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Conclusion to chapter 'The Scholarship on Working-class Women's Work and their Child Care Models' in *Infant Mortality and Working-Class Child Care, 1850-1899*

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in Sunderland, where women did little paid work, and low in other towns where paid work was more common'.²⁵⁷

The range of strategies working-class women employed whilst trying to combine either waged or unwaged work with child care was vast. The variety and scope of labour encompassed leads us to suspect that few of these women evaded any of their responsibilities to their families.

Conclusion

Historically, women have always worked, taking on a diverse range of occupations, bending with the capitalist wind when their families needed them to. The effort made by working-class women on behalf of their families is clear: long hours, and, in the pre-industrial era in particular, long days for women who had to combine waged work with child care in the home. This employment was often heavy labour such as working in mines, making heavy cheeses, or working with deadly substances such as white lead which poisoned both women and their infants. Although Amanda Vickery argues against a 'golden age' for women during pre-industrialisation it may have been easier for women to combine waged work with child care in the home. The extent to which this ability to combine the two roles eroded as women were moved from manor to mill with the onset of industrialisation is well articulated in the historical literature.

Since the onset of the industrial revolution women who needed to earn a wage have met with difficulties when children came along. The middle-class control of the mode of production obliged women and mothers who needed to contribute to their family economy to take up new roles, learn new skills when the need dictated whilst at the same time being vilified by contemporary witnesses whose sensibilities were affronted by this waged work – this role did not fit with the female image held by middle-class observers. However, coinciding with the rise of industrialisation was a notable increase in the number of baby-minders and of workhouse nurses who recruited by the *Guardians*. Once this badge of honour was given, female paupers were responsible for the care of the inmates of the workhouse.

Although many middle-class sensibilities were affronted by working-class women's waged work, this sentiment did not lead to the provision of working-class mothers with the funds to stay in their homes and care for their children. Thus, working-class women had to continue with their employment, contributing in great measure towards their family's finances in both northern and southern regions by making woollens, cottons, cheese, pots, matches, nails and chains.²⁵⁸ Historians argue that the separation issue forced northern mothers to give their infants over to a carer, be it kin, a baby minder or workhouse nurse, and all were maligned and subjected to scorn, ridicule and scrutiny from contemporaries who concluded that they were irresponsible. The perceived relationship between waged work and child

care in the northern districts, therefore, was characterised as unacceptable, because if a mother was prepared to 'go out to work' and the carer was prepared to take money for the care of an infant then neither were responsible women. However, we can see that either waged or unwaged work in all its guises colonised much of the working-class mother's day.

Northern factory mothers however, have been singled out as being the worst perpetrators of neglect, the antithesis of motherhood; uncaring and irresponsible mothers in a period of a high northern IMR. This is despite women who worked in the southern white lead trade, for example, also receiving criticism.²⁵⁹ For as Thomas Maudsley, the secretary for the Committee for Promoting the Nine Hour Act, remarked in 1872: 'The prolonged absence from home of the wife and mother causes an enormous amount of infant mortality and it must cause the elder children to be more or less neglected'.²⁶⁰

Indeed, the white lead trade was also suspected to harm the unborn infants of women who worked in it.²⁶¹ Yet, the reasons why women who worked in the factories of the north, and the day-carers and baby-minders who looked after their children whilst they did so, not to mention the workhouse nurses who were in loco parentis, seemingly placed their infants at higher risk than those who sought child care from kith and kin and neighbours can only be guessed at. What we do know is that this neglect features widely in both the contemporary and historiographical view. One of the reasons for the latter being the availability of a wealth of primary source material emanating from nineteenth century observers claiming to have witnessed neglect or its consequences.

The options, historians argue, open to working-class women when children came along were either to engage in 'waged work' and enlist carers to help, or to stay at home and tend to their children themselves. This binary choice meant that if women wanted or needed wages they either had to obtain help with child care or stay at home and undertake sweated labour, meanwhile relying on the wages of their oldest children to supplement the family income. But as we have seen, both options posed problems for working-class women. They were subjected to ridicule and scorn when they engaged in factory work, and they were exposed to alarming poverty when they stayed at home. Yet, there was little difference for working-class women in the work they took part in: work was an omnipresent part of the day and, as Spence argues, the perils of industrialisation would impose harm on to their young if they did not ensure their well-being. Spence reminds us that working-class women were the ones required to look out for their infants and, as we have seen, they were not workshy, and employers needed them to work, so we should ask if they developed a third way of caring for their children which at present eludes us.

Carol Dyhouse set the ball rolling by showing us that working-class mothers who worked in industry were able to improve their families' lot. Was this

so in the West Riding? And if so how did they do it? This book seeks to take Dyhouse's ideas further and discover whether there were similar positive aspects to women's child care in the north as in Birmingham. Did factory mothers, day-carers and workhouse nurses heed Spence's words to take care of infants? Is the separation issue for industrial mothers as evident as historians argue it is? If so, is it due to the burgeoning work opportunities for working class women? Have contemporaries and historians exaggerated the irresponsible actions of factory mothers and used it as a cloak for neglect? To answer these questions we now need to explore the child care practice of mothers in industrial waged work.