

VII. LAUNDRIES

The specific prohibition in the Oregon Act of more than ten hours' work in laundries is not an arbitrary discrimination against that trade. Laundries would probably not be included under the general terms of "manufacturing" or "mechanical establishments"; and yet the special dangers of long hours in laundries, as the business is now conducted, present strong reasons for providing a legal limitation of the hours of work in that business.

A. Present Character of the Business

Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor. 1872.

Laundries: Much of this work is very fatiguing, and but few are able to endure the labor from month to month. (Page 96.)

Dangerous Trades. THOMAS OLIVER, *Medical Expert on Dangerous Trades Committees of the Home Office. 1902. Chapter XLVII. Laundry Workers.*

It is perhaps difficult to realize that the radical change which has everywhere transformed industrial conditions has already affected this occupation (laundry work) also, and that for good or for evil the washerwoman is passing under the influences which have so profoundly modified the circumstances of her sister of the spinning-wheel and the sewing needle. When the first washing machine and ironing roller were applied to this occupation, alteration in the conditions became as much a foregone conclusion as it did in the case of the textile or the clothing manufactures, when the spinning frame, the power loom, or the sewing machine appeared.

Meanwhile, few industries afford at the present time a more interesting study. From a simple home occupation it is steadily being transformed by the application of power-driven machinery and by the division of labor into a highly organized factory industry, in which complicated labor-saving contrivances of all kinds play a prominent part. The tremendous impetus in the adoption of machinery, and the consequent modification of the

system of employment so striking in the large laundries, is not greater than the less obvious but even more important development in the same direction among small laundries. Indeed the difference is rapidly becoming one of degree only. In the large laundries may be found perhaps more machinery and a greater number of the newest devices, but the fundamental change has affected all alike.

"With this advent of machinery and subdivision of labour, the whole character of the industry has changed. It is becoming more and more evident that, from the smallest to the largest laundry, the industry is passing — has indeed in some respects already passed — out of the peculiar position which it has hitherto occupied, and is taking its place alongside ordinary trades."¹

The manufacture of laundry machinery, to which much energy and capital is devoted, is every year increasing. New and ingenious inventions and improvements constantly appear, many of which come from America, whence a considerable amount of this machinery is imported.

The "calender machine" has been adapted to laundry work, and is now commonly found in quite small laundries; it consists of huge steam or gas heated cylinders, varying from four to eight or nine feet long, either revolving singly in a metal bed, as in the case of the "decoudun," or on each other, as in the case of the multiple-roller calenders. The linen is generally drawn in under the hot, revolving rollers, which thus "iron" it smooth and glossy, a cloud of steam arising as each damp article passes under the roller. Constant care is required to so put the work under the machine that the hands are not also drawn under; want of attention may be followed by an accident, and even where care is exercised the fingers may be entangled in a string or hole in the material and the hand thus drawn in. The heat given off by these machines is sometimes very great; a temperature of over 90° F. may be registered even in winter on the feeding-step in front of this machine. . . . at which little girls stand all day long. (Pages 663-666.)

This work is not the light and often pleasant occupation of sewing or folding. It is not done sitting down. From morning to night these young girls are constantly standing; they are generally tending machines, the majority of which are specially heated, and they work in an atmosphere in which steam, which

¹ Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories for 1900.

is nearly always present, makes the high temperature far more oppressive than would be the case if the air were not thus artificially saturated to an excessive degree with moisture. Steam rises from the calenders and various machines. It is given off also by the damp clothes, which in many laundries, even large ones, hang drying or airing overhead or on "horses" in the room. The conditions in this respect are often at least as trying as in any spinning-mill, and the hours during which the girls are exposed to them very much longer. (Page 670.)

Colorado. Third Biennial Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1891-1892. Part II. Female Wage Earners.

In some laundries the hours of employment during the rush frequently extend to eleven and twelve hours per day, although no extra compensation is paid to female employees, with but few exceptions. . . . While machinery to a large extent relieves her (the female laundry worker) of much work, the full strength of her physical endurance is taxed by a tedious attention to the duties assigned her. (Page 28.)

B. Bad Effect upon Health

Report of British Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops, 1900.

The whole work of a laundry is done standing, and the practice of so apportioning the legal "sixty hours a week" that on three or four days in the week the women have to work from 8 A. M. to 10 or 11 at night—a practice which could be, and where there is proper organization often is, rendered needless—has its natural result in the form of disease to which laundry workers are extremely liable. It is well known that they suffer much from varicose veins, and terrible ulcers on the legs; but the extraordinary extent to which they are so afflicted is, I think, not generally known. In many other trades standing is a necessary condition, and it is difficult to account for the far greater prevalence of this disease among laundry workers than among others of the same class engaged in ordinary factory occupations, except on the ground of the long and irregular hours. (Page 383.)

With a view to arriving, if possible, at some definite knowledge of the position of laundry workers as compared with other women of their class and situation, in regard to the question of health, I have this year devoted some time to inquiring into the

subject in the districts under my charge and in neighboring localities. . . . By the kindness of the superintendents of the two first infirmaries (Islesworth, and Wandsworth and Clapham) I have been able to examine the carefully kept records of the number, ages, occupations, and diseases of the patients. The following tables, compiled from these records, speak for themselves, and afford some indication of the kinds of disease to which laundry workers appear to be particularly liable. (Page 384.)

TABLE A. ISLESWORTH INFIRMARY
(Includes Acton, Chiswick, Brentford—a typical laundry district)

	No.	Suffering from ulcers on the legs.	Per cent.	Phthisis.	Proportion.
1898					
Laundresses . . .	58	0	1 in 6	6	1 in 10
Women, other than laundresses . .	179	7	1 in 25	7	1 in 25
1899					
Laundresses . . .	70	13	1 in 6	9	1 in 9
Women, other than laundresses . .	218	7	1 in 31	11	1 in 20

TABLE B. WANDSWORTH AND CLAPHAM INFIRMARY
(Includes Battersea—another laundry district)

	No.	Ulcers on the legs.	Proportion.	Rheumatism.	Proportion.	Bronchitis.	Proportion.	Phthisis.	Proportion.
1899									
Laundresses	247	36	1 in 6	16	1 in 16	45	1 in 5	21	1 in 11
Women, other than laundresses	1171	50	1 in 23	49	1 in 22	120	1 in 9	63	1 in 19
1900									
Laundresses	199	27	1 in 7	12	1 in 16	21	1 in 9	18	1 in 11
Women, other than laundresses	1127	41	1 in 27	69	1 in 16	133	1 in 9	59	1 in 19

At the Fulham and Hammersmith Infirmary about the same proportions exist, but it was not so easy to collect accurate statistics. . . . The figures supplied by the records of the cases attended by the Kensington District Nursing Association show a large proportion of ulcerated legs and of forms of internal disease aggravated by standing for long hours. I was struck by the absence of any particular liability to skin disease . . . noticed . . . some years ago, but . . . since almost disappeared. The immensely increased use of machinery in the process of washing . . . may account for this difference.

The constant exposure to steam, standing on wet floors, the great heat in which the work is carried on, and the long hours at exhausting work, amply explains the tendency to pulmonary disease. The badly arranged floors in large wash-houses are a constant source of discomfort and probably of ill-health to the workers. . . . It is not uncommon to find that the yellow and foul water from a row of tanks or washing machines at one side of a wash-house flows all across the floor and over the feet of the workers before eventually reaching the drain. . . . (Page 385.)

Dangerous Trades. THOMAS OLIVER, M.D., *Medical Expert of the Dangerous Trades Committee of the Home Office.* 1902.

It is impossible that the heat and steam, the exhausting manual labour (all of which is done standing), and above all the excessively long hours of work in this ill-regulated industry, can fail to have a marked effect on the health of the workers as a class. In 1893 and 1894, when inquiry as to these conditions preceded the passing of the Act of 1895, the periods of work of women and young girls were found to be excessively long — and they are still not only very long, but extraordinarily irregular. The most immediately obvious effect on health is to be found in the prevalence among these workers of ulcers on the legs and varicose veins. It would perhaps be hardly credited by any who are not intimately acquainted with them to what extent these poor women suffer in this respect. To stand at work all day is the lot of many industrial workers, but in no other woman's industry is this form of suffering so serious. In certain well-defined laundry districts in West London an inquiry at the Poor Law Infirmary, to which, and not to the hospitals, the poor woman suffering from this troublesome and painful ailment most naturally resort,

demonstrated the peculiar liability of laundry workers in this respect.

Ironers suffer from headaches and sore eyes, which result from constantly bending over the gas-heated irons in general use. The fumes from the tiny gas-jets — unless these and the air supply to each iron are very carefully regulated — are disagreeably noticeable on entering the room, and sometimes even the laundry, and are of course worst of all just above the iron so heated.

It would be interesting to test the accuracy of this general impression, which is shared by many medical and philanthropic persons who are interested in laundry workers, if figures were available on which to base a calculation of the "expectation of life" among these women. "Worn out while still young" is the expression constantly used by those whose professional work brings them into contact with these women when speaking of the effect of the occupation on health. (Pages 668-671.)

C. *Bad Effect on Safety*

Report of British Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops, 1903.

The comparative immunity from accidents in the laundries in the West Riding of Yorkshire may be possibly due in some measure to the moderate hours of employment.

The incidents of accidents according to time of day is somewhat surprising, the most dangerous hours apparently being 11 A. M. to 12 noon and 4 to 6 P. M. . . . Probably 11 A. M. to 12 noon is more generally than any other time the last tiring hour of a day five hours' spell; 4-6 P. M. covers the time when most generally the transition is from daylight to artificial light." (Page 210.)

Reference was also made (in the Thirteenth International Congress of Hygiene), although figures were not adduced, to the alleged increase in the number of accidents which occur late in the working day when the effect of intellectual and physical fatigue have made themselves apparent. (Page 298.)

D. *Bad Effect upon Morals*

Report of British Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops, 1900.

One of the most unsatisfactory results of the present system or lack of system of working hours in laundries is the unfortunate

moral effect on the women and girls of this irregularity. The difficulty of securing steady regular work from employees and of insuring punctual attendance is complained of on all sides, and the more intelligent employers are beginning to see that this is the natural result of the irregularity in working hours, which is still too readily fostered by many who do not realize its mischievous effect. Women who are employed at arduous work till far into the night are not likely to be early risers nor given to punctual attendance in the mornings, and workers who on one or two days in the week are dismissed to idleness or to other occupations, while on the remaining days they are expected to work for abnormally long hours, are not rendered methodical, industrious, or dependable workers by such an unsatisfactory training. The self-control and good habits engendered by a regular and definite period of moderate daily employment, which affords an excellent training for the young worker in all organized industries, is sadly lacking, and, instead, one finds periods of violent over-work alternating with hours of exhaustion. The result is the establishment of a kind of "vicious circle"; bad habits among workers make compliance by their employers with any regulation as to hours very difficult, while a lack of loyal adherence to reasonable hours of employment by many laundry occupiers increases the difficulty for those who make the attempt in real earnestness. (Page 386.)

Dangerous Trades. THOMAS OLIVER, M.D., *Medical Expert to Dangerous Trades Committee of the Home Office.* 1902.

The ten minutes or quarter-hour "lunch" of "beer" is common, and the "beer-man" who goes his rounds at 10 A. M. and 6 or 7 P. M. to all the laundries, delivering his cens of beer from the nearest public house, is an institution which is, I believe, unknown in any other trade. Imagine the amazement of the master of a mill or weaving factory if his employees were to stop in a body for a quarter of an hour twice a day between meals to drink beer! Yet in many laundries the beer is kept on the premises for the purpose, and it is certain that as long as time thus wasted (to put in on the lowest grounds) can be made up by each separate woman "working it out" at the end of the day, irregular dawdling and intemperate habits will be encouraged. On the other hand, a woman who is expected on Thursdays or Fridays to be in the laundry from 8 or 8.30 in the morning till 9 or 10 or 11 at night

may claim with some show of reason that only by some kind of spur can she keep her over-tired body from flagging.

E. Irregularity of Work

Debate in the British House of Lords on Clause 30, Factory and Workshops Bill. Hansards' Parliamentary Debates, 1890-1891. Vol. CCCLV.

THE EARL OF DUNRAVEN. . . . But the hours that the women work (in laundries) are excessively long . . . I know it has been said, and it may be repeated in your Lordships' House, that this business is in the nature of a season trade; that there comes a sudden rush of work, and that it cannot be performed and the business carried on unless those employed in it work excessively long hours. Believe me, that is all nonsense. It may be the cause at the present time; but if the hours are limited, as they ought to be, the trade would very soon adapt itself to the new conditions. . . . Of course, my noble friend on the cross benches (Lord Wemyss) may be perfectly right in saying that it is a mistake altogether to interfere with the liberty of adult women; but if so, let us at least be consistent and do away with all our factory legislation affecting adult women. But if our factory legislation interfering with adult women is beneficial, as I believe it to be, then why . . . should it not be extended to these women who are engaged in this laborious work. (Page 1034.)

THE MARQUESS OF RIPON. . . . Then as to hours . . . surely in regard to work that is so hard and so laborious these poor women (laundresses) have just as good a claim to have their hours regulated as have the milliners and women employed in boot-makers' establishments, who are brought under the regulations of the Factories and Workshops Act. . . . Some of the noble Lords who have addressed the House have spoken as if our factory legislation was a thing to be deprecated and not extended. I believe it to be, as my noble friend behind me (Lord Sandhurst) said, one of the most successful portions of the legislation of this country. (Page 1038.)

Report of the British Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops, 1902.

The work of endeavoring to administer the regulation as to period of employment in (laundries) is extremely disheartening when work is carried on in spurts, the shamefully long hours, straining endurance to the utmost, alternating with days of idleness; the worker cannot be expected to develop any qualities but those of the casual laborer. (Page 174.)

CONCLUSION

We submit that in view of the facts above set forth and of legislative action extending over a period of more than sixty years in the leading countries of Europe, and in twenty of our States, it cannot be said that the Legislature of Oregon had no reasonable ground for believing that the public health, safety, or welfare did not require a legal limitation on women's work in manufacturing and mechanical establishments and laundries to ten hours in one day.

See *Holden v. Hardy*, 169 U. S. 366, 395, 397.

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BOSTON, January, 1908.