

And protect us from the market

Organized labor and the demand to shorten the workday of women in the 1860s and 1870s¹

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»As a feminist, I grow instinctively
wary when someone tells me he
wants to ›protect‹ me.«²

As this statement by Nancy Fraser epitomizes, the ambivalence of protection occupies a central place in contemporary feminist thought. Socio-historical research likewise displays a keen interest in the complex dynamics of female labor and protective legislation. In particular, labor historians have debated whether women's protection from market pressures promoted the emancipation of women or, on the contrary, fostered their further domination. According to Kathryn Kish Sklar, controversies over the ambiguity of female labor protection began as early as the 1920s, when Elizabeth Faulkner Baker argued that gendered labor legislation tended to protect women and men equally only in those trades where women constituted the majority of workers, while it regularly undermined their equal status in trades where men outnumbered women (Sklar 1988, 126–27; Baker 1925). This view was soon challenged by Clara M. Beyer and Elizabeth Brandeis who highlighted the positive impact of labor legislation for working women (Beyer 1929; Brandeis 1935). Fronts hardened over the course of the twentieth century. Following the rise of gender as a crucial category for

1 I wish to thank Thomas Welskopp and the anonymous reviewer for comments to an earlier version of this article.

2 Fraser 2011a, all translations by the author unless otherwise noted.

historical investigation in the 1970s and 1980s, labor historians increasingly interpreted special legislation for women as an essentialization of difference that undermined the equal position of men and women both in the labor market as well as in society at large. In their view, early instances of labor legislation for working women reflected the ambition of the state to restrict gendered groups to their supposedly natural spheres and tasks (Kessler-Harris 2003, 180–216; Lehrer 1987, 227–40). Other historians, however, pointed out that not only did nineteenth-century labor legislation end some of the most exploitative working conditions, it also paved the way for laws protecting women and men alike (Dye 1980; Sklar 1988). According to their interpretation, the protection of working women had the effect of an *opening wedge* towards the universal or gender-neutral protection of labor.³

Interestingly, the concept of an *opening wedge* already informed one of the earliest protective demands of organized workers, that is, the reduction of the daily working hours for women (Robertson 2000, 46). Characteristic for later discussions in other fields of labor protection, working-class activists linked the demand to shorten the female workday to hopes for a general reduction of working hours. The normal workday for men, they argued, would automatically follow legislative intervention for the sake of working women. Yet to what extent legislation to shorten women's hours actually caused or contributed to a reduction of working hours for men is difficult to assess. After all, many factors, including the professionalization of trade unions, the emergence of scientific management, the ups and downs of migration, the global rhythms of production relocations and capital flows, and the outbreak of wars had a decisive impact on the development of female labor and protective legislation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Thus instead of investigating the causal relationship between female labor legislation and the length of male workdays, the following pages explore the ideas that

3 For a short overview of this debate, see also Kessler-Harris et al. 1995, 3–5. For a critical analysis of the *opening wedge* argument, see also Boxer 1986, 55–56; Kessler-Harris 2003, 211–13.

were put forward by early trade unions and social-democratic parties in Europe and the U.S. in the 1860s and 1870s. Juxtaposing the arguments that were presented in favor of shorter hours for women and men respectively, this article argues that the rationale behind demands for shorter hours for women has obstructed rather than promoted female emancipation and gender equality. Socio-historical research on protective labor legislation has long tended to concentrate on the four decades or so that spanned from the mid-1880s to the aftermath of World War I. The growing acceptance of protective legislation and the increasing international co-operation of labor reformers make the fin-de-siècle a natural starting point for analyses. This does not mean, however, that conflicts about the desirability or harmfulness of protective labor laws for women were nonexistent prior to the 1880s. In the U.S. as in Europe, debates about special labor legislation were in fact particularly virulent in the 1860s and 1870s, long before the dawn of the Progressive Era in America's Gilded Age or the *Neuer Kurs* in Wilhelmine Germany.

The movement for a shorter workday

If there was one demand that unified early organized labor across the Western hemisphere, it was the shorter workday.⁴ From Australia to England, from Germany to the U.S., from the Netherlands to France, labor reformers, nascent socialist parties, and the young trade union movement struggled fiercely for a legislative reduction of daily hours (Cross 1989; Deutschmann 1985; Roediger and Foner 1989; Karsten 1990; Kimber and Love 2007). These movements therefore not only addressed their respective national arenas, they also pushed for transnational co-operation. As a result, the newly established First International raised the demand for shorter hours to, as the association put it at its Geneva congress in 1866, »the common platform of the working classes all over the world« (IWA 1868, 5). Transnational co-operation fostered a

4 Although historical research increasingly acknowledges the transnational character of nineteenth-century struggles for shorter hours, non-Western societies have thus far received little attention in this respect.

lively exchange about the rationale that helped legitimize this demand. It was comprised of a diverse set of arguments that simultaneously addressed the respective national polities, economies, and societies (Reick 2015). With respect to the political realm, the universal reduction of hours was regularly interpreted as a precondition for democratic participation. Within the system of wage labor, workers could be distinguished from slaves because they had political liberties and civil rights. In order to become educated and responsible citizens of the republic—whether the latter actually existed as in the U.S. or was hoped for as in Prussia—wage laborers needed to be protected from a free labor market (Montgomery 1993; Roediger and Foner 1989, 81–122; Weaver 1988, 77–102). Legislative market intervention thus not only promised to secure democratic sovereignty and political equality, it also resonated with the prevalent concept of *producerism*. Emphasizing the role of the laborer as an independent producer of value, the shorter-hour movement drew upon the conviction that workers should enjoy the omnipresent full fruits of their labor and benefit from the increase in productivity which they had, after all, made possible (Rock 1988, 21–39; Welskopp 2000, 566–667).⁵ The various concepts of productive co-operation that traveled back and forth across the Atlantic in the 1860s were vivid expressions of this quest for autonomy and control. In more pragmatic terms, shorter hours were also seen as a remedy against unemployment and a means to increase wages by accustoming workers to more refined lifestyles (Montgomery 1967, 249–60). At the same time, demands for shorter hours were regarded as a wedge that could be driven into the paradigm of *laissez-faire* economics. Resistance against unregulated labor markets were thus also expressions of a struggle against hegemonic political-economic theory (Cross 1989, 21–51). In addition to political rights and economic demands, arguments for shorter hours drew upon a broad field of social or cultural considerations. Among other things, the demand featured as a precondition for education, cultural refinement,

5 For the decline of the concept of producerism in late nineteenth-century America, see Hallgrimsdottir and Benoit 2007, 1393–1411.

the observance of religious obligations or the deserved enjoyment of leisure and free time »for what we will« (Rosenzweig 1985, Murphy 1988, 59–76).

These political, economic, and social arguments were embedded in a rhetoric that, at its heart, opposed the commodification of labor which followed from the proliferation of wage work. In his classic study, *The Great Transformation*, the political economist Karl Polanyi described the transformation of natural phenomena (such as land) or human activities (such as labor) into marketable entities as *fictitious commodification* (Polanyi 2001, 71–80). According to Polanyi, this transformation was facilitated as well as opposed by a *double movement* that determined the socio-economic dynamics of the nineteenth century. On the one side, reformers and employers promoted the liberalization of markets for actual as well as fictitious commodities in order to boost economic growth and end the specter of pauperism that haunted Europe and urban America. On the other side, a movement emerged that struggled to protect society from the unregulated access of this very market. In the eyes of the latter, human work could not be degraded to the status of a commodity (Polanyi 2001, 223–28). The transnational movement to shorten the workday by legislative intervention in the free market provides a prime example of what Polanyi has called a *movement for social protection*. As suggested above, early social-democrats and trade unionists opposed the unfettered commodification of labor as a violation of their political rights as free and equal citizens, of their economic rights as independent producers of value, and of their social or cultural rights as autonomous human beings or precious divine creations. The notion of de-commodification also featured prominently in discussions about the legal reduction of the female workday. When it came to women, however, opposition to the commodification of labor drew upon a very different rationale. The following pages analyze this distinction by addressing three elements in popular working-class discussions on the need to protect women from the commodifying pressures of the labor market. These elements were: (a) widespread male opposition to and delegitimization of female wage labor; (b) adherence to the concept of a

family wage provided by working men, and (c) androcentric anxieties about the impact of women's mobility on female sexuality.

Working men's perspectives on shorter hours for women

With the notable exception of Switzerland, most workers' movements in mid nineteenth-century Western Europe expressed approval for special legislation restricting the working hours of women.⁶ In England, the demand for special legislation was already well established by that time. When the first round of normal workday agitation hit the country in the 1830s, labor reformers had initially struggled for a gender-neutral introduction of shorter hours. Yet given the persistent laissez-faire hegemony in political economics, England's Ten Hour Movement increasingly realized that any comprehensive bill addressing the working hours of all adults irrespective of their sex would be rejected by parliament due to the supposed violation of the freedom of the worker to sell his labor power under whatever conditions he might choose. The Ten Hour Men thus joined England's Chartists in the early 1840s and focused on the passage of shorter-hour legislation for children and women only. Clearly, the reformers were confident that shorter hours for women would result in shorter hours for men, too. After all, men could not simply continue to work when women, who performed a particular auxiliary task in the production process, left the shop floor.⁷ Yet the closer the once gender-neutral agitation moved towards gender-conscious legislation, the more the rationale for cutting hours revealed its discriminatory bias. It was in this context of differentiation that restrictions of working hours for women were openly justified as a means to stop and reverse the spread of female wage labor (Lewis and Rose

6 Switzerland had already introduced gender-neutral working hour legislation in the first half of the nineteenth century. According to Regina Wecker, however, this universalistic approach increasingly eroded in the second half of the century (Wecker 1995, 63–64).

7 Sklar makes a similar point with respect to the early American movement (Sklar 1988, 109–12).

1995, 95–101). Over the coming decades, the demand to de-commodify female labor became a crucial element in the argumentation of shorter-hour activists across Western Europe.

In Germany, this argumentation was readily taken up by members of the nascent socialist movement in the 1860s. Many of the male activists voiced deep concern over the market-mediated allocation of female labor. In a letter to the editors of the newly established party paper *Social-Demokrat*, a typesetter from Berlin argued that the current system of wage labor was based, as he put it, on »the law of supply and demand that equated the propertyless worker with a commodity that capital could exploit« (Einsendung von Arbeitern). What capital required was a constant supply of cheap labor to which it had unrestricted access thanks to a free market. The progressing commodification of new segments of society—such as women or children—was not a movement for emancipation, but an effort to increase the pool of available labor and, as the author feared, to tighten competition among those who offered their labor for sale. Working men were deeply disturbed by the commodification of female labor and the resulting increase in the formal employment of women. Yet it was not the fact that women performed work in general that offended these men—after all, they were accustomed to women working in home production, agriculture or domestic services, where the latter faced both physically challenging tasks and devilishly long workdays. What had changed over the course of the century, however, was the growing separation of the spheres of waged and non-waged work (Kocka 1990, 467–68). While the sight of women working tirelessly on the field or in the kitchen failed to produce public outcries, the sight of women engaged in wage labor violated the moral senses of commentators as diverse as Baron Carl Ferdinand von Stumm-Hallberg on the one side and Marx on the other.⁸ In a letter to Wilhelm Liebknecht's *Volk-*

8 The notorious employer »King« Stumm had replaced all working women in his factories by mid-century. Over the course of the second half of the century, he actively supported parliamentary measures to restrict female wage labor (see Braun 1993, 89–90). While Marx, on the other hand, welcomed the alleged universalizing tendency of capital that would

staat, one reader exclaimed angrily that the liberal myth of female emancipation through commodification was nothing less than

the »legal« expression of economic circumstances which restrict the ability of male workers to sell their labor power [...]. Like men women are thrown on the labor market; and like men they are vested with »civil liberties« only to be forced into a competition with men compared to whom they are much more vulnerable. Men are at least protected by their stronger mental and physical constitution; women however, bereft of their male protectors, are forced to leave their natural sphere of activity and, alienated from their very nature, are left to enjoy these »liberties.« (Roßbach)

Characteristic of working-class conceptions of female labor, the author implied that although the free labor market was indeed a sphere of contractual freedom, it was also a sphere of social struggle and industrial conflict. Neither women nor the work women performed belonged here. Opposition to the commodification of female labor therewith reflected a widespread conviction among male workers that the work of women constituted a primordial duty rather than a free producer's activity. When early German social-democrats struggled to introduce a normal workday especially for women, many of them were driven by the hope that shorter hours would contribute to the eventual abolition of female wage labor. In their eyes, the restriction of female labor would push women

eventually transform all labor, irrespective of gender, age or ethnicity, into one powerful international proletariat, he shared the moral conviction that female labor jeopardized the essence of true womanhood. Quoting excessively from reports by English factory inspectors, Marx analyzed the situation of working children and women. One of the investigators lamented the fact that young women were working side by side with men: »These females employed with the men, hardly distinguished from them in their dress, and begrimed with dirt and smoke, are exposed to the deterioration of character, arising from the loss of self-respect, which can hardly fail to follow from their unfeminine occupation.« It is the same in glasswork,« Marx added affirmatively (Marx 1974, 260, footnote 2).

out of a sphere in which they did not belong and ease the wage competition that burdened male workers.

Working-class resistance against the unchecked commodification of female labor tied in, secondly, with the dominant idea of a family wage provided by the male head of household. Shortly before emigrating to the U.S., where he would become an important working-class voice in labor politics, the prominent social-democrat and trade unionist Paul Grottkau addressed a meeting of cigar workers who had convened at the pub *Zum Deutschen Kaiser* in Berlin. Grottkau argued that child, female, and convict labor all qualified as unfree work that lacked the autonomy of a free producer. Yet while all three forms of work increased wage competition for working men, child and female labor also destabilized social and familial cohesion (Berlin, 3–4). In a similar vein, the Austrian workers' newspaper *Arbeiter-Blatt* declared that it did not oppose female labor per se. Women were indeed qualified for many jobs especially in the service sector. What it did oppose, however, was any kind of female labor that kept women away from their duties at home. According to the paper, the evil of female wage labor was revealed in the mobility of working women. No woman who was forced to leave the house early in the morning and return late at night could provide the comfort and care that were the pillars of family life. »Female labor outside of the home,« the article concluded, »destroys the family environment and is thus a social malady that needs to be abolished wherever it exists« (Frauen und Kinderarbeit). At first sight, labor reform and trade union movements in post-bellum America appeared less hostile towards free female labor. In the summer of 1866, delegates from various unions, city trade assemblies, and eight-hour leagues convened in Baltimore where they founded the *National Labor Union* (NLU). The NLU reflected the growing conviction among unionists that only concerted action could enforce substantial improvements for the nation's working classes (Foner 1949, 370–88). As the NLU declared in its 1867 *Address to the Workingmen*, it generally welcomed female labor. Yet there were instances when opposition was legitimate. According to the NLU, the working men of America objected

to the introduction of female labor when used as a means to depreciate the value of their own, and accomplish the selfish ends of an employer, when under the specious plea of disinterested philanthropy, the ulterior object has not been the evaluation of women, but the degradation of man, or, as has been the case in almost every instance, where the labor of one has been brought into competition with the other. (Commons et al. 1958, 156)

The NLU could not have been vaguer. In a system of free wage labor, the opening of the labor market to new social groups necessarily transformed the latter into competitors vis-à-vis the already existing labor force. To welcome unrestricted female labor only as long as it did not intensify labor competition was either carelessly naïve or deliberately dishonest. Despite its theoretically female-friendly approach, the NLU's ambiguity did little to help dispel reservations that existed among many male reformers and trade unionists. Even prominent NLU leaders such as William H. Sylvis, an outspoken defender of women's rights, believed »that once relations between capital and labor had been revolutionized, women would leave wage labor and return to their »naturak place in the home« (DuBois 1978, 120). And many of the rank and file did not want to wait that long. Several of the local groups that together made up the NLU openly embraced the demand for shorter hours for women as a means to re-enforce the hegemony of the male provider. Discussing the deteriorating effects of unchecked female workdays on male wages and family life, the prominent labor analyst P. M. McGill argued that heavily overworked women, »tender, gentle, patient, weak, and delicate woman—the linking spirit between man and angel in every sphere—mothers, sisters, daughters,« were particularly worthy of protective legislation (McGill 1867, 17). New York's *National Workman* agreed. There was no doubt that »women needed, much more than men, protection for their labor« (Labor Movements). The increase of female wage labor posed a serious threat to proletarian family wage concepts on both sides of the Atlantic. The powerful German immigrant groups that mushroomed in cities like Chicago or New York during the 1860s and 1870 thereby functioned as a bridge that transported this notion back

and forth across the ocean. Characteristic for this transfer of ideas, New York's *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, one of several German-speaking papers addressing the highly politicized working-class community of Manhattan's *Little Germany*, published an article in the summer of 1873 that had appeared several weeks before in the Leipzig-based *Volksstaat*. As the article declared, employers naturally rejoiced over the commodification of female labor. After all, the weaker sex was much more submissive and was usually willing to accept a wage much lower than that of men. In so doing, working women depressed male wages and brought misery to working-class households. And, readers in Germany and the U.S. were informed, this was in fact exactly what capital wanted from the proletarian family:

To the bourgeoisie, the proletarian »family« is nothing more than an institution that serves to breed new workers for the exploitative passion of the capitalist lords, providing the labor market with as much human meat as possible. (Die Arbeiterbewegung und die Frauen (a and b))

Against this capitalist attack on male authority in the family as well as on the payroll, organized labor struggled to enforce protective measures that they hoped would reduce the unchecked availability of female labor. The normal workday for women was such a protective measure. The less women were allowed to compete with men on the labor market, the more men would be able to reclaim control over the family wage.

Both the delegitimization of female labor as well as the working-class concept of a male family breadwinner were closely linked to proletarian anxieties about the unchecked mobility of women and uncontrolled female sexuality. Here, too, opposition to the commodification of female labor played a crucial role. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, social-democrats and labor reformers followed very closely discussions about female wage labor in neighboring countries. The Austrian workers' paper *Gleichheit*, for instance, was markedly shocked by the spread of female labor in Berlin, where each year more and more women were forced into the labor market (Sozialpolitische Rundschau). No wonder the question of female labor featured so highly on the agenda of organized labor in

the German capital. Early in 1872, Wilhelm Hasselmann, a prominent member of the Lassallean *Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein* (ADAV) and the rather aggressive editor of the *Neuer Social-Demokrat*, delivered a speech about the situation of working women. Having rejected the proliferation of female wage labor for some time, Hasselmann eventually came to the conclusion that the »saddest aspect of the women's question is that women and girls are treated as commodities not only on the labor market, but in general« (Vereins-Theil a). Hasselmann here introduced a striking twist to the anti-commodification discussion. Women not only needed special protection vis-à-vis the commodification of their labor power, they also needed special protection vis-à-vis the commodification of their *bodies*. According to social-democratic analysis, the female proletariat was subject to two-fold abuse by the bourgeoisie. As if it were not enough that the ruling class kept their fathers, brothers, and husbands in constant misery and poverty, it also exploited their destitute and defenseless daughters for the pleasures of its rich and idle sons. In order to de-commodify both female labor and female bodies, Hasselmann suggested that if women were protected from the labor market, protection from the sex market would follow automatically. If women were, in other words, spared the demeaning experience of wage labor, they could return to the protected sphere of the home:

Legislation has to attend first to the protection of female factory workers [...]. Only if women are given back their proper role can we speak of emancipation. And this requires an end to the current system of production in which the female worker is a commodity. (Vereins-Theil b)

End the commodification of female labor and you will end the commodification of female sexuality. The two forms of commodification were presented here as equally immoral practices that needed to be addressed not by the socialist state of the future, but by the capitalist state of the present. Most of the speakers who followed Hasselmann emphatically endorsed his talk. Yet there was one solitary voice of opposition. A certain Mr. Jörrissen, who was introduced as a »writer« in order to

emphasize his non-worker status, argued that women were the true slaves of the present day. Hasslemann's demand to push women back to the home where they would enjoy the fruits of their husbands' labor was in fact the best way to maintain the dependency and suppression of the female sex. Even if women were not made for wage labor, the ability to offer their labor power in exchange for a wage not only spared them the experience of prostitution, it also fostered their emancipation from dependency on men. As long as the current system of wage labor was in place, the commodification of labor offered women an avenue towards greater equality and emancipation (Vereins-Theil b). Jörrissen's response was fiercely opposed by the assembled working-class Berliners. To them, the commodification of female labor was just as morally compromising as prostitution.⁹ This logic rested on a well-established legacy. As early as the 1830s, activists for shorter hours in England had put female wage labor in the vicinity of promiscuity and prostitution. Michael Thomas Sadler, one of the leading supporters of factory reform at the dusk of the Georgian Era, argued that mills were in »fact little better than brothels« (Lewis and Rose 1995, 96). The equation of female labor commodification with the commodification of the female body was based on a growing concern about the mobility of working women. In this respect, working-class voices were in full agreement with the conservative movement that likewise deplored female mobility and the resulting disruption of notions of domesticity. Female wage labor pulled women out of their proper place and pushed them into the mines and workshops, where they often worked on par with male workers (though usually for lower pay). The unchecked commodification of female labor thus not only undermined male authority at the workplace, but also at home. English observers were shocked by the sight of women »drinking, talking, and smoking in pubs,« unwilling to perform their familial duties (Lewis and Rose 1995, 99). Threats to male authority and the concept of female domesticity thus constitute a third element in nineteenth-century rhetoric in favor of shorter hour for women.

9 Kathrin Braun reaches a similar conclusion; see Braun 1993, 67–74.

Conclusion

This article has hopefully shown two things. First, it testified to the usefulness of the Polanyian framework which is currently enjoying a great revival in the social sciences.¹⁰ As Polanyi has suggested, the phenomenon of commodification indeed constitutes one of the fundamental—and yet strikingly understudied—elements in the repertoire of organized labor in the second half of the nineteenth century. Early social-democratic and labor reform discussions were heavily influenced by wide-spread opposition to the idea that human work was a commodity like any other. The transnational movement to shorten the workday that emerged in the 1860s represents a movement for market protection par excellence. The Polanyian notion of anti-commodification thus contributes greatly to a better understanding of the diversity of past social struggles. Pushing the historiographical focus on protective legislation from the decades around the turn of the century back to the 1860s and 1870s, this article, secondly, illustrated the ambiguity of protection, which escaped Polanyi's attention. As the introductory statement by Nancy Fraser indicates, protection can be both promise and menace to those to be protected. In a current re-evaluation of Polanyi's *Great Transformation*, Fraser emphasizes a third category that emerged out of the free market vs. social protection struggle, that is, the movement for emancipation. According to Fraser, the commodification of society not only provoked responses by movements for social protection, it also gave rise to new claims to justice and recognition. Such demands were neither necessarily congruent with those of social protection nor with those of the free market. Rather, they built a movement in its own right, at times pairing with social protection against the market, at times joining the market against social protection's flip side—domination—at times

10 The past decade has witnessed a tremendous increase in studies on Polanyi; see among many others Block and Somers 2014; Bugra and Agartan 2007; Brie 2015; Dale 2010; Hann and Hart 2009; Harvey, Ramlogan, and Randles 2007. On the Polanyian revival, see Mendell 2001.

striving against both. Though movements for emancipation struggle against a wide array of injustices, they are united, Fraser suggests, in their desire to »remove obstacles that prevent some people from participating fully, or on par with others, in social life« (Fraser 2011b, 149). This definition points to Fraser's idea of participatory parity which, in turn, rests on her notion of recognition (Fraser and Gordon 1992; Fraser 1995; Fraser 1998). Unlike Charles Taylor or Axel Honneth, Fraser does not understand recognition primarily as an act of self-realization but as a question of justice. In her eyes, it is first and foremost

unjust that some individuals and groups are denied the status of full partners in social interaction simply as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of interpretation and evaluation in whose construction they have not equally participated and that disparage their distinctive characteristics or the distinctive characteristics assigned to them. (Fraser 1998, 3)

Movements for emancipation are thus struggles for justice through recognition as equal partners. Fraser has shown that Polanyi remained blind to the central distinction between emancipation and protection because he disregarded what Fraser calls the *ethical substance*, the *normative stuff* or *Sittlichkeit* that legitimized any form of embedding and protection (Fraser 2011b, 147). Societies did not react as homogenous entities to threats triggered by marketization. Instead, states institutionalized only certain protective provisions which were signified and substantiated by societal actors – actors among whom the nascent workers' movement featured prominently. Such selective protection helped establish social hierarchies rather than promote the equal protection of *all* members of society. Drawing attention to the distinct rationale of the struggles for normal male and female workdays, this article revealed that arguments put forward in defense of gender-neutral workday legislation seldom reappeared in labor reform debates pushing for special legislation for women. In the eyes of early social-democrats and labor reformers, women required protection from the free market not because the latter jeopardized women's status as citizens, as producers of value or as equal

human beings. Rather, working women were in need for protection from the laws of supply and demand because these very laws challenged male authority both at the workplace as well as in the family. In so doing, the free labor market threatened to undermine the alleged essence of womanhood. From the commodification of female labor, it was but a short way to the commodification of the female body. While gender-neutral arguments devised by and for men drew upon an emancipatory rhetoric of equality and participation, arguments for shorter hours for women rested on an essentializing logic of reproductive duty, moral vulnerability, and economic marginality—a set of arguments that was eventually expanded by the imperialist-racist concern for the health of *the mothers of the race* (Braun 1993, 68; Jansz 1995; Kessler-Harris 2003, 191 and 201–2). Rather than acting as an *opening wedge* towards greater equality, dominant working-class rhetoric in support of protective labor legislation for women facilitated the emergence of separate argumentations for men and for women. While arguments for the de-commodification of male labor were in fact meant to promote the emancipation of working men, arguments pushing for the a de-commodification of female labor were hardly able to conceal their underlying discriminatory agenda.

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