

## **How did the Factory Acts introduced in England in the first half of the nineteenth century affect women and children?**

The various Factory Acts during the nineteenth century starting in 1802 with the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act thru till 1897 with the Workmen's Compensation Act have affected the working class conditions to this day. As well as looking at the different acts one must also consider the Industrial Revolution, for if it wasn't for this period of time many of the Acts would never have come into play. With so many Acts it is necessary to narrow it down to a select three that will be focused on, the 1833 Mills and Factories Act, the 1842 Mines and Collieries Act and the 1847 Hours of Labor of Young Persons and Females in Factories Act. The last item to be discussed will be how these acts changed the lives of all workers, physically and mentally.

The Factory Acts came as a result of the industrial revolution, the consequences of this revolution would change human labor, consumption, family structure, social structure, and even the very soul and thoughts of the individual. However, the industrial revolution was more than technology. What drove the industrial revolution were profound social changes, as Europe moved from a primarily agricultural and rural economy to a capitalist and urban economy, from a household, family-based economy to an industry-based economy. This required rethinking social obligations and the structure of the family; the abandonment of the family economy, for instance, was a dramatic change to the structure of the family and we're still struggling with these changes today.

The Industrial Revolution was largely a period of western European industrialization, which saw countries, such as Great Britain, move from a predominantly agrarian economy to an economy based on mass-produced commodities. It is generally recognized as the period from about 1760 to 1830. The key to this transition was the successful development of the steam engine. Used at first to pump mines, the steam machines were scaled down and utilized for

machinery in factories and, more importantly, as a mode of transportation. Workers became more productive, and since more items were manufactured, prices dropped, making exclusive and hard to make items available to the poor and not only the rich and elite. Life generally improved, but the industrial revolution also proved harmful. Pollution increased, working conditions were harmful, and capitalists employed women and young children, making them work long and hard hours. The industrial revolution was a time for change, for better, or for worse.

The shameful practice of child labor played an important role in the Industrial Revolution from its outset. The displaced working classes, from the seventeenth century on, took it for granted that a family would not be able to support itself if the children were not employed. The children of the poor, as young as three, were forced by economic conditions to work. Many children worked 16-hour days under atrocious conditions. In The Sadler report of 1831–32, after visiting the Coggeshall Mill where children worked from half past five in the morning till half past six in the evening, Daniel Fraser remarked “The children all bear marks of confinement and fatigue...the children look ill as any I have seen yet... (little girls were preferred)... they seem to have an aversion to boys because they are sufficiently docile.”<sup>1</sup> Ineffective parliamentary acts to regulate the work of workhouse children in factories and cotton mills to 12 hours per day had been passed as early as 1802 and 1819.

After radical agitation, a royal commission established by the Whig government recommended the Mills and Factories Act (Lord Athorp’s Act) in 1833 stating that children aged 11-18 be permitted to work a maximum of twelve hours per day; children 9-11 were allowed to work 8 hour days; and children under 9 were no longer permitted to work at all.

“Younger children were to attend school for at least two hours, six days a week, and holidays for the children and young persons to be all day on Christmas Day and Good Friday, and eight half days. The Act gave powers for the appointment of inspectors, because provisions of previous acts “were not duly carried into execution

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<sup>1</sup> Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism*, p. 46-47

and the Laws for the Regulation of the Labor of Children in Factories have been evaded". The inspectors were empowered to enter any factory at any time and to examine therein the children and other young persons and to enquire about their condition, employment and education. Children under the age of 13 years had to be certified by a physician or surgeon as being "of the ordinary strength and appearance" of a child of his/her stated age."<sup>2</sup>

(<http://home.clara.net/craigthorner/htmlfiles/factory.html>)

This act applied only to the textile industry, where children were put to work at the age of 5, and not to a host of other industries and occupations such as lace and silk mills, which were not seen as a health risk. With the reduction of hours for children came many complaints from men. With the invention of the factory system man was forced to work long laborious hours. John Fielden, M.P, had this to say,

"Here, then, is the "curse" of our factory-system; as improvements in machinery have gone on, the "avarice of masters" has prompted many to exact more labor from their hands than they were fitted by nature to perform, and those who have wished for the hours of labor to be less for all ages, have had no alternative but to conform more or less to the prevailing practice, or abandon the trade altogether. Since Lord Althorp's Act was passed, in 1833, we have reduced the time of adults to sixty-seven and a half hours a week, and that of children under thirteen years of age to forty-eight hours in the week, though to do this latter has, I must admit, subjected us to much inconvenience, but the elder hands to more, inasmuch as the relief given to the child is in some measure imposed on the adult. But the overworking does not apply to children only; the adults are also overworked. The increased speed given to machinery within the last thirty years, has, in very many instances, doubled the labor of both."<sup>3</sup> (<http://65.107.211.206/history/workers2.html>)

The Mines and Collieries Act of 1842 was introduced after The Royal Commission investigated the conditions of girls, boys and women working in mines and collieries revealing unfathomable terrors to a shocked public. As Marx commented, the scandal was so great that Parliament had to relieve its conscience by passing the Act. Woman and children worked in cramped and dirty conditions, women, often in close proximity to unrelated men. There was a fear that women would lose their femininity and become coarse. There was also the belief that mine work would cause body deformations resulting in the inability to conceive and as a result of coal mining woman would lack maternal instincts and other domestic skills. Joseph Kennedy, one of the inspectors with the Royal Commission, was also

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<sup>2</sup> Website, *Summary of Factory Acts in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*

<sup>3</sup> Website, *The life of the Industrial Worker in Nineteenth-century England*

critical of home conditions of miners, "Not Only were miners and their children exceedingly dirty but their houses were recognizable from the accumulations of filth and excrement at their doors."<sup>4</sup> This legislation enacted quite speedily as a result of the investigation. The 1842 Act prohibited the employment, underground, of boys under the age of ten and forbade all females in British mines of any kind, though they were permitted to continue working above ground. After further radical agitation, the 1847 Hours of Labor of Young Persons and Females in Factories Act, limited both women and children to ten hours of work daily with a maximum of 58 hours in any one week.

Factory labor is a species of work unfit for any man let alone woman and children. Cooped up in a heated atmosphere, remaining in one position for a series of hours, with only one set or system of muscles working. It is no wonder that the physical growth of a child was hindered. The legs curved, and the whole body lost height, as a consequence of this general yielding and bending of its parts. Any man that would stand at the doors of the cotton-mills, must acknowledge, that an uglier set of men and women, of boys and girls, exit in mass.

"Their complexion is sallow and pallid with a peculiar flatness of feature, Their stature low, the average height of four hundred men, measured at different times, and different places, being five feet six inches. Their limbs slender and a very general bowing of the legs. Great numbers of girls and women walking lamely or awkwardly, with raised chests and spinal flexures. Nearly all have flat feet, Hair thin and straight - many of the men having little beard. A spiritless and dejected air and an appearance, taken as a whole, giving the world but "little assurance of a man," or if so, "most sadly cheated of his fair proportions..."<sup>5</sup>  
<http://65.107.211.206/history/workers2.html>

The intent of many of the Factory Acts was to protect not only Women and children but to secure the well-being of the entire working-class family, it has been proven that women and children doing arduous labor and long hours greatly harmed their health and lifespan. However, one can argue both sides. The Mines and Collieries Act emphasized gender differences at work and undermined women and children in the workplace, limiting the

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<sup>4</sup> Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England, 1700-1870*, p.70

<sup>5</sup> Website, *The life of the Industrial Worker in Nineteenth-century England*

workers based on gender. “If the Act enhanced the quality of life of coal-mining families, and this is not certain, it did so at the expense of women’s position as workers. The gendering of the working class was ultimately to women’s great disadvantage.”<sup>6</sup> Tensions grew in the nineteenth century as employers tried to substitute cheap female and child labor with skilled men. Women and children were known to take unfavorable positions at very low wages, while industrialization brought in individual wages for men causing men to feel a competition from women and children for positions in the workplace. Men sought support from male dominated trade unions and the state becoming more empowered, and women were marginalized.

“Although the restrictions imposed by unions and legislation were largely ineffective, they emphasized the ideas of women in terms of domestic duties. This may have encouraged more women to take employment which incorporated domestic skills, such as nursing and teaching.”<sup>7</sup>

The transformation of family production (agriculture) to factory production, from independent workers to industrialization provoked a period of change and re-accommodation in the sexual division of labor. Facing the break up of the family economy and the loss of control over his own labor left the male needing re-assurance and the women losing femininity and domesticity that up to this period was satisfying. With the introduction of the Factory Acts the man was once again given some re-assurance, women were allowed in the workplace while still having the time to run a home and retain her femininity, and children were finally given the opportunity to play and be educated. “The new equilibrium, which was established around mid-century had its work and its home dimensions, now no longer combined in one set of social relations.”<sup>8</sup> (Hall. Pg 27)

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<sup>6</sup> Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England*, p.71

<sup>7</sup> Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society 1650-1850*, p.207

<sup>8</sup> Hall, *The Changing Experience of Women*, part one, p.27

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