgrading of the trade. With industrialization, women still earned one-third to one-half of men's wages. New occupations were added for women over time, but these for the most part were ones previously filled by males, but downgraded in status and pay for women. These jobs included secretaries and typists in businesses, store clerks in the new department stores, and teaching. Increased demarcation in the industrial economy was the strict delineation between men's and women's work. There were always more women seeking employment than there were jobs available. Working class women were more visible outside the home now with the advent of factories. These working class women were blamed by the middle class for contributing to the decline of the traditional family and its morality.

Initially, married women along with their children worked in factories, because few families could survive without their wages. Orphans, abandoned and poor children, and then single women, were the first workers in factories. Men refused to work initially in factories because of the monotonous and long arduous hours. Men had been used to working only Wednesday through Saturdays when they got paid. They would then go out and get drunk and then start their work week again Tuesday or Wednesday when sober. Women did not have this more relaxed work week prior to industrialization. Eventually people migrated from Ireland, Scotland, and Wales to work in the factories and elsewhere. Once factories organized in a more modern format, then only single women were employed. It was not until 1832 that it was illegal to employ children under nine years of age in the cotton mills, and not allow older children to work for more than twelve hours a day. As women's endurance and docility were prized by factory owners and supervisors, many more women than men worked in factories. Working conditions in factories were appalling. Where production required processing with water or steam, women workers were compelled to spend hours in damp clothing and humid air filled with cotton dust. Industrial accidents and health hazards were common because of the complex machinery and materials, and workers' inexperience. Women, who were the major workers making white lead that was used as the coloring agent in paint, suffered illnesses. In Lyons, France, women who extracted silk from cocoons in factories worked fourteen to sixteen hours a day, six days a week. They had to thrust their hands into near boiling water. High rates of skin disease and tuberculosis were constants.

Working class women suffered the most during this new industrial time. Women's wages were pitifully low. Single women could only make enough money to pay the rent, but not enough to buy food and clothing. So it was the aim of every girl to get married. Once married, the woman had to continue some sort of job in addition to raising their family and taking care of the house. Men did not help with the chores or children. If the men did, then they were ridiculed by being called mop rags or diddy men. Women who failed to manage adequately or spent too much could be expected to be physically abused. No one intervened unless a man beat another man's wife or there was fear that the woman would die. Mothers usually ate less than their husbands and children. We know now that some mothers resorted to infanticide, the willful killing

of an infant, because of poverty. For thousands of years infanticide has been practiced throughout the world cultures. Domestic servants were especially vulnerable to this because if they got pregnant, it was usually automatic grounds for dismissal. Most women prosecuted for infanticide in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were domestic servants. When a French servant was dismissed by her mistress for being pregnant in 1847, after she gave birth to a boy, she crushed his skull, and buried him in a field. Infanticide was now equally practiced on boys as well as girls. Before the 19th century, girls were the usual victims of infanticide. Mothers were desperate. Some mothers placed their children in foundling homes. Infants in England were often dosed with "Godfrey's Cordial", opium mixed with molasses, to keep them in a constant stupor, and easier for them to carry on their piecework or some other type of work. In Germany, parents practiced angel-making. Children were intentionally mutilated and made sick or malformed so people would take pity on them when they were sent begging. With the advent of the tremendous increase in the middle class, their women folk did not need to work, thereby perpetuating low wages for the working class women.

Prostitution was the best paying position for women in the working class. What other working class women made in a week, prostitutes made in a day. Because of the pay scale, women worked as prostitutes for a short time to earn enough money to get married, usually with no stigma attached. Prostitution was also the form of employment for women when all else failed. Young prostitutes almost always came from the poorest families, and often one or both parents were deceased. Manufacturing towns had fewer prostitutes because there was more steady employment. Prostitution generally was legalized on the continent, which meant that it was subject to the central government and municipal authorities' regulations. In fact, it was the police who gave permission and supervised the brothels. For instance, in Paris a woman took her birth certificate to the police station to prove she was sixteen. If she was married, then her husband had to give his permission. Police were given this control over prostitutes because of the fear of venereal disease. Women prostitutes were required to receive a medical inspection. After the examination, each prostitute would receive a card attesting to her being venereal disease free. If venereal disease was found, then she was sent to a hospital. In England though, prostitutes were not examined until syphilis became almost an epidemic. Parliament then passed the Contagious Diseases Act, where any suspected or identified prostitute could be required to undergo a vaginal examination for venereal disease. Those that were infected were confined to lock hospitals for months, while subjected to rigorous moral and religious instructions. As part of the feminist movement in England at the time, a middle class reformer, Josephine Butler, was able to get the act repealed, but at a cost that gave prostitution the stigma it holds today in England and America. England had its serial killer of prostitutes just like in America and in the State of Washington. In England it was Jack the Ripper, and in Washington, the Green River Killer. Jack preyed on lower class prostitutes in the East End of London, the ghetto quarter. Five bodies were ripped with deep jagged incisions. Who Jack the Ripper was,

we do not know for sure, as key papers have been destroyed, but even high-placed individuals have been mentioned.

Attempts to reform the negative conditions of work for working class women were led by middle class reformers in England and elsewhere. There ensued a dichotomy. Middle class reformers wanted to restrict women's work because they thought it was incompatible with their ideal of womanhood. Industrialists of the middle class did not want to limit women's work because they could pay women low wages, thus insuring higher profits. A few radical reformers wanted to pay male workers enough to support their families, thereby excluding women from wage work entirely.

Improvements for girls and women eventually occurred. Once stories about the working conditions for young children were publicized, then efforts were started in England to provide free, compulsory primary-school education. The Methodist Church had begun a similar effort for the children of mine workers. As seen today in developing countries during their industrialization process, educating girls was usually not seen as important as educating boys. France mandated public primary schools for all boys in 1833, but it was not until 1881 that a law was passed giving girls the same type of schooling. Henry Mayhew, the famous English investigative journalist, who interviewed thousands of street people in London and published the results in his celebrated book, London Labor and the London Poor, found that street sellers were reluctant to educate their girls as they felt it contributed nothing to their ability to earn a living. In England, by the third quarter of the nineteenth century primary schooling for girls was provided, but that did not mean the girls were sent to school. Poor families still needed the financial resources from their daughters' wages. But at cross purposes was the cultural idea that the more prosperous a working class family became, the less the woman was supposed to be employed. In all the areas where men had originally served as the workers, when women became the primary employees, women were paid half of the men's wages.

In the second half of the nineteenth century two major developments affected the economic lives of working class women. Firstly, there was a proliferation in the variety of available jobs. Secondly, there was the significant withdrawal of married women from the work force. As the century progressed, there was an expansion of government bureaucracies, and the emergence of corporations and other large-scale businesses. Technological inventions of the typewriter and telephone fostered female employment for these bureaucracies and businesses. Women by the thousands became secretaries, clerks, and telephone operators. In Europe the department store, beginning with the Bon Marche in Paris, became a major institution of retailing. Consumer demand was being fed by permanent display, special sales, and fixed prices. These cathedrals of commerce employed thousands of young women. As compulsory education laws were enacted, the demand for female school teachers was endless. Now school teaching came to be identified as a female occupation, but women rarely entered universities or the learned professions.