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From Danger and Motherhood to Health and Beauty: Health Advice for the Factory Girl in Early Twentieth-Century Britain¹

Abstract

A survey of government reports and the archives and journals of other agencies interested in industrial health in early twentieth-century Britain has led us to conclude that, in addition to apprehension about the potentially harmful impact of industrial work on the reproductive health of women, there was a great deal of interest in the health of young, unmarried girls in the workplace, particularly the factory. Adopting a broader time frame, we suggest that the First World War, with its emphasis on the reproductive health of women, was an anomalous experience in a broader trend which stressed the growing acceptability of women's work within industry. Concern with girls' health and welfare embraced hygiene, diet, exercise, recreation, fashion and beauty within and outside of the workplace, as well as the impact of the boredom and monotony associated with industrial work. The health problems of young women workers tended to be associated

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with behaviour and environment rather than biology, as were anxieties about the impact of work on morals, habits and character. Efforts to ensure that young female factory workers would be equipped to take their place as citizens and parents, we argue, often dovetailed rather than diverged with the 'boy labour' question.

Historians examining the industrial work of women in Britain in the early years of the twentieth century have emphasized the dangers such work was believed to pose to women themselves and their unborn children. Barbara Harrison has argued that the primary objective of state intervention was to ensure social control and reproductive health; consequently married women were targeted, despite the predominance of young unmarried women in the workforce.² Similarly, Carolyn Malone has characterized the legislative restriction of women's work, prompted by the popular press and enacted through the dangerous trades legislation, as a policy of foetal protection which sought first and foremost to preserve women's reproductive health.³ Harrison and Malone's research supports a larger historiography which argues that women's health became an issue of state concern tangentially through the development of maternal and child welfare policies.⁴

Investigation of government reports and the archives and journals of other agencies interested in industrial health has led us to conclude that, in addition to apprehension about the potentially harmful impact of industrial work on the reproductive health of women, there was a great deal of interest in the health of young, unmarried girls in the workplace. This predated the First World War, ran alongside heightened wartime concerns about maternal health and continued into the inter-war years, emphasizing a broad approach to health education and urging the establishment of facilities for young women within and outside the workplace. Interest in the relationship between young

² Barbara Harrison, *Not Only The 'Dangerous Trades': Women's Work and Health in Britain, 1880–1914* (London, 1996); Barbara Harrison, 'Women and health', in June Purvis (ed.), *Women's History: Britain, 1850–1945* (London, 1995), 157–92.

³ Carolyn Malone, *Women's Bodies and Dangerous Trades in England, 1880–1914* (Woodbridge, 2003). The 'dangerous trades' were industries or processes legally defined under the 1891 Factory Act, and for women referred mainly to work with phosphorus or lead. During the First World War, the risks of work in munitions were highlighted. See e.g. Antonia Ineson and Deborah Thom, 'T.N.T. poisoning and the employment of women workers in the First World War', in Paul Weindling (ed.), *The Social History of Occupational Health* (London, 1985), 89–107.

⁴ See e.g. Jane Lewis, *The Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare in England 1900–1939* (London, 1980); Deborah Dwork, *War is Good for Babies and Other Young Children: A History of the Infant and Child Welfare Movement in England 1898–1918* (London, 1989); Anna Davin, 'Imperialism and motherhood', *History Workshop Journal*, 5 (1978), 9–66; Valerie Fildes, Lara Marks and Hilary Marland (eds), *Women and Children First: International Maternal and Infant Welfare 1870–1945* (London and New York, 1992).

women, health and the workplace was embraced by youth organizations such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and girls' clubs, as well as government and industrial welfare agencies. It dovetailed with a growing interest in the youth of both sexes in the early twentieth century, and concerns about the role of young people in preserving the interests of the state and the social and moral fabric of British society as future parents.⁵ Much of the health advice targeted at young women workers addressed issues of fashion, beauty and behaviour, reflecting anxieties that the financial freedom and independence gained on entering paid employment could lead young women to fritter away their wages and moral integrity and engage in sexual activity.⁶

This article focuses on interest in girls' health, but will additionally trace how this correlated to some extent with anxieties regarding the future roles of boy workers as parents and citizens. In so doing, we engage with Harry Hendrick's analysis of the male youth problem and suggest that the concerns he identified associated with young working-class men largely applied to young working-class women.⁷ While most studies of this period have explored the effects of war work on women there was also considerable concern about the impact of industrial work on the health of boy labourers. The *Boys' Welfare Journal* warned that amidst the production demands of the First World War, 'the boy was in danger of being overlooked, not only as a future workman, but as a future citizen and father', and expressed concerns about boys' low morale and juvenile crime.⁸ There were similar fears that the factory work undertaken by girl workers could exert 'a very damaging influence on health, mind and morals'.⁹ Yet if care was taken to

⁵ Associated most famously with G. Stanley Hall, *Youth: Its Education, Regimen, and Hygiene* (New York, 1906).

⁶ See A. Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munition Workers in the Great War* (Berkeley, 1994), 143–52; S. Alexander, 'Becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and '30s', in S. Alexander, *Becoming a Woman and other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History* (London, 1994), 203–24; A. Woollacott, "'Khaki fever" and its control: gender, age and sexual morality on the British homefront in the First World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 29 (1994), 325–47. David Fowler also points to the increasing affluence of young wage earners—male and female—and the corresponding rise of a teenage consumer culture in the inter-war years. His account explores how traditional youth organizations, such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, had to abandon character building objectives by the mid- to late 1930s to compete with more popular attractions such as the cinema. See D. Fowler, *The First Teenagers: The Lifestyle of Young Wage-Earners in Interwar Britain* (London, 1995), 93–166.

⁷ Harry Hendrick, *Images of Youth: Age, Class and the Male Youth Problem, 1880–1920* (Oxford, 1990).

⁸ R. Hyde, 'Editor's notes', *Boys' Welfare Journal*, 1 (1918), 1–4; 3.

⁹ Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London, 1981).

improve working conditions, provide moral guidance and direct employees to appropriate jobs, the workplace was also seen as having the potential to improve the health of young workers. This was vital at a time when the economic labour of young wage earners, particularly young women, took on a new significance. Barclay Baron asserted in 1911 that six out of seven of all boys and girls in Britain were compelled by financial necessity to leave school at the age of 14 to become wage earners.¹⁰ In the inter-war years, regional variations in employer demands for particular types of labour and high levels of adult unemployment ensured that the wages of young workers often played a pivotal role in household economies.¹¹

Interest in the wider health concerns of adolescent girls was thus a natural response to the increasing dominance of young, unmarried women in the labour force. In 1901, over half of all women workers were under 25 years of age; 61 per cent of girls aged between 15 and 24 participated in the labour force, falling off to 31 per cent for the age group 25–34. By 1911, 77 per cent of women workers were single, 14 per cent married and 9 per cent either divorced or widowed.¹² The proportion of young women active in the labour force remained steady at 61 per cent at the turn of the century and 63 per cent in 1921, increasing to 69 per cent in 1931; this compared with a labour participation rate of 23 per cent and 24 per cent for women over the age of 24 in 1921 and 1931, respectively.¹³

After the late nineteenth century the nature of women's work changed considerably, with a steady decline in the numbers entering domestic service and the clothing and textile trades, and a rise in employment in the metals, paper, chemicals and food, drink and tobacco industries, as well as clerical and distributive services. These trends continued up until 1951, with women, especially young women, being increasingly absorbed into lighter industry.¹⁴ Yet, even as many young women moved into lighter industry or white-collar work, the

¹⁰ Barclay Baron, *The Growing Generation: A Study of Working Boys and Girls in our Cities* (London, 1911), published by the inter-denominational Student Christian Movement, 30.

¹¹ Discussed in Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family 1918–50* (Oxford, 2005), 54–84.

¹² Statistics for 1901 and 1911 taken from Harrison, *Not Only the 'Dangerous Trades'*, 5–6, 8. Harrison and Todd draw upon the Census Returns for England and Wales.

¹³ Todd, *Young Women*, 19–20.

¹⁴ Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870–1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Brighton, 1984), 156–7; Miriam Glucksmann, *Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Interwar Britain* (London, 1990), 46–56. Selina Todd points to the centrality of paid employment as a defining force in the identity of young women, as in the inter-war period the new light manufacturing industries were seen as offering acceptable and desirable occupations for young women: Todd, *Young Women*.

factory remained emblematic as a site of health improvement into the inter-war years, and the focus of many welfare interventions.

The First World War was notable for women's work in a number of ways, seeing a surge in the employment of young women in heavy industry, especially munitions, as well as their substitution of men in white-collar employment. Already by April 1916 the female labour force had grown by 600,000.¹⁵ Driven by concern about the heavy, unpleasant and risky nature of much factory work, anxieties about maternal and foetal welfare were heightened, centring not only upon the current generation of mothers, but also young women workers, Britain's future mothers.¹⁶ Reiterating fears articulated during the Boer War regarding the poor physical and mental status of the fighting force and the potential shortage of recruits for future conflicts, even the *Woman's Dreadnought*, a pacifist, socialist, feminist paper, stressed the need to 'save every saveable child'.¹⁷ As the infant welfare campaign and efforts to spread the ideals of mothercraft took hold, girls were urged to learn the laws of health, to develop domestic skills, to prepare to become competent mothers and 'to lay a foundation of health and happiness for... future generations'.¹⁸ A number of influential reports, meanwhile, analysed the relationship between work and women's health, focussing on issues of female physiology and maternity, most notably the War Cabinet Committee Report on Women in Industry of 1919.¹⁹ Yet as Gail Braybon has demonstrated, the First World War was also seen as a time of great potential, highlighting the need to improve health and offering the opportunity of 'making industrial work enhance the health of the nation, and of safeguarding maternity and infant welfare'.²⁰

The First World War acted as a tremendous catalyst in propelling the state to take action to ensure the health of employees working in the munitions industry in order to maintain levels of production. The Health of Munition Workers Committee (HMWC) was established by the government in 1915 to investigate factors which might impact on the health and productivity of employees. It made far reaching recommendations on welfare supervision, hours of work, hygiene, lighting and ventilation of workplaces, and the provision of medical,

¹⁵ J.M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (Houndmills, 1985), 46.

¹⁶ J. Pickstone, 'Production, community and consumption: the political economy of twentieth-century medicine', in R. Cooter and J. Pickstone (eds), *Companion to Medicine in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2003), 1–20.

¹⁷ 'The baby saving crusade', *Woman's Dreadnought*, 17 April 1915. Cited in Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War* (London and New York, 1981), 112.

¹⁸ Agnes L. Stenhouse and E. Stenhouse, *A Health Reader for Girls* (London, 1918), 3–4.

¹⁹ Reports from the War Cabinet Committee on *Women in Industry*, 1919 (Cmd 135 and 167).

²⁰ Adelaide Anderson, *Women Workers and the Health of the Nation* (pamphlet, 1918). Cited in Braybon, *Women Workers*, 112.

recreational, washing and catering facilities. Its findings were encapsulated in two reports and a series of memoranda.²¹ Records of the Factory Inspectorate, meanwhile, provide snapshots of isolated examples of welfare work and indicate how the lady factory inspectors, first appointed in 1893, urged the amelioration of workplace conditions to promote health amongst working women. The Boys' Welfare Society was established in 1918 by the Reverend Robert Hyde, who had helped Seebohm Rowntree set up the Boys' Welfare Department in the Ministry of Munitions two years earlier. In 1919 the Society broadened its name and agenda, becoming the Industrial Welfare Society. Its mouthpiece, the *Journal of Industrial Welfare*, soon concerned itself too with the physical and mental health of girl workers. A range of voluntary organizations and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) also actively debated issues connected with girls' health.²² These sources demonstrate the ways in which young working women were targeted, advised to eat well, to dress sensibly and to exercise to improve their general health and physical appearance. Factory owners were urged to install amenities within their premises which would safeguard and improve the health and welfare of their female employees and offer pleasant distractions from the often monotonous work that they were expected to undertake. Meanwhile, concern about the dual role played by many women within the home and the workplace encompassed working girls as well as mothers. In 1922 it was estimated that 3 million girls spent at least one-third of each day in a factory, workshop or domestic service, and many carried a 'double responsibility, industrial and domestic'.²³

Hygiene and Welfare Supervision

Within the workplace, welfare supervision was believed to be particularly beneficial to women and girls. Prior to the outbreak of the First World War, the employment of women to oversee the welfare of employees had been limited to a few firms. During the war, this

²¹ Ministry of Munitions, *Health of Munition Workers Committee Interim Report: Industrial Efficiency and Fatigue*, 1917 (Cmd 8511); Ministry of Munitions, *Health of Munition Workers Committee Final Report*, 1918 (Cmd 9065). Individual memoranda included *Welfare Supervision* (Cmd 8151); *Industrial Canteens* (Cmd 8133); *Employment of Women* (Cmd 8185); *Industrial Fatigue and its Causes* (Cmd 8213); *Investigation of Workers' Food and Suggestions as to Dietary* (Report by Leonard E. Hill, FRS) (Cmd 8370); *Juvenile Employment* (Cmd 8362) and *Washing Facilities and Baths* (Cmd 8387). A handbook designed for managers and supervisors was also published: Ministry of Munitions, *Health of the Munition Worker: Handbook Prepared by the Health of Munition Workers Committee* (London, 1917).

²² Archives of the Trades Union Congress (hereafter TUC) (MSS 292), held at the Modern Records Centre (hereafter MRC), University of Warwick.

²³ MRC: Young Women's Christian Association (hereafter YWCA) Archives, MSS 243/2/1/7, *A Review YWCA 1922*, 3, 2.

figure expanded dramatically to around 1,000 women welfare supervisors.²⁴ Supervisors oversaw the introduction of interventions which aimed to safeguard the health and welfare of women entering the workforce. They were also responsible for monitoring the factory environment and ensuring that workrooms, cloakrooms, lavatories, washing facilities and canteens were clean, bright and warm.

A hygienic workplace was viewed as an essential prerequisite in any health and welfare scheme. 'The effect upon the health and energy of women and girls which results from clean, bright, and airy workrooms', wrote the HMWC, 'can hardly be exaggerated'.²⁵ The provision of washing facilities was believed to be beneficial to all workers, not only those in contact with poisonous substances or engaged in particularly dusty, hot or dirty tasks. The HMWC argued that periodic bathing was beneficial to health and efficiency, encouraged self-respect, and that workplace provisions would assist workers who had inadequate washing facilities in their homes.²⁶

Maintaining personal hygiene, a factor largely external to the workplace, was believed to play a crucial role in the preservation of good health and consequently working efficiency. Health education was, therefore, represented as a matter of interest to the management. 'Hygiene is the science of cleanliness, the gospel of health... and one of the high roads to perfect womanhood', proclaimed Sarah MacDonald in her 1917 work *Simple Health Talks with Women War Workers*. MacDonald stressed that in order to be healthy one had to be clean, and urged her readers to make liberal use of soap, water and sponge baths in order to keep their skin clean and unblock pores, to enable kidneys and lungs to function and aid perspiration. Those who failed to keep their hair in order and brush it daily were warned that 'the things' would breed.²⁷

'The number of girls with bad teeth is appalling; surely grown-up women do not need to be taught to clean their teeth each day', complained MacDonald, warning miscreants that they would experience foul breath and gum disease.²⁸ The YWCA *Gazette* also recommended regular brushing and flossing with a quill toothpick,

²⁴ A. Woollacott, 'Maternalism, professionalism and industrial welfare supervisors in World War 1 Britain', *Women's History Review*, 3 (1994), 29–56.

²⁵ HMWC, *Final Report*, 27, para 108.

²⁶ Section XV of HMWC, *Final Report*, 'Sanitary accommodation, washing facilities and cloakrooms', 89–94. See also HMWC, *Washing Facilities and Baths* (Cmd 8387). For a wide-ranging account of concepts and practices of cleanliness and hygiene, see Virginia Smith, *Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity* (Oxford, 2007).

²⁷ S. MacDonald, *Simple Health Talks with Women War Workers* (London, 1917), 7, frontispiece, 13–15.

²⁸ MacDonald, *Simple Health Talks*, 15–16.

warning 'lazy' girls of the dangers of losing their teeth at an early age.²⁹ It was not just objectionable breath and false teeth that girls had to fear, however. The preoccupation many writers exhibited regarding both dental hygiene and constipation was underpinned by the medical theory of auto-intoxication.³⁰ Advertisements for laxative products informed women that beauty came from within, claiming that laxatives could benefit health, aid weight loss and improve the complexion.³¹ Meanwhile, septic teeth, Beatrice Webb warned her readers in her 1917 book *Health of Working Girls*, could poison the stomach and the blood, leading to anaemia. Similarly headaches, which were supposedly more common amongst women and girls than men, were caused largely in Webb's opinion by toxæmia, 'a condition in which poisons, usually of an intestinal or dental origin, are constantly circulating in the blood'.³² Girls were urged to drink plenty of water, to follow a healthy diet and avoid consuming tea which had been left to stew.

For many writers, women's health was endangered not so much by poor workplace conditions but unhygienic homes. During the First World War, lodgings and other temporary makeshift accommodation established for war workers were seen as particularly problematic. The YWCA was concerned with the various environments within which girls found themselves in the course of the working day—factory, workshop and office, home or temporary accommodation, and transport to and from work. Its work in establishing hostels, as well as managing colonies of munitions workers accommodated in 'hutments' and rest rooms for those in transit, escalated during the war.

In the inter-war years, good hygiene in the workplace and a vigorous welfare department continued to be seen as an effective means to instruct working-class women in the lessons of hygiene, which they would then apply in their own homes. Dr E. Shannon argued that an operational welfare scheme within a factory had great value because of the 'opportunity afforded to the women of learning and practising those elementary laws of hygiene and health, so necessary for the preservation of health'.³³ A 1922 article from the *Journal of Industrial Welfare* asserted that welfare must extend beyond the home.

²⁹ MRC: YWCA, MSS 243/4/2/3, *Our Own Gazette* (March 1922), 'The care of the teeth', 14.

³⁰ Nancy Tomes, 'The history of shit: an essay review', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 56 (2001), 400–4.

³¹ See J.C. Whorton, *Inner Hygiene: Constipation and the Pursuit of Health in Modern Society* (Oxford, 2000), 102–5; Neula Kerr-Boyle, "'We are all in the constipation boat together": re-thinking British obsessions with internal cleanliness, 1920–1940', unpublished MA dissertation, University of Warwick, 2004, especially chapter 2.

³² B. Webb, *Health of Working Girls: A Handbook for Welfare Supervisors and Others* (London, 1917). See 19–22 on teeth, 29–33 on headaches, quotation on 29.

³³ Information sent by Dr E. Shannon in 1938 to the TUC Women's Advisory Committee. MRC: TUC, MSS 292/134.1/5 Health 1938–42.

'The home-visitor who expects to find the most ordinary elements of common sense in the homes of workers will', the author wrote, 'be disillusioned'. The unsatisfactory state of affairs found in workers' homes, the article claimed, was best remedied by targeting young factory girls and providing them with classes in homemaking skills after factory hours.³⁴

Diet

During the First World War the provision of canteens became one of the YWCA's key priorities, aiming to provide 'maximum nourishment at lowest possible price'. These were set up inside factories or just outside the gates, where girls could rest after shifts before setting off on the journey home. The London Division alone set up three large canteens feeding 1,000 girls a day as well as 'emergency huts' which offered lighter meals.³⁵ It was pointed out that wholesome food bolstered the girls' ability to cope with the heavy demands of industrial work and was appreciated by the girls themselves, as were the neatly arranged tables and cleanly service. This built upon the long-standing efforts of the YWCA to urge working girls, especially those who lived alone, to foster the habit of eating a carefully prepared meal. The YWCA *Gazette* included recipes, tips on keeping food fresh, and insisted 'Never, however tired, sit down to a soiled traycloth or serviette and *never* use dimmed and greasy spoons and forks'.³⁶

In the eyes of the HMWC, productive output was dependent upon the physical efficiency and health of the worker, and physical fitness was dependent upon nutrition. It was, therefore, a matter of concern that girls working too far from the factory to go home for their lunch brought in their own food which, in the eyes of the Committee, was cold and not nutritious. Canteen provision in factories expanded from around 100 before the war to around 1,000 either in operation or under construction by 1918.³⁷ However, even when industrial canteens were established, and girls were persuaded to use them, they often purchased food and drink items which did not meet with approval. 'At first we had some trouble getting our girls to take a substantial meal in the middle of the day', one writer testified to the HMWC, complaining that the girls were accustomed to a diet of tea, cake and bread and butter. The establishment of a canteen however had helped wean the girls off their cakes and on to properly cooked meals.

³⁴ S.W., 'The problem of home and factory', *Journal of Industrial Welfare*, 4 (1922), 25–6.

³⁵ MRC: YWCA, MSS 243/2/1/6, *A Review YWCA, 1920–21*, 12.

³⁶ MRC: YWCA, MSS 243/5/11, *Our Own Gazette* (November 1900), 52–3; 53.

³⁷ *Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops for the Year 1918* (Cmd 340), 31.

'I feel certain that once they fully experience the advantages to their own health with better food the workers will not readily return to their old methods.'³⁸

Canteens were introduced primarily to bolster productivity, but as James Vernon has argued, it was also hoped that they would help educate the workforce about sensible food choices and encourage civilized behaviour by placing workers in a 'humanising' environment.³⁹ Girls who 'romped' and 'tossed food about' in poor facilities became, in the words of Dorothea Proud, 'by mere transference to a fine messroom, orderly and decorous'.⁴⁰ The HMWC advocated a varied menu which would ensure that workers received their necessary intake of protein, carbohydrate and fats. Likewise, the YWCA expressed the hope that by offering girls proper hot dinners, malted milk and cocoa, its canteens would wean them from 'a diet of tinned meats, pickles and stewed tea'.⁴¹ It was not simply women's poor choice of food which imperilled their health. Many writers complained that factory girls bolted their food down quickly without chewing thoroughly, leading to an upsurge in indigestion, headaches, bad breath, anaemia and ulcers. Girls were repeatedly ticked off for not drinking enough water, a failing which could bring about constipation, especially given the pernicious evils of tea drinking.

It was also suggested that young girl workers on lower wages than adult women would not be able to afford to feed themselves. In 1914, factory inspector Rose Squire related how a large East End restaurant which served food to workers from a nearby factory ran out of meat and vegetable dinners one day soon after the outbreak of war, after an unprecedented demand from the younger girl workers who had traditionally opted for the cheaper pudding and gravy or tea, bread and butter. 'The cause was that the wages had that day been raised voluntarily by the employer to the proposed Trade Board rate, and the effect was immediate', Squire noted. 'This fact is a striking answer to those who cling to the theory that an increase in wages is of no substantial value to a girl.'⁴²

³⁸ HMWC, *Final Report*, 9 para 257.

³⁹ J. Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Cambridge and London, 2007), 161–80; 166.

⁴⁰ D. Proud, *Welfare Work: Employers' Experiments for Improving Working Conditions in Factories* (London, 1916), 123. Cited in Vernon, *Hunger*, 168. Proud moved from Australia in 1913 to undertake a thesis at the London School of Economics on the industrial condition of women factory workers, which she published as the above book in 1916. Between 1915 and 1919, Proud worked in the Welfare Department of the Ministry of Munitions, assisting Seebohm Rowntree. She was awarded a CBE in 1919. See H. Bourke, 'Pavy, Emily Dorothea (1885–1967)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography: Volume 11* (Melbourne, 1988), 168–9.

⁴¹ MRC: YWCA, MSS.243/2/1/3/1, *A Review 1917*, YWCA, 17.

⁴² *Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops for the Year 1914* (Cmd 8051), 52.

Malnutrition was seen as one of the key determinants undermining the health of the nation in the inter-war years so it is not surprising that canteens continued to figure prominently in inter-war welfare schemes.⁴³ Welfare supervisors argued that canteens not only benefited health but also, if designed and managed well, improved morale and behaviour. The YWCA's Industrial Labour Bureau, set up after the First World War to advise young women on industrial law particularly in workshops lacking a factory inspector, reported on the frequent absence or poor provision of canteens, as well as the ongoing problem of girls forced to eat their dinner in workrooms full of dust and 'stuff'.⁴⁴ In 1930, however, the Factory Inspectorate noted in its report that the construction of a canteen or messroom had become commonplace in new factory buildings,⁴⁵ while by 1933 complaints were received by the Inspectorate from workers related to inadequate messroom and canteen provision. 'In some areas workers are so used to finding such provision that they think the absence of it is necessarily illegal', explained inspector Emily Slocock.⁴⁶

Exercise, Recreation and Education

Organizations and individuals seeking to advise young factory girls advocated a holistic approach, urging their readers that to achieve a balanced state of health attention should be paid to both mental and physical well being. Discussions on the benefits of exercise and recreation generally stressed how carefully chosen activities could counter the unhealthy side effects of work. Already in the 1880s the *YWCA Gazette* was arguing that gymnastic exercises should be offered to shop and factory girls, particularly for those whose 'sedentary occupations induce an apathetic manner and a stooping gate [*sic*] and posture', pointed to as forerunners of consumption and other related disorders.⁴⁷ Walking to work was recommended to improve physique

⁴³ For a discussion of the investigations undertaken into diet and malnutrition in the inter-war years, see Charles Webster, 'Healthy or hungry thirties?', *History Workshop Journal*, 13 (1982), 110–29 and D.J. Oddy, *From Plain Fare to Fusion Food: British Diet from the 1890s to the 1990s* (Woodbridge, 2003), 113–32.

⁴⁴ MRC: YWCA, MSS 243/45, Industrial Law and Social Legislation Department: Register of Complaints, 1919–23.

⁴⁵ *Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops for the Year 1930* (Cmd 3927).

⁴⁶ *Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops for the Year 1933* (Cmd 4657), 78. The extent of canteen provision in the inter-war years was not enumerated by the Inspectorate and figures only become available again during the Second World War, when 5,695 factory canteens were listed to be in operation in December 1941, a figure that would expand to 11,630 by December 1944: see *Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories for the Year 1943* (Cmd 6563), 60.

⁴⁷ MRC: YWCA, MSS.234/5/1, *Our Own Gazette* (October 1884), 112.

and appetite, and to save on fares. Flora Lucy Freeman, turn of the century pioneer of working girls' clubs and Catholic Guiding in the Brighton area, advocated drill and gymnastics as aids to self-control as well as physical health.⁴⁸ Girls employed in physically demanding jobs, especially those working long hours during the First World War, were not expected to have as much energy for recreation. Dorothy Collier's 1918 report on *The Girl in Industry*, citing evidence from girls' club secretaries, claimed that following work the girls were mentally exhausted, lethargic and 'incapable of taking an interest in anything', yet still welcomed drill and gymnastic work.⁴⁹ The extension of sporting activities for factory girls during the First World War enabled many to participate in sports they had previously not had access to.⁵⁰ Sport, it was argued, could benefit general health, expose the working girl to fresh air and thus counter the effects of poorly ventilated workshops.

Suitable recreation was seen as a means to promote mental fitness by countering the effects of monotonous work, and mothers were urged to free daughters from domestic duties and allow them to have fun and blow off steam. Sarah MacDonald expressed concern that girls' recreation was often spent in places where ventilation and air quality was no better than in the factory, and urged her readers to exercise in the open air, which would aid appetite, digestion and nerves. While claiming not to be attempting to prescribe a particular type of recreation, she wrote 'light and sunshine are absolutely necessary for health, both physical and mental, in these unnatural working hours and times'.⁵¹ An article published in the *Journal of Industrial Welfare* in 1923 argued that if granted too much liberty, factory girls would acquire 'undesirable companions, and foolish, impossible ideas which unfit them for steady work in the factory or useful work in the home'. However, should parents restrict a girl's liberty, she would become discontented with home and factory life. The solution to the conundrum was for parents to allow their daughters to attend factory social clubs, which would improve the general tone of the workers and teach girls to spend and save wisely.⁵²

⁴⁸ M.C. Martin, 'Gender, religion and recreation: Flora Lucy Freeman and female adolescence 1890-1925', in R. Gilchrist, T. Jeffs and J. Spence (eds), *Drawing on the Past: Studies in the History of Community Youth Work* (Leicester, 2006), 61-77.

⁴⁹ D.J. Collier, *The Girl in Industry* (London, 1918), 8.

⁵⁰ See Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend*, 134-9. Jill Matthews has highlighted the role of the Women's League of Health and Beauty, founded in 1930, in providing business girls with small disposable incomes access to friendly, physical fun in the inter-war period, independent of the ideals and agendas of the League's leadership. J.J. Matthews, 'They had such a lot of fun: the Women's League of Health and Beauty between the wars', *History Workshop Journal*, 30 (1990), 22-54.

⁵¹ MacDonald, *Simple Health Talks*, 12.

⁵² 'Extra-mural welfare issues', *Journal of Industrial Welfare*, 5 (March, 1923), 72-3.

Exercise offered a means through which factory girls could dispense with normal standards of dress and behaviour, yet it could also be advocated to improve workers' conduct and discipline.⁵³ Gymnastics was believed to be particularly effective in this respect, especially for girls who had fewer opportunities than boys for other forms of exercise, though teachers were warned by Dorothea Proud in a book which urged the expansion of industrial welfare throughout industry, that 'a class of factory girls can be the bane of a teacher's existence, if finished grace is the chief object'. Instead, Proud argued, gymnastics teachers would be rewarded by the enjoyment, enthusiasm and improved physique of their pupils. Factory girls, Proud implied, were clumsy and graceless.⁵⁴

While life lessons could be inculcated into girls in the gymnasium or at the factory social club, formalized educational provision also existed in some factories. Education provided in such continuation or evening classes was largely along the lines of homemaking and mothercraft.⁵⁵ This education reflected a concern that girls working in industry had lost the domestic skills they would traditionally have acquired within domestic service but also demonstrated the belief that homemaking skills could be re-learned within the factory. However, it was sometimes suggested that women should be provided with more thought-provoking schooling, especially in light of the monotonous work many women undertook. Was it right, Proud asked, to educate a girl to become a 'proficient housewife' when the rest of her time was divided between domestic chores and repetitive work? 'As a thinking, sentient being she is given little or nothing', Proud complained, 'she is trained to work, not to live'.⁵⁶ The establishment of works libraries, dramatic and musical societies and other forms of educational recreation, Proud suggested, could go some way towards enriching the outlook of factory girls.

Through their club activities, the YWCA facilitated a wide range of health-promoting activities for working girls, which by the 1920s included drill and gymnastics, swimming, hockey, netball, cricket and organized games, and Greek and country dancing. The YWCA had long advocated a rounded, as well as a religiously intoned, approach to health, which included 'pure recreation', complete relaxation as a

⁵³ Focussing on women's access to swimming pools and beaches, Catherine Horwood has argued that health concerns eroded restrictions premised on the grounds of modesty. See C. Horwood, 'Girls who arouse dangerous passions: women and bathing, 1900-39', *Women's History Review*, 9 (2000), 653-73.

⁵⁴ Proud, *Welfare Work. With Foreword by David Lloyd George* (3rd edn, London, 1918), 204.

⁵⁵ See, for example, advice on training for girls in H. Dyer, *Education and Industrial Training of Boys and Girls* (London, Glasgow and Bombay, 1913), 90-101.

⁵⁶ Proud, *Welfare Work* (1918 edn), 237.

counter to monotonous work—reading, games, dancing and community singing.⁵⁷ ‘Health’ for the YWCA referred to the ‘spiritual, mental and physical’, and club work promised ‘healthy’ amusements, companionship and a religious atmosphere, particularly important for girls who had left school aged 14, who were likely to become isolated, bored and unruly after moving on from the discipline exerted at school. Outdoor games kept girls in good health and assisted in the ‘development of self-control and self-forgetfulness’.⁵⁸ Education also fitted this framework, stimulating interest in self-improvement and the acquisition of knowledge, making girls better ‘citizens’. By the 1930s the YWCA was offering ‘Industrial Study Camps’ to girls from Britain and overseas, as well as a wide range of holidays and summer camps for working girls. An article appearing in the *Gazette* in 1932 offered the rather unappealing option of ‘A “Stay-at-Home” Camp’, a do-it-yourself holiday for the ‘exceptionally poor’. All that was required to facilitate this was a hall with kitchen and washing facilities. Games, folk dancing and trips to the public swimming baths were recommended, perhaps an excursion to the countryside, as well as visits to galleries, museums and factories.⁵⁹

This emphasis on moral, spiritual and physical welfare was embraced more broadly by the girls’ club movement. Freeman’s club work at the turn of the century was primarily driven by religious motives and the advocacy of social purity, but additionally encouraged a range of sports and physical activities, including dancing, drill and games.⁶⁰ Drill, an aid to girls with narrow chests and bad carriage, was ideally to be taught by lady club leaders with the girls wearing special costumes, while Freeman outlined her ambition—seemingly a distant hope—to have access to a gymnasium for her club charges.⁶¹ An ‘Evening Home’ for ‘Rough Girls’ was established and Freeman organized holidays and Saturday excursions when the club closed for the summer. A number of club reformers advocated political engagement and voluntary work, encouraging the idea of service to others, as well as emphasizing moral guidance, training in domestic skills and recreation, health and citizenship.⁶² In the late 1920s keep-fit activities were promoted on a large scale for working girls, sponsored by the National Council of Girls’ Clubs in the north of England.⁶³ By the 1930s tennis, netball, camping, swimming, dancing and ballroom

⁵⁷ MRC: YWCA, MSS/243/2/1/14, *The YWCA in 1929: A Review*, 3, 5.

⁵⁸ MRC: YWCA, MSS/243/41/1, *Our Own Gazette* (September 1920), 20.

⁵⁹ MRC: YWCA, MSS/243/4/12, *The Blue Triangle Gazette* (July 1932), 11.

⁶⁰ Martin, ‘Gender, religion and recreation’, 71, 61, 63.

⁶¹ F.L. Freeman, *Religious and Social Work Amongst Girls* (London, 1901), 45–6.

⁶² Iris Dove, ‘Sisterhood or surveillance? The development of working girls’ clubs in London 1880–1939’, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Greenwich, 1996.

⁶³ Matthews, ‘They had such a lot of fun’, 23.

dancing were actively promoted by the national organization. Drill was by this time considered too militaristic and it was recommended that it be replaced by 'Keep-Fit and Health Slimming'.⁶⁴

Boredom and Monotonous Work

The objective of recreation and education was not simply to provide a healthy outlet for bored factory girls in their leisure time but to counter the monotony entailed by unskilled, mechanized tasks within the workplace. In 1915 in an essay on 'The Young Factory Girl' Emily Matthias explained how the 'immorality' of the factory girl could be explained by her being 'drugged by the monotony and long hours of physical labour, and...the need for a strong and sharp stimulus'.⁶⁵ YWCA clubs and activities were intended to supply this need, offering an appropriate outlet for girls who were worn down by the routine of the workplace, while weaning them from roaming the streets and other dubious activities. Training for citizenship aimed to interest young people in their work, 'not in the mere process which is often depressingly monotonous, but in its relation to other work, its use in the community, its place in the scheme of things'.⁶⁶

By 1933 medical factory inspector Dr Sybil Horner noted that many of the 1,835,586 women and girls employed within industry (35.6 per cent of the total workforce) worked on repetitive processes. She argued that they had developed a coping strategy to deal with this, one which differed significantly from that advocated by the YWCA. 'Why is it', she asked, 'that women alone of the industrial groups can bring themselves to the daily performance of monotonous work without losing, what one may call for want of a better name, their "interest in life"?' Horner attributed the predominance of women in such work to their ability to stave off boredom by balancing attention to the work process with detachment, arguing that aloofness protected women from boredom and 'its attendant wide-reaching effects on physical and mental health'.⁶⁷ Similarly, Proud claimed that women were able to 'shut themselves out of their work and shut their work out of their lives...curiosity as to their work and their accustomed surroundings seems non-existent... It is as though an unskilled worker brought into the factory only a portion of her consciousness'.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Dove, 'Sisterhood and surveillance', 171.

⁶⁵ E. Matthias, 'The young factory girl', in J.J. Findlay, *The Young Wage Earner* (London, 1918), 87. Cited in Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up*, 107.

⁶⁶ MRC: YWCA, MSS/243/50/1/1, Industrial Law Bureau Commission, 1925-26: Sub-Committee on Education in Industrial Matters, 2.

⁶⁷ *Annual Report 1933*, 50-1.

⁶⁸ Proud, *Welfare Work* (1918 edn), 97.

If women were represented as by nature suited to repetitive work, instances in which they had shirked or exhibited physical symptoms could be portrayed as indicative of the frivolity and irresponsibility supposedly inherent in girl workers. In his 1936 report, the Chief Medical Inspector of Factories, John Bridge, discussed a case of a girl who collapsed at her work in a metal polishing department of a large factory. Within an hour, a further nine girls employed in different parts of the department had also 'fainted'.⁶⁹ Bridge attributed this phenomenon to 'hysterical imitation', claiming that none of the women was hurt.

Trade union responses to repetitive work rejected both the idea that women were naturally suited to repetitive work and the suggestion that any shirking resulted from the irresponsible and hysterical nature of the girl worker (two viewpoints that were contradictory in any case). Instead, deep concern was expressed by trade unionists regarding the damage such work could do to a girl's health. At a 1936 conference, resolutions on systems of payment for automated processes and provision of more breaks for women and young persons discussed the crushing effect of repetitive work. Miss Horan voiced her anxieties about conveyor belts, 'which she described as being utterly soul destroying, because the operatives had to keep pace with the machine'.⁷⁰ 'I have noted from a close study that girls, very healthy and full of vim, after a few weeks of repetitive work on machines seem to lose all interest in work', one shop steward wrote in response to a health survey carried out by the Amalgamated Engineering Union. 'They become part of the work and appear to be incapable of thinking. They become subject to nerves. Financial worries tie them to this... One thing all have in common is that when they get home they are unable to do anything but sleep.'⁷¹ Many of the women workers who were interviewed in 1937 for a study on fatigue and boredom in repetitive work admitted that they spent the working day thinking about home matters and evening activities. Others, the report authors noted, wondered how they could 'get out of this hole', while repetitive work provoked something of an existential crisis in one respondent, who 'dwelt repeatedly on the question as to "why are we in this world at all, since we just go to work and go home to sleep"'.⁷²

⁶⁹ J. Bridge, *Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories and Workshops for the Year 1936* (Cmd 5514), 42. Bridge placed the word 'fainted' in inverted commas within the text.

⁷⁰ 1936 Annual Conferences of Representatives of Trade Unions Catering for Women Workers, typescript. MRC: TUC, MSS.292C/65.5/4.

⁷¹ Amalgamated Engineering Union, 'First Report on Health and Welfare Enquiry: Part II' (1944), 86. Typed report printed by the union. MRC: National Union of Railwaymen, MSS.127/NU/GS/3/87.

⁷² S. Wyatt, J.N. Langdon and F.G.L. Stock, *Fatigue and Boredom in Repetitive Work: Industrial Health Research Board, Report No. 77* (London, 1937), 10.

Factory Girls and Factory Boys: Biology versus Behaviour

Many reports and inquiries produced during the First World War and in its immediate aftermath devoted considerable attention to the relationship between women's work and maternal and infant health, discussing maternity schemes, the types of work suited to women in the last months of pregnancy and following birth, and the question of nurseries for factory workers.⁷³ The impact of menstruation on women's health continued to be debated into the inter-war years, though many accounts argued, as Collier did in 1918, that the 'extent of menstrual disorders appears to be slighter than is generally supposed', though 'sanitary arrangements...are not always adequate'.⁷⁴

By the inter-war years many authorities were arguing that rest rooms and welfare provision which had initially been advocated to meet the health needs of women workers should be provided for all employees, undermining the belief that the factory environment posed a distinct problem for women's physiology. In 1924, for example, one welfare supervisor argued that 'There are sound physiological grounds for stating that men are almost as prone as women to give way under the strain of a sustained expenditure of muscular energy, and sometimes they are actually more predisposed to breakdown so far as nervous energy is concerned'.⁷⁵ The inquiries of the Medical Women's Federation into the association between maternity, menstruation and work argued that by and large no harm was done to women who undertook heavy work. Measuring physiological indicators, they concluded that pulse rate, blood pressure, basal metabolism and co-ordination did not show 'any periodicity', and stressed that it was just as important for men to work in good conditions as women.⁷⁶

Notably, the distinctions drawn between the health of the girl worker and that of her male counterpart were grounded more in behaviour than inherent physiology. While devoting some attention to the 'derangement of special physiological functions', the HMWC also described a range of disorders women workers were believed to be particularly prone to, which were far removed from reproduction, such as digestive problems, anaemia, headaches, flat foot, muscular pain and nervous exhaustion.⁷⁷ These health problems were attributed not to any innate physiological difference but to girl workers' penchant for a diet

⁷³ See Braybon, *Women Workers*; Lewis, *The Politics of Motherhood*.

⁷⁴ Collier, *The Girl in Industry*, 35, 26.

⁷⁵ C.U. Kerr, 'Symmetry in industrial welfare schemes', *Journal of Industrial Welfare*, 6 (1924), 99–101; 99.

⁷⁶ Wellcome Library: SA/MWF/B.2/1/1: Box 12, Medical Women's Federation Newsletter, January 1919–March 1923, Prof. Winifred Cullis, 'The physiological aspect of women in industry', July 1922, 22–3.

⁷⁷ HMWC, *Final Report*, 61.

of tea and buns, and their supposed inability to eat slowly and drink enough water. Diet and eating patterns, it was suggested, and not biology, underlay women's special occupational health problems. Even women's comparative physical weakness was attributed partly to diet: 'the average wages earned by women before the war made it impossible for them to procure good and substantial food', explained Dr Janet Campbell. 'When the wages are insufficient the needs of the father as bread-winner almost necessarily comes first, those of the children next, the mother's last.'⁷⁸ Dorothea Proud also claimed that women were 'habitually less thoughtful than men in matters concerning their own health'.⁷⁹

The HMWC argued that women workers were physically weaker than their male counterparts in part because they took less exercise. However, advice on exercise for factory girls sought to accomplish more than remedying any comparable physical weakness. Beatrice Webb suggested that hockey was an eminently suitable activity for girls on winter weekends, 'giving concentrated exercise and the best kind of moral discipline, that involved in "Play the game!"—discipline of a kind which comes less readily to factory girls, each working on her own'.⁸⁰ Replace 'factory girls' with 'factory boys' and Webb's passage could be transplanted into a passage on sport for working-class boys. This symmetry in sentiments indicates how a focus on the unique hazards posed to women's physiology and reproductive health by industrial work had been displaced by a broader agenda which sought to forge healthy, disciplined citizens.

Though girl workers were seen as having special needs and problems, much advice was aimed at working-class youths of both sexes, suggesting that we may need to rethink 'the boy labour problem', identified and analysed by Harry Hendrick.⁸¹ Hendrick asserted that between 1880 and 1920, adolescent male workers were increasingly targeted by middle-class reformers who perceived boy workers as having a pivotal future social role as employees, voters and fathers and therefore sought to inculcate responsibility, citizenship and respectability to ensure social cohesiveness. Some efforts to improve health and character were focussed within schools, such as the provision of the school medical service and physical education.⁸² However, it was

⁷⁸ War Cabinet Committee, *Women in Industry* (Cmd 135), 221.

⁷⁹ Proud, *Welfare Work* (1918 edn), 78.

⁸⁰ Webb, *Health of Working Girls*, 101.

⁸¹ Hendrick, *Images of Youth*.

⁸² See, for example, B. Harris, 'Educational reform, national fitness, and physical education in Britain, 1900–1945' and J. Welshman, 'Child health, national fitness, and physical education in Britain, 1900–1940', both in M. Gijswijt-Hofstra and H. Marland (eds), *Cultures of Child Health in Britain and the Netherlands in the Twentieth Century* (Amsterdam and New York, 2003), 61–84 and 85–102.

the fate of boys once they had left school that was of great concern and it was felt that many boys between the ages of 14 and 17 entered so-called 'blind alley' occupations which offered little training and few prospects, thus damaging their future employment and earning ability. The families of such men, it was believed, would be unable to support themselves and the cycle of poverty would perpetuate itself. It was felt that boys entering such 'blind alley' occupations lacked effective moral supervision and that the good work undertaken in elementary schools would be undone.

The provision in factories of further education, sporting activities, welfare supervision and guidance for young men was urged in the *Journal of Industrial Welfare* and its predecessor publication, the *Boys' Welfare Journal*, so that the next generation of men could be shaped into worthy specimens of manhood, imbued with the public school spirit and capable of taking their place as workers, soldiers and fathers. Many of the articles discussed how the right character could be encouraged in boys. Welfare supervisors were urged to try and recreate the public school '*esprit de corps*' in working-class boys, as in an article from 1920, which discussed how the 'tone' produced by public schools might be achieved in workshops, helping to restore that 'personal touch' between employers and employed:

Something of the friendly guidance and personal influence of the school must follow the boy into the workshop and help him, first of all, to take an interest in himself, so that he may aspire to a worthy manhood fitted for the duties of responsible citizenship.⁸³

In the same vein as Beatrice Webb, many welfare supervisors argued that sport was the ideal medium through which to cultivate boys' team spirit, helping to develop 'those higher qualities of mind which places the name and tradition of the school first and personal aggrandisement last...the boy excels best who plays for his team rather than for personal renown'.⁸⁴ Similar concerns regarding the beneficial effects of sport as a means both to improve health and to socially integrate working-class children as dutiful citizens, efficient workers and future parents pervaded the Boy Scout movement and discussions about the place of physical education in British schools.⁸⁵ For some welfare supervisors, however, a game of football was not enough.

⁸³ 'Public school spirit', *Journal of Industrial Welfare*, 2 (1920), 28.

⁸⁴ F.S. Button, 'Sport and work', *Boys' Welfare Journal*, 1 (1919), 6-7; 7.

⁸⁵ M. Rosenthal, *The Character Factory: Baden-Powell and the Origins of the Boy Scout Movement* (London, 1986); Welshman, 'Child health'.

One anonymous author argued that boys should be encouraged to join the cadets:

By what means the energies of boyhood—always overflowing, and very often, if led to develop of themselves, lamentably misplaced—can be directed into proper channels, toned down to reasonable standards of discipline and consideration for others...is a question which has probably exercised the mind of every Welfare Supervisor.

Bearing in mind 'the type of boys often to be dealt with', the author argued that cricket and football could not 'produce the desired results so speedily as will an organisation whose centre and mainspring is a definitely constituted authority'.⁸⁶

As we have demonstrated, similar concerns were aired about girls. The YWCA, for example, emphasized again and again their concerns about the falling away of moral guidance, instruction in domestic work, regular exercise, intellectual instruction and the absence of an '*esprit de corps*' once girls left school.⁸⁷ While the concern that 'blind alley' jobs damaged future earning capacity was largely restricted to boys, some club workers also identified lack of stimulus for girls as a problem. Freeman advised that if capable girls were believed to be wasting their talents, club organizers should seek to find more suitable employment, such as nursing.⁸⁸ Work was believed to put at risk moral judgement, homemaking skills, physical and mental wellbeing, and citizenship for girls and boys. Addressed properly, the workplace could also tackle these issues. Some authorities drew close analogies between the behaviour of unruly girls and juvenile delinquency. Dove has suggested that the aspect of working-class life which most concerned club leaders was the girls' 'desire for street amusements'.⁸⁹ Maude Stanley, describing the activities of clubs for working girls, referred at length to the difficulties of managing volatile and unruly girls: 'At first they were hardly civilised, and had bad habits and conversation over which a veil must be drawn, but now they are well-behaved in the club, can be taken out on visits to other clubs, and are eager to take part in the next musical drill competition.'⁹⁰ Collectively, these sentiments reflected beliefs about the innately emotional and uncontrolled nature of adolescence which had been widely diffused amongst middle-class

⁸⁶ 'The sea cadet corps: an opportunity for shipyard welfare workers', *Boys' Welfare Journal*, 1 (1919), 99–100; 99.

⁸⁷ MRC: YWCA, MSS.243/2/1/8, *A Review YWCA*, 1923, 10.

⁸⁸ F.L. Freeman, *Our Working Girls and How to Help Them; With Special Reference to Clubs and Classes* (London and Oxford, 1908), 100–1. Cited in Martin, 'Gender, religion and recreation', 63.

⁸⁹ Dove, 'Sisterhood or surveillance', 202.

⁹⁰ Maude Stanley, *Clubs for Working Girls* (London, 1904), Preface, viii.

reformers through the popularization of psychological ideas in the early years of the twentieth century.⁹¹ The acceptance of such a concept as a medical fact helped justify interventions in and efforts to control the lives of young workers if they were to fulfil their roles as citizens, workers and parents.⁹² Despite the emphasis placed upon the importance of individuals, welfare work sought to replicate the same ideals of behaviour in young workers of both sexes in order to achieve broader social goals. 'We are indeed catering now for the welfare of the individual', wrote Robert Hyde, 'but it is as a means only to an end, which is the eventual welfare of the nation.'⁹³

Fashion, Beauty and Frivolity?

Sally Alexander has argued that the nascent consumer industries of the inter-war years offered young women workers the opportunity to fashion a glamorous and rebellious identity that marked a break with childhood and distinguished them from the domestic worlds their mothers inhabited.⁹⁴ In the popular press, representations of young women conflated modernity and independence with glamour and sexuality, while authors of health advice literature, alarmed by young women's social and sexual behaviour, sought to curb the appeal of make-up and fashion.⁹⁵ Women workers were encouraged to dress sensibly for work to help preserve their health, to dress warmly and for the task at hand, and factories to establish cloakrooms where workers could remove wet footwear and coats and leave them to dry until the end of their shift. A particular bugbear for many writers was the wearing of high heels for work, which were implicated in poor posture and fatigue. For the YWCA, this was also bound up with urging moral behaviour—their publications stressed that beauty resulted from robust health and cleanliness rather than cosmetics, and warned of the 14- to 18-year-old who quickly acquired the superficial appearance and manners of an adult, 'with lipstick and high heels'.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Mathew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2006).

⁹² See Hendrick, *Images of Youth*, especially 'Social science and working class "adolescence": from idea to social fact', 83–118.

⁹³ R. Hyde, 'Editor's notes', *Boys' Welfare Journal*, 6 (1919), 81–2.

⁹⁴ Alexander, 'Becoming a woman'.

⁹⁵ See A. Bingham, *Gender, Modernity and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford, 2004), 145–81; Penny Tinkler, *Constructing Girlhood: Popular Magazines for Girls Growing Up in England 1920–1950* (London, 1995); Woollacott, 'Khaki fever and its control'. David Fowler has explored the rather tame British 'flapper' phenomenon, centred largely around female clerical workers, in *Youth Culture in Modern Britain, c.1920–c.1970* (Houndmills, 2008), chapter 3.

⁹⁶ MRC: YWCA, MSS.243/2/1/21, YWCA 'From Strength to Strength', *Review* 1938–39, 2.

Given the unsuitability of women's clothing for many industrial processes, uniforms were considered necessary for many industries employing women for safety reasons, and writers urged employers to consider workers' taste. Proud warned readers against imposing too garish a uniform, claiming that "'Factory girls like bright colours" is accepted as true by those who do not know "factory girls"; and the mistake of forcing brilliant colours upon them is made again and again'.⁹⁷ However, articles written for the *Journal of Industrial Welfare* in the 1920s stressed the need to appeal to the factory girl's supposed love of beauty if uniforms were going to be accepted. One writer urged the adoption of attractive looking caps to prevent women's hair becoming caught up in moving machinery, cautioning that 'girls prefer to run the risk of accidents rather than "look a fright"'.⁹⁸ Another writer suggested coaxing factory girls into safe clothing by adopting the following ruse:

A good way to break down the prejudice against uniform is to pick 6 girls who look particularly attractive in overalls and get them to wear them for a few weeks...Tactful praise of the neat, trim appearance of girls in uniform by officials and visitors to the works will go a long way to make the girls appreciate the uniform.⁹⁹

The proneness of adolescents to accidents in the workplace was attributed to reckless youthful behaviour amongst both sexes. Commenting in 1944 on the higher rate of accidents amongst boys as opposed to adult men, the Factory Inspectorate urged better supervision of young workers and suggested that the establishment of lunch-time clubs could provide 'counter-attractions to getting into mischief in the meal interval'.¹⁰⁰

Writers discussing factory girls sought to defend girls from allegations of vanity and frittering away their wages on luxury clothing and beauty products while simultaneously implying that factory girls were coarse and clumsy, attracted to garish make-up and vulgar fashion. Writing in the interim report of the HMWC, Janet Campbell claimed that a 'fair proportion' of girl workers during the First World War preferred night to day work because of the higher wages earned and the time gained for recreation and shopping.¹⁰¹ This statement was given to indicate that night work posed no real problem to

⁹⁷ Proud, *Welfare Work* (1918 edn), 131.

⁹⁸ 'Fashion in the workshop: clothing and accidents', *Journal of Industrial Welfare*, 7 (1925), 99–100; 100.

⁹⁹ 'Safe clothing for women workers', *Journal of Industrial Welfare*, 10 (1928), 217–19; 218.

¹⁰⁰ *Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories for the Year 1944* (Cmd 6698), 11. Despite experiencing a higher accident rate, young male workers suffered fewer fatal accidents than adult male workers: 0.1 per thousand versus 0.26 for adult men.

¹⁰¹ HMWC, *Interim Report*, 119 para 17.

women workers. However, the final report of the HMWC expressed concern that young unmarried women on night work would not get the rest they needed because they would be unable to resist the lure of shopping.¹⁰² Embedded within her medical study of women and girls working in industry, Sybil Horner sought to give objective scientific credence to her impressionistic assertion that amongst factory girls 'physical attraction is early attained and quickly lost',¹⁰³ though she attributed this in part to the lack of recreation time allowed to working girls who also had to undertake home duties. Dorothea Proud, meanwhile, urged employers to consider décor within their factories. 'Some people may question whether it is wise to accustom workers to beauty', Proud wrote, 'but it will scarcely be denied that beauty will, if permitted, affect their senses as it affects the senses of other human beings.'¹⁰⁴ In a deft sleight of hand, Proud managed to stress the importance of an attractive working environment and portray herself as an advocate of the working girl while implying surprise that 'even' factory girls could respond to beauty. Lilian Barker, the government Inspector of Mmunition Workers' Welfare at Woolwich, launched a more vigorous defence of working-class girls, accused by critics of frivolously wasting the higher wages which were paid during the war on fripperies such as cheap jewellery and fur coats. 'If she brought a fur coat... it was a good asset', Barker asserted, though she subsequently noted that girls did tend to buy cheap jewellery for the first few weeks before being coaxed out of the habit under the influence of the welfare supervisor.¹⁰⁵

One might expect the trade unions to challenge and critique the image of frivolous young women workers preoccupied with fashion and exhibiting a careless disregard for their health and work as perpetuated by welfare supervisors, factory inspectors and health advice writers. Instead, these stereotypes were deployed by both men and women within the trade union movement in a misguided attempt to 'sell' trade unionism to young women by emphasizing the beauty benefits trade unionism could confer.¹⁰⁶ Conferences representing women within the TUC, held in 1926 and 1927 and then from 1931 onwards, bemoaned the difficulty of attracting young women into trade unionism. In their discussion of potential recruitment methods, the representatives portrayed young women workers as irresponsible, uninterested in training and prepared to jeopardize their own health by

¹⁰² HMWC, *Final Report*, 25 para 100.

¹⁰³ *Annual Report 1933*, 51

¹⁰⁴ Proud, *Welfare Work* (1918 edn), 99.

¹⁰⁵ 'Girl munition workers: Health and a twelve-hours day', *The Times*, 19 October 1916. Report of speech by Lilian Barker.

¹⁰⁶ Misguided in the sense that they appeared ineffectual in raising the low level of women's trade union membership in the inter-war years.

working longer hours for more money.¹⁰⁷ Articles and pamphlets written in the 1930s to persuade young women to join trade unions characterized girls as unmotivated workers, who were happy to selfishly undercut the male wage while they dreamed of marriage.¹⁰⁸

By 1937, women's membership within trade unions affiliated to the TUC totalled 488,000, just over a tenth of the female industrial labour force of four million.¹⁰⁹ Clearly, a different approach was needed. In 1937, the TUC printed 'Health and Beauty: a Word to Women and Girls Earning their own Livelihood', following this publication two years later with 'Ticket to Health and Beauty'. Both leaflets claimed that trade unions worked to secure the real basis of beauty—better working conditions, shorter hours and higher wages. Discussing the inefficacy of these campaigns, Sarah Boston argued that they 'merely re-enforced the stereotype of women as disinterested in anything but their appearance'.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, the TUC persisted in issuing 'attractive but simple' recruitment pamphlets throughout the 1940s and 1950s which depicted stylishly dressed and attractive young women and portrayed trade unions as fashionable.¹¹¹

Conclusion

Employment, particularly if undertaken in a healthy environment, was frequently portrayed as an activity beneficial to women's health. Sarah MacDonald reassured her young readers that work itself was a natural outlet for energy which offered health benefits. Using the brain and

¹⁰⁷ MRC: *Report First Annual Women's TUC Conference* (London, 1926); *Report of the Second Annual Women's Trade Union Conference* (London, 1927); *Reports of the Seventh to the Twenty-Third Annual Conference of Unions Catering for Women Workers* (London, 1937–53); TUC, MSS.292C/65.5/4 Annual Conferences of Representatives of Trade Unions catering for Women Workers: Typescript Reports for 1931–36.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, typescript proof of 'Gas rings, wedding rings, and trade rings?' by Miss B.A. Godwin, sent by the *Daily Herald* to TUC women's officer Nancy Adam on 4 January 1933. MRC: TUC, MSS.292/60.2/1 Publicity 1933–35.

¹⁰⁹ Figure in TUC, *Report of 8th Annual Conference of Unions Catering for Women Workers*, April 23 1938 (London, 1938), 17.

¹¹⁰ These campaigns are discussed in S. Boston, *Women Workers and Trade Unions* (London, revised edition 1987), 162.

¹¹¹ A 1952 recruitment pamphlet issued by the TUC entitled 'Times Change' was illustrated with the changing trends in fashion, skirt length and hair styles. Readers were urged to 'keep in style' by joining their trade union. In 1957, this pamphlet was replaced with one entitled 'Smart' that included a pattern to knit the jacket depicted on the back cover. MRC: TUC MSS.292/60.2/2a Publicity 1936–58. The Amalgamated Engineering Union typified this trend. See Amalgamated Engineering Union, 'What's Her Secret?' (1949). MRC: TUC Miscellaneous Published Items MSS.259/4/3. For a broader discussion of how the Union sought to encourage women to join by arguing that trade unionism promoted health and beauty, see N. Adams, 'Women engineers, health and trade unionism in post-war Britain', <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/chm/activities/projects/workers/women>.

muscles for work could, she argued, make a girl 'healthier and happier'.¹¹² 'More people are ill of too little work, or boredom in work, than of too much work', claimed Beatrice Webb in her handbook, *Health of Working Girls*.¹¹³ It was not merely the nature of the work itself, but improved wages that led some commentators to claim that women's war work had improved their level of health, leading to better furnished homes, bedding and clothing. In an address to the Women's Liberal Association in Bedford, Mr Kellaway argued that the rise in pre-war wages from 10s to 35s and the welfare facilities introduced had proved very beneficial. 'In three years women in this country had been lifted from a starvation to a living wage', he wrote.¹¹⁴

Janet Campbell's inquiry into the health of women engaged in munition factories, undertaken in 1915–16, sampled 1,326 women employed at eleven factories. Campbell found evidence of fatigue, and inadequate seating, canteen, transit and hygiene provisions, but argued that if these defects were remedied and good welfare supervision introduced, 'there seems no reason why women and girls... should not take their place in munition factories and carry out many operations hitherto considered fit only for men, without permanent detriment to their future health'.¹¹⁵ A follow-up inquiry which examined women who had been employed for at least nine months, however, depicted a significant decline in the health of many employees from her earlier investigations.¹¹⁶ While welfare supervisors were by this stage employed in every one of the eight factories Campbell visited, many other defects she had ascertained in her first survey two years earlier had not been remedied, though these conditions, according to Campbell, were most likely to undermine the health of older, married women with children. Of the 1,183 women examined, over 40 per cent showed signs of fatigue or ill-health. Campbell attributed this high figure to heavy work, long hours, transit problems, anxiety, the age of some women and the unsuitability of the work they were being asked

¹¹² MacDonald, *Simple Health Talks*, 5.

¹¹³ Webb, *Health of Working Girls*, 100.

¹¹⁴ 'Women in Industry: Position after War', *The Times*, 10 October 1918', 3. Report of the speech of Mr F.G. Kellaway, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Munitions. This was also reflected in the downward trend in the death rate for women and babies during the war. See Anne Hardy, *Health and Medicine in Britain since 1860* (Houndmills, 2001), 50–1. The assertion that good working conditions and higher wages paid by war industries benefited workers' health has been amplified by Jay Winter, who asserted that workers were able to supplement their diets which led to an overall improvement in health: Winter, *The Great War and the British People*, 204–45.

¹¹⁵ HMWC, *Interim Report*, 110 para 18.

¹¹⁶ The initial report was J. Campbell and L.E. Wilson, 'Inquiry into the health of women engaged in munition factories', *Interim Report*, 110–19. The later report was J. Campbell, 'Appendix B (I) A further inquiry into the health of women munition workers', *Final Report*, 145–52.

to do, home duties and insufficient attention to welfare inside the factory.

Concern about the impact of unemployment on mental and physical health increased during the Depression, reinforcing the notion that employment had health benefits. Writing for a report on the health of women in industry prepared by the TUC in the late 1930s, Dr Margaret Trotter painted a gloomy picture of the impact unemployment could have, arguing that economic and psychological factors contributed to diminished health and physical appearance. 'Food intake lessened for financial and economic reasons with resulting first steps to ill health', Trotter wrote. 'With resulting lowering in standards of appearance—clothes and healthy skin—it becomes more and more difficult to get employment'.¹¹⁷ Dr Kate Platt, also asked to provide information for the TUC report, confidently asserted that 'there is no doubt in my mind that every woman who has no conflicting family obligations is healthier and happier when in full employment, than the woman who has no definite outside work'.¹¹⁸ The YWCA tackled the impact of unemployment during the Depression largely through 'Club fellowship and activities', addressing the psychological as well as practical problems facing young women who were either unemployed, growing up in a 'home atmosphere of unemployment', or forced into 'dead end' jobs 'requiring the minimum of skill and offering no opportunity for initiative or creative expression'.¹¹⁹

It would be misleading to imply that the early years of the twentieth century were characterized by continuity rather than change. The future role of young working girls as mothers was stressed very strongly during the First World War in the reports of the HMWC, the Factory Inspectorate and journals and health advice literature. However, anxieties about future motherhood diminished in importance in the inter-war period, when state intervention receded and the promotion of industrial health and welfare once again became a voluntary movement. When writers addressed girl workers as future mothers, they were often more interested in developing domestic skills in factory girls and in the factory environment, than expressing concern about the impact of industrial work on women's reproductive capacities. Indeed, it is possible to question whether the First World War should be seen as an anomaly, not only with regard to the post-war period but also to the pre-war years. Concern that industrial work imperilled women's reproductive health naturally came to the attention of the government

¹¹⁷ Information sent by Dr Margaret Trotter in 1938 to the TUC Women's Advisory Committee. MRC: TUC, MSS.292/134.1/5: Health 1938–42.

¹¹⁸ Information sent by Dr Kate Platt in 1938 to the TUC Women's Advisory Committee, as above.

¹¹⁹ MRC: YWCA, MSS.243/2/1/19, *YWCA Review*, 1934, 3.

in 1914–18, because women’s industrial work had become more visible and women who would traditionally not be employed within factories were now doing so, often working very long hours and in physically challenging tasks, while the militaristic agenda had pushed to the fore the question of the health of the race.

A historical approach which examines women’s lives and health through motherhood alone risks obscuring the role employment—and indeed unemployment—played, including the benefits improved income could bring to working women and their families. The statutory and voluntary organizations we have examined recognized that women’s roles, health and welfare needs and interests transcended motherhood as well as—after 1918—the immediate requirements associated with the prosecution of war. The emphasis placed upon the positive physical and mental health of women and girls at work reflected a broader trend within industrial health in the inter-war years which has to date received scant attention in the historiography. Indeed, while acknowledging the highly gendered nature of the advice given to factory girls regarding fashion and beauty and the fulfilment of domestic duties, many of the topics discussed in this article were also considered to be suitable areas of welfare work amongst boys and men working in industry. As John Welshman has demonstrated, public health education in general in this period was informed by anxieties regarding morality and citizenship. Suggesting that ill-health stemmed from ignorance rather than poverty, advice stressed healthy habits, exercise, hygiene and nutrition.¹²⁰ By turning the spotlight on health advice for the factory girl we have sought to demonstrate the limitations of exploring women’s health solely in relation to their roles as wives and mothers. There were indeed believed to be specific health risks associated with working women which included gynaecological disturbance and miscarriages. But considerable attention was also given to the discussion of health problems which emerged not through women’s biology but their supposed behaviour and psychological make-up and neglect of simple health rules, or the neglect of the work environment by employers. Janet Campbell asserted in a passage on the effects of employment that ‘direct injury to the growing girl is certainly uncommon . . . indirect injury due to conditions of work which result in an anaemic, stunted, underfed girl, would seem to be far more important’.¹²¹

The stereotype of the frivolous, shopaholic factory worker, ignoring the basic rules of hygiene, dominated. She imperilled her health by

¹²⁰ J. Welshman, ‘“Bringing beauty and brightness to the back streets”: health education and public health in England and Wales, 1890–1940’, *Health Education Journal*, 56 (1997), 199–209.

¹²¹ War Cabinet Committee, *Women in Industry* (Cmd 135), 228.

wearing high heels, favouring lipstick over washing and flossing, bolting down buns, drinking tea, working long hours for extra cash while undercutting the wages of other workers; she went out to dances rather than exercising in the fresh air and spent her wages on make-up and clothes rather than proper food. This image was so pervasive that it even shaped trade union recruitment campaigns. Nevertheless, by emphasizing that behaviour rather than biology explained the factory girl's malaise, it was possible to argue that girls were potentially capable—if they attended clubs, ate square meals, took exercise and played sport—of combating the detrimental impact of industrial labour and improving their general health. Like their male counterparts, girl workers were increasingly being examined through new psychological frameworks which constructed them as adolescents, receptive to, and in need of training which would fashion them to fulfil their roles as healthy citizens, workers and, at some point in the future, wives and mothers.¹²²

¹²² Hendrick, *Images of Youth*, 83–118.