

Lord Ashley: Women Factory Workers (1844)

Sir, look at the physical effect of this system on the women. See its influence on the delicate constitutions and tender forms of the female sex. Let it be recollected that the age at which the “prolonged labour,” as it is called, commences, is at the age of thirteen. That age, according to the testimony of medical men, is the tenderest period of female life. Observe the appalling progress of female labour; and remember that the necessity for particular protection to females against overwork is attested by the most eminent surgeons and physicians. [...]

There are [says Mr. Saunders] among them, females who have been employed for some weeks, with an interval only of a few days, from six o'clock in the morning until twelve o'clock at night, less than two hours for meals, thus giving them for five nights in the week, six hours out of its twenty-four to go to and from their homes, and to obtain rest in bed. [...] A vast majority [says Mr. Saunders, in January, 1844] of the persons employed at night, and for long hours during the day, are females; their labour is cheaper, and they are more easily induced to undergo severe bodily fatigue than men.

Where, Sir, under this condition, are the possibilities of domestic life? how can its obligations be fulfilled? Regard the woman as wife or mother, how can she accomplish any portion of her calling? And if she cannot do that which Providence has assigned her, what must be the effect on the whole surface of society? [...]

Look again to the effects on domestic economy; out of thirteen married females taken at one mill, only one knew how to make her husband a shirt, and only four knew how to mend one. I have the evidence of several females, who declare their own ignorance of every domestic accomplishment—the unmarried declare, “not a single qualification of any sort for household servants.” The married; “untidy, slovenly, dirty; cannot work, sew, take care of children, or the house; cannot manage expences; perpetual waste and extravagance.”

[...] So much, Sir, for their physical, and, if I may so speak, their financial condition; the picture of their moral state will not be more consolatory. And, first, their excessive intemperance: Mr. Robertson, a distinguished surgeon at Manchester, says, in a published essay:—

I regard it as a misfortune for an operative to be obliged to labour for so long hours at an exhausting occupation, and often in an impure atmosphere. I consider this circumstance as one of the chief causes of the astounding inebriety of our population. [...]

Mr. Braidley, when boroughreeve of Manchester, stated, “that in one gin shop, during eight successive Saturday evenings, from seven till ten o'clock, he observed, on an average rate, 412 persons enter by the hour, of which the females were 60 per cent.” Many females state, that the labour induces “an intolerable thirst; they can drink, but not eat.” [...]

But listen to another fact, and one deserving of serious attention; that the females not only perform the labour, but occupy the places of men; they are forming various clubs and associations, and gradually acquiring all those privileges which are held to be the proper portion of the male sex. These female clubs are thus described:—“Fifty or sixty females, married and single, form themselves into clubs, ostensibly for protection; but, in fact, they meet together, to drink, sing, and smoke; they use, it is stated, the lowest, most brutal, and most disgusting language imaginable.” Here is a dialogue which occurred in one of these clubs, from an ear witness: “A man came into one of these club-rooms, with a child in his arms; ‘Come lass,’ said he, addressing one of the women, ‘come home, for I cannot keep this bairn quiet, and the other I have left crying at home.’ ‘I won’t go home, idle devil,’ she replied, ‘I have thee to keep, and the bairns too, and if I can’t get a pint of ale quietly, it is tiresome. This is the only second pint that Bess and me have had between us; thou may sup if thou likes, and sit thee down, but I won’t go home yet.’ ” Whence is it that this singular and unnatural change is taking place? Because that on women are imposed the duty and burthen of supporting their husbands and families, a perversion as it were of nature, which has the inevitable effect of introducing into families disorder, insubordination, and conflict. What is the ground on which the woman says she will pay no attention to her domestic duties,

nor give the obedience which is owing to her husband? Because on her devolves the labour which ought to fall to his share, and she throws out the taunt, "If I have the labour, I will also have the amusement."

[...] The toil of the females has hitherto been considered the characteristic of savage life; but we, in the height of our refinement, impose on the wives and daughters of England a burthen from which, at least during pregnancy, they would be exempted even in slave-holding states, and among the Indians of America. But every consideration sinks to nothing compared with that which springs from the contemplation of the moral mischiefs this system engenders and sustains. You are poisoning the very sources of order and happiness and virtue; you are tearing up root and branch, all the relations of families to each other; you are annulling, as it were, the institution of domestic life, decreed by Providence himself, the wisest and kindest of earthly ordinances, the mainstay of social peace and virtue, and therein of national security. [...]

It matters not whether it be prince or peasant, all that is best, all that is lasting in the character of a man, he has learnt at his mother's knees. Search the records, examine the opening years of those who have been distinguished for ability and virtue, and you will ascribe, with but few exceptions, the early culture of their minds, and above all, the first discipline of the heart, to the intelligence and affection of the mother, or at least of some pious woman, who with the self-denial and tenderness of her sex, has entered as a substitute, on the sacred office. No, Sir, these sources of mischief must be dried up; every public consideration demands such an issue; the health of the females; the care of their families; their conjugal and parental duties; the comfort of their homes; the decency of their lives; the rights of their husbands; the peace of society; and the laws of God. [...]