

NOTE ON THE EFFECTS OF HOME DUTIES ON FACTORY EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN

A STUDY OF ABSENTEEISM IN A GROUP OF 144 VOLUNTARY FACTORY WORKERS

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At the present time, when women volunteers are being urged to undertake industrial work, it seems relevant to consider the social relations which may affect their well-being, and favour or hinder their employment. The following investigation was therefore made during the period August to October 1946 on a group of women employed in a factory in the Oxford area, where an inquiry in wartime on the health of women conscripted into industry had shown a consistent deterioration in the state of nutrition associated with the complaint of fatigue (Wilson, 1945). The data obtained form the basis of the present study.

THE SOCIAL GROUP

Single women under middle age formed about four-fifths of the workers enrolled in this inquiry (Table 1). Previously they had worked as domestics or in other factories and shops or had been at home. They had settled down to their present occupation, 86% having been in the factory for over a year and 47% for over 5 years (Table 2).

ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS

In general the women were content with their jobs. With few exceptions they accepted without question the monotony of repetitive work and had no wish to learn anything further. In the workshops they were well protected against industrial hazards, only two women complained of eye strain and three had suffered from accidents. Many found their working environment both cold and draughty, pointing out that doors supposed to be closed were in fact kept open, but no attempt had been made to seek any improvement. Their earnings ranged from £1. 10s. 0d. to £6 weekly according to their job and individual skill. Deductions according to scale were made for income tax and to cover certain 'compulsory' stoppages, health insurance, hospital and Works Club contributions, in all amounting to about 1s. 6d. each week. Savings varied from 2s. to £1 weekly,

according to the home demands on the worker's earnings. Some women, who had previously held well-paid jobs, wished that overtime were still in force.

Table 1. *Age and civil condition of the 144 women voluntary factory workers*

Age (years)	Single	Married	Widows
14-25	53	7	1
25-45	62	9	3
Over 45	2	2	5
Total	117	18	9

Table 2. *Duration of present employment of 144 women factory workers*

Length of present employment	No. of industrial women	%
Under 1 year	19	13.2
1-5 years	57	39.6
5-10 years	51	35.4
10-15 years	11	7.6
15-20 years and upwards	6	4.2
Total	144	100.0

FACILITIES FOR MEALS

The daily routine for a 40 hr. week, with Saturday mornings free, was from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., with a 10 min. break at 10 a.m. and a meal hour at 1 p.m. Usually sandwiches or cakes brought from home were eaten during the mid-morning break together with a cup of tea or coffee purchased (price 2d.) from the canteen wagon. For the midday interval some workers brought sandwiches, returning home in the evening to a hot meal; others went home to dinner or down town to a café. Some used the factory canteen, but many women were convinced that canteen meals were expensive, monotonous and unappetizing. They liked 'to know what was in the dishes they ate. The canteen served food undercooked and in a mess, which hadn't ought to be.'

THE SOCIAL FRAMEWORK

Most of the women lived within the Oxford city limits or in the immediate neighbourhood. Having found work near their own homes, they were free from difficulties connected with accommodation and transport. Of the group 120, about five-sixths, were living with their own families; forty-four with bedrooms of their own. One-third of the group considered their home duties heavy because of the ill-health of some household member. Others had freedom for leisure activities, outings with relatives and friends, sewing, gardening and an occasional visit to a cinema.

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

On the whole the women considered that they kept in good health apart from colds and coughs often ascribed to the cold and draughty conditions of their employment. A clinical history of ill-health, due in

1945 to March 1946. In Table 3 the factory data for loss of working days are apportioned to the women as grouped in two classes according as information supplied during personal inquiry showed them to be women tied by home responsibilities (fifty-two women, mean age 31.6 years) or free from household cares (forty-four women, mean age 29.1 years). There was greater loss of working days by the workers who had the additional stress of home responsibilities and this was especially noteworthy for 'certified sickness', the comparable rates for the two groups being 5.2 and 2.2 days per woman respectively, during the 6-months period. For uncertified sickness and other causes the incidence in the two groups was much higher, but the disparity between them was much less marked, the rates per woman being 8.6 and 6.0 days respectively. Not only was there more time lost per worker, but the sickness incidence was also much greater among the fifty-two women with home duties who had a total case rate of 29%

Table 3. *Loss of working days apportioned to ninety-six women factory workers according to their home responsibilities, during the period September 1945 to March 1946*

Home conditions and no. of women	Time lost due to 'certified sickness' (in days)	Rate per woman	Cases per 100 women	Time lost due to 'uncertified sickness and other causes' (in days)	Rate per woman
52 women tied with home duties (mean age 31.6 years)	271 (15 cases)	5.2	29	445.5	8.6
44 women free from household cares (mean age 29.1 years)	95 (6 cases)	2.2	14	263.0	6.0

part to minor ailments during factory life, was given by thirty-five women. Fifteen others with heavy home duties complained of gastro-intestinal symptoms, or of fatigue and debility. On superficial inspection fifty-five women were graded as sub-normal physically. Enlargement of the thyroid gland ('Rossetti neck') was shown by eleven workers. The women, as a whole, said that they got their fair share of rations and extras (fruits, vegetables, etc.) and often paid tribute to a mother's good house-keeping.

Wartime conditions had in many instances severed relations with the family doctor and women found themselves on the panels of practitioners whom they still looked on as strangers and did not willingly visit.

From the Works Personnel Department it was possible to obtain absence records for ninety-six of the 144 women interviewed. In these records time lost in working days was ascribed to 'certified sickness', 'uncertified sickness' and 'other causes' respectively. The last 6-months period for which this information was available extended from September

for the 6-months period, as compared with 14% for the forty-four women free from household cares and responsibilities.

DISCUSSION

This group of women voluntary factory workers was to a large extent organized within a restricted social framework. Mostly unmarried and under middle age, the women had chosen employment within easy reach of their homes and their chief interest centred round their own families. They appreciated factory hours of work which permitted freedom at home in the evenings and at week-ends. Within the family group each worker had reciprocal rights and duties. By mutual endeavour the division of labour within the household enabled many to be free to pursue congenial leisure activities. But one-third of the group were tied with home responsibilities which they themselves recognized as heavy, some showing clinical signs of stress. The factory absentee record of the previous period confirmed a greater loss of working days for women thus handicapped. The considerable loss of working time recorded (Table 3)

for both 'tied' and 'free' women due to 'uncertified sickness and other causes' was found, on personal inquiry, to be largely due to ill-health which might have been avoided by alteration in the conditions of their employment.

SUMMARY

A study was made of factors leading to loss of working time in a local group of 144 women voluntary factory workers. The majority were single women whose interests centred in their families. One-third of these 144 women, owing to disability of some near

relative, had home duties which they realized were sufficiently heavy to interfere at times with their factory work; a contributory cause of absenteeism was ill-health, ascribed by many workers to cold and draughty working environment. Examination of the factory records showed more than twice the rate of absenteeism due to certified sickness among women with home ties and responsibilities.

This study was made possible by the willing co-operation of the Factory Management and their Welfare Department and of the women workers concerned.

REFERENCE

Wilson, D. C. (1945). *J. Hyg., Camb.*, **44**, 221.

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