CHAPTER 2

The Reproductive Body, Part II: The Tasks of Social Reproduction

The reproductive body was by its very nature made biologically to reproduce. But reformers understood the concept of reproduction in a social as well as a biological sense. Social reproduction, as the term has been used in feminist scholarship, refers to “activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships, directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally.”¹ This usage recognizes the work of the private sphere as work. For Victorians, social reproduction meant the fulfillment of domestic tasks to ensure a healthy workforce; it encompassed above all domestic economy, or the proper management of the home and the care of children. Not only did working women supposedly pose potential dangers to biological reproduction, but the parliamentary inquiries suggested that employment outside the home took women away from their tasks of social reproduction. Investigators worried that their lack of training in domesticity prevented working women from knowing how to keep house or care for children. Children weakened, sickened, and died through neglect; husbands declined from bad diet and turned to drink. Without attention to social reproduction, the health of families, working-class communities, and the nation as a whole would suffer.

Although the threat of women’s work to biological reproduction was articulated most specifically with regard to factories and more uncertainly in the context of other trades and industries, the threat to the social reproduction of laboring communities encompassed potentially all occupations that took women out of domestic spaces. At the same time that reformers were raising questions about the health of industrial labor, others were investigating the public health more generally. In the late 1830s and 1840s Parliament undertook several broad inquiries into sanitary conditions that
focused on the work and domestic lives of the poor. The first large-scale sanitary inquiry in Britain was begun in 1838 by the Poor Law Commission. Edwin Chadwick, the prime mover behind public health reform in Britain, made the evidence from this inquiry famous through his compilation and synthesis of excerpts from the commissioners’ reports, published in 1842 as *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain.* The problem of female labor appeared throughout the reports on various localities in England and continued as a recurrent theme in sanitary reports throughout the 1840s. In exploring employment and sanitary conditions, investigators exposed intimate links between domestic economy and public health, concluding that the industrial organization of labor precluded women’s attention to their domestic responsibilities. Just as the working woman threatened public health through inattention to her role in biological reproduction, so too did she threaten the public health through neglect of her role in social reproduction. Both roles were considered natural; there was no critique of the gendered organization of social reproduction itself.

**Domesticity, Parliamentary Inquiry, and Public Health**

Women as keepers of the domestic space were very significant to public health reformers, as they were the ones considered responsible for maintaining cleanliness, among their other tasks of social reproduction. Chadwick’s emphasis on miasma as the primary cause of disease reaffirmed this important female role, for it was women who were supposed to clear the air, so to speak, by maintaining a home free of garbage, excrement, and other causes of noxious fumes that caused disease. Mary Poovey has explored specifically the relationship between public health and domesticity in Chadwick’s *Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Populations*, arguing that for Chadwick “ideas about domesticity played a crucial role in the sanitary idea, in the constitution of the social domain, and through these, in the process of state formation.” According to Poovey, working-class women were fundamental to this process, as they were the ones through whom middle-class domestic values would be brought into the homes of the laboring population.

In both rural and urban contexts, women were the ones held responsible for the tasks of social reproduction. In their investigations of employment conditions, parliamentary commissioners asked young female workers
about their domestic abilities. R. H. Horne took depositions to this effect at various Sunday schools in South Staffordshire and the surrounding areas of Shropshire and Worcestershire. He found that Sarah Nechill, a sixteen-year-old worker at a screw manufactory, “can do needlework; can knit. Thinks she could cook a poor man’s dinner; can boil cabbage properly; would put a little salt in with it.” Likewise, Maria Wooldridge, a clay worker, “can do household work; can boil a potato without spoiling it, and can roast a joint of meat without burning it or losing the gravy; has often done it; can mend her father’s stockings, and make most of her own clothes, if they were cut for her.” This testimony suggests what both working women and their middle-class observers perceived to be some of the key domestic skills women of the laboring classes were supposed to possess. Unlike their middle-class counterparts who could afford servants, poor women were never expected to relinquish their home labor. In addition to the general tasks of caring for husband and children, social reproduction included food purchase and preparation; keeping a clean and orderly house; cleaning, mending, and often making clothing; and managing the family’s finances, including developing credit and using the pawn shop when necessary. These responsibilities varied with locality; for example, in urban areas, traditional women’s duties of baking and brewing were made unnecessary with the availability of purchased bread and beer.

While the domestic ideal positioned women solely in the home attending to these varied tasks, middle-class reformers for the most part were not concerned with eradicating working-class women’s paid work; the middle classes in fact benefited from the employment of poor women. Mariana Valverde has shown persuasively that neither statesmen nor the men of the working classes concerned with the conditions of female employment hoped to take women completely out of factories; they merely wanted to regulate the conditions in order to maintain proper gender roles and responsibilities. Ideologies of domesticity predicated upon middle-class lifestyles thus had to be reworked for members of the working classes. This reworking included a place for paid labor, and indeed for an able body; as June Purvis has pointed out, “the ideal of the ‘good worker’ defined [working-class] femininity in terms of an ability to earn a living.” The preferred form of labor for poor girls, however, was domestic service, for “the ‘good domestic servant’ was seen as an extension of domesticity, a form of femininity appropriate for girls of the lower orders,” because service provided girls with the proper training for their future roles as wives and mothers. Additionally, as Deborah Valenze has pointed out, “domestic service would
reinforce an association of women with nonproductive activity,” situating women’s work of social reproduction in opposition to labor with value. While reformers worried about the health and moral dangers of women’s work in factories, “work inside another person’s home apparently did not have these insidious effects, since it kept women firmly in a domestic role, albeit as facilitators of another woman’s wifehood and motherhood rather than as wives and mothers themselves.” In this way, the contradictions for poor women—between an ideal of domesticity and the reality of needing to be gainfully employed—were resolved ideologically in domestic service. Reformers were more concerned with getting working-class girls into domestic service jobs than they were about the actual healthfulness of service work itself. And certainly not all poor women wanted or could find jobs as servants.

The instructions of the Royal Commissions investigating employment and sanitary conditions suggest that these investigations proceeded with the assumption that the nondomestic work of female children and young single women kept them from becoming responsible wives and mothers. Under the heading of “Moral Condition,” for example, the 1843 commissioners investigating children’s employment were given the charge to “inquire how far [female workers’] employment during Childhood has prevented them from forming the domestic habits usually acquired by women in their station, and has rendered them less fit than those whose early years have not been spent in labour for performing the duties of wives and mothers.” Highlighting the domestic service norm for poor girls, this instruction did not ask investigators whether girls working in factories were prevented from learning domestic tasks but rather assumed a failing in domestic training, which investigators were to assess. By setting up these concerns, the commission structured the expectations of its agents.

The reports of the investigators reflect this preoccupation with girls’ domestic training. William Raynor Wood, in his observations of collieries near Leeds and Bradford, reported that the paid employment of young girls was a major cause of distress in laboring populations, having “the effect of preventing them from acquiring the most ordinary and necessary knowledge of domestic management and family economy; that the young females in general . . . are nearly ignorant of the arts of baking and cooking, and, generally speaking, entirely so of the use of the needle.” A “Report on the State of Public Health in Birmingham” by a Committee of Physicians and Surgeons, submitted as evidence to both the 1842 sanitary inquiry and the 1843 investigation of trades and manufactures, also lamented the domestic ignorance of young women workers:
The improvidence . . . [of the working classes] is to be traced in many instances to the extreme ignorance on the part of the wives of these people. The females are from necessity bred up from their youth in the workshops, as the earnings of the younger members contribute to the support of the family. The minds and morals of the girls become debased, and they marry totally ignorant of all those habits of domestic economy which tend to render a husband’s home comfortable and happy.13

The committee blamed women for the perceived faults of the working classes as a whole, while simultaneously recognizing the need for young women to contribute wages to the family economy. The strong language condemning the domestic ignorance of working-class women, however, overrides the mention of economic necessities. The 1843 Central Board of the Royal Commission took the issue of girls’ lack of domestic training so seriously that one of their numbered concluding points focused solely on this matter:

That the girls are prevented, by their early removal from home and from the day-schools, to be employed in labour, from learning needlework, and from acquiring those habits of cleanliness, neatness and order, without which they cannot, when they grow to womanhood, and have the charge of families of their own, economise their husbands’ earnings, or give to their homes any degree of comfort; and this general want of the qualifications of a housewife in the women of this class is stated by clergymen, teachers, medical men, employers, and other witnesses, to be one great and universally-prevailing cause of distress and crime among the working classes.14

Earnings were to be the responsibility of men, while domestic economy fell to women. In representing the absence of domestic education as a health and moral threat to the entire laboring population, this testimony supported ideas about the reproductive body and the suitability of domestic service. A body incompatible with industrial labor was eminently suited to the tasks of social reproduction, reflecting notions about the complementary nature of the sexes. Regulating the hours of female labor would open up more time for women to spend learning how to create a home, which would prevent the breakdown of working-class communities and, by implication, the nation as a whole.

Although investigators did not worry about the reproductive biology of women engaged in field work, the reports on agriculture are full of concern about the domestic training of rural women workers. Investigating the counties of Kent, Surrey, and Sussex, Commissioner Vaughan determined
that “it seems agreed on all hands that much field-work in early life is a bad exercise for a woman’s future duties,” leaving no doubt of what those duties consisted. Commissioner Austin’s conclusions on Wiltshire, Dorset, Devon, and Somerset agreed with Vaughan’s assessment of the dangers posed to domestic health through women’s agricultural labor. Echoing the investigators of women’s work in factories and mines, Austin reported that

the women of the agricultural labouring class are in a state of ignorance affecting the daily welfare and comforts of their families. Ignorance of the commonest things, needle-work, cooking, and other matters of domestic economy, is described as nearly universally present; and when any knowledge of such things is possessed by the wife of a labourer, it is generally to be traced to the circumstance of her having, before marriage, lived as a servant in a farmhouse or elsewhere.

Both Vaughan and Austin highlighted their preference for domestic service as an employment for women, as it provided young women with skills in the management of a home.

There were few alternative voices concerning the damage girls did to their domestic futures through early waged labor outside the home. Thomas Stonor Simkiss, a former surgeon in Wolverhampton, was one dissenting voice. He “thinks that girls who have worked during childhood are not injured so as to be rendered less fit than others for performing the duties of wives and mothers in after-life; they are not, generally speaking, employed laboriously; many of them work in manufactories and go out to service alternately.” Simkiss challenged the two central fears regarding girls’ labor: that through hard work girls would hurt their future reproductive capacities, and that employment kept girls from learning domestic skills. Similarly, in his report on South Gloucestshire, Elijah Waring noted that “the girls employed in pin-heading, are accustomed to take a share in the domestic labours of home; and when they become wives and mothers, are considered to fulfill their relative duties very respectably.” Although Waring indicated that girls were habituated to domestic tasks, he stressed that their work outside the home prevented their perfecting household duties, for “it is nevertheless, hardly probable, that they can be, generally, so well qualified for the economy of housekeeping, as girls who have been either in service, or in constant household training.” Waring’s final comment implies that adequacy—or the “very respectabl[e]” fulfillment of domesticity—was not in the end sufficient; only girls who were trained in housewifery full-time, either at home or in domestic service, would make truly respectable wives and mothers.
Commissioners and their witnesses did not question that working girls would indeed marry and have children, and investigators were even more condemnatory when women continued their paid employment once married. In 1833, Parliament instructed commissioners investigating children’s employment to approach married women with a set of questions concerning their experiences of employment, marriage, and childbirth. Additionally, the 1833 investigators were supposed to ask medical men whether “the factory operatives [were] more or less attentive to cleanliness and ventilation in their dwellings than other persons of similar means.”

This, in effect, was a question about the domestic habits of married women in factory communities. In light of these instructions, Dr. Bissett Hawkins questioned several midwives concerning the domestic skills of their clients: “Do the factory women take good care of their houses, and make good housewives?—Why, they are kept so long at the factory-work that they have not often inclination for such things.” Another midwife noted that factory women “are not instructed, and they have no time. They cannot go to market.”

This testimony and other evidence like it convinced Bissett Hawkins that in Manchester “the married women fall remarkably short of the usual characteristics of the English wife,” and he concluded, “I cannot help . . . expressing my hope that a period may arrive when married women shall rarely be employed in a factory.” The “English wife” imagined by Bissett Hawkins fit a model of middle-class domesticity with which he was familiar. The surgeon Joseph Fletcher testified to the Select Committee on the Health of Towns in 1840 that “the want of comfort at home arises very much from moral causes: the woman is absent from home during the day working at the mill; she has not made the home comfortable, and the discomfort of the home has greatly arisen from that circumstance.”

Medical men were generally in agreement that the inexperience of collier wives posed moral and physical dangers to their families through their neglect of housekeeping. T. M. Greenhow, however, a surgeon in Newcastle, submitted a letter questioning the relative blame placed on husbands and wives for the condition of the home:

In visiting the habitations of the colliers you will find great distinctions in neatness, cleanliness, order, and general comfort of appearance. I have taken some pains to ascertain whether this was dependent most on the husband or wife. Of course attention to household neatness and comfort must depend immediately upon the latter, but an ill-conducted husband might render a wife indifferent and reckless in the management of household affairs, while
on the contrary an untidy wife may render her home so little attractive and comfortless, as to induce the husband to prefer spending his time abroad at the public-house or elsewhere.

This is one of few instances where a witness creates the possibility that men had an impact on social reproduction. Yet Greenhow concluded that “my inquiries have led me to believe that the wife is more frequently to blame than the husband. Indeed the women in the collieries are frequently remarkably ignorant and self-indulged.” Here Greenhow connects domestic ignorance to women’s selfishness, and it is not surprising that his report ended up concurring with prevailing gender norms.

Agricultural laborers were not exempted from investigators’ claims about the dangers of women’s domestic incompetence. Most of the twenty-four comments Commissioner Denison collected on the “Effects of Field-Work on Manners and Conduct” in his region pointed to the negative impact of women’s agricultural work on their ability and desire to do domestic tasks. Some differentiated between married women’s field work, which was viewed as acceptable, and the outdoor work of young women, whose field work created poor domestic habits and “disinclines them to domestic life.” In this case, it was domestic training that was of central importance. Presumably, married women’s agricultural labor was more acceptable because these women had already been trained in domesticity and were under the partial supervision of their husbands. This presents an interesting tension with the factory case where the work of single women was considered more appropriate than that of married women.

Medical men asserted that the most pressing issue regarding the relationships among public health, social reproduction, and women’s work was inattention to children. According to Robert Baker of Leeds, in his extensive contribution to the sanitary inquiry of 1842, “not only is a delicate constitution induced [through factory work], by which sickly children are born, but that absolute neglect of their offspring takes place after birth.” The degenerative effects of women’s employment were compounded by the need for mothers to return to work after their children were born. Baker clearly attributed the death of children to absent working mothers, claiming that “infantile deaths are concurrent with the increase in manufactories, and the abstraction of females from their homes and domestic occupations for mill-labour, or for other occupations which take them from home.” The Birmingham Committee of Physicians and Surgeons insisted that “the want of sufficient and frequent nutriment and proper care” that contributed to high infant mortality was “caused by the absence of mothers who are detained from their children, and are engaged
The committee went on to write that

the habit of a manufacturing life being once established in a woman, she continues it and leaves her home and children to the care of a neighbour, or of a hired child, sometimes only a few years older than her own children, those services cost her probably as much as she obtains for her labour. To this neglect on the part of the parents is to be traced the death of many children.  

Although the last sentence refers to “parents,” the passage plainly associates the responsibilities of child care with mothers.

Using a similar rhetorical strategy, John Kennedy, who investigated the print-grounds and other trades in Lancashire, also pointed to the dangers of maternal neglect. He asserted that

much evidence might be adduced of the great inattention of the parents to their children. I may state as an instance of this that in Manchester during the year 1840 alone, there were 5475 lost children found by the police and restored to their parents. Perhaps this may be accounted for by its being the practice for mothers to work in the mills and at other work, and they give some old woman a small douceur to look after the children.

This passage nicely illuminates the gender assumptions concerning domestic responsibilities. Kennedy quickly reduces parental neglect to maternal neglect caused by mothers’ work outside the home. Along with other investigators and medical witnesses, Kennedy attributed additional physical dangers, such as death by the burning and scalding of children in their own homes, to mothers working. Men were held responsible in the abstract as parents and financial providers, but the specific domestic duties to children were identified with mothers. Female labor, rather than poverty and poor sanitary conditions, was the primary cause of infant death.

Dr. Lyon Playfair, in his submission to the 1845 public health inquiry on large towns, did blame general sanitation problems as the major cause of mortality in his region. In his report, however, he cited female ignorance of domestic economy as the primary *minor* cause of disease and mortality in Lancashire: “This ignorance certainly leads to much disease among the infantile part of the population, and is strongly insisted upon by various medical witnesses.” Playfair referred to the evidence of Dr. Strange of Ashton, for example, who complained that factory mothers left their infants and children with other women or girls in order to go off to work.
According to Strange, “the effects of this unnatural treatment are visible upon the infant in very short time.” The physical consequences of their mothers’ “unnatural” labor and absence from home thus was written on the bodies of children. From a similar perspective, the surgeon Robert Garner submitted a letter on the Staffordshire Potteries, lamenting that

a great cause of the mortality amongst young children, particularly infants, in this district, . . . is the neglect of them, in many instances, from their mother’s being obliged, from necessity, or in some cases choosing, without such necessity, to absent themselves at their work for several hours, or even the whole day, and committing them to the care of hired attendants, in whom, it would be too much to expect the cares and attentions of the mother herself.

Women’s work away from home distorted the natural order of things, especially when a mother willingly chose wage labor as opposed to being forced to work out of financial need.

Likewise, investigators believed women’s agricultural labor led to a neglect of children. According to Commissioner Austin, working mothers left their children with unqualified caretakers or even locked up alone in the cottage. Children were thus exposed to “fatal accidents . . . those from the fire amongst others.” Austin quoted a female field worker, “a most excellent specimen of her class, industrious, careful and thriving,” as to the health risks to which she put her children: “I have always left my children by themselves, and, God be praised! nothing has ever happened to them, though I have thought it dangerous. I have many a time come home and have thought it a mercy to find nothing has happened to them.” Austin indicated that the testimony of women themselves revealed that female workers felt “that leaving their children without anybody to attend properly to them was the worst part of their employment.”

Women’s inattention to social reproduction was represented as a health threat to adults as well as children, particularly in reference to the poor preparation of food. Mines commissioner Dr. Charles Barham, who as senior physician to the Royal Cornwall Infirmary took a particular interest in the diseases of miners, reported with reference to Devonshire and Cornwall that

the slenderness of the stock of domestic knowledge possessed by the females employed in the mines is attested by all parties. When they come to be wives and mothers, the consequences are very injurious to the husband
and children, from the want of management in the outlay of the earnings, from the expense entailed in paying for work which ought to be done at home, and from the coarse and insufficient culinary processes, adopted through ignorance of better methods.35

Two of women’s primary domestic tasks were the organization of family finances and the preparation of food, and Barham despairingly concluded that women’s mining employment prevented them from mastering these duties. The Birmingham Committee of Physicians and Surgeons suggested that public kitchens should be set up so that working men could have good food, for “it very frequently happens that when the working man returns home to his dinner, he finds it unprepared: his wife has been at her shop, and she leaves the cooking of her husband’s dinner to a neighbour, who forgets it, and the poor man is obliged to swallow hastily his half-cooked meal, and to return to his labour with his stomach loaded with indigestible materials.”36 Here again we have medical testimony stressing the inadequacy of any private replacement for the natural wife and mother. This committee, however, offered the surprisingly socialistic solution of public kitchens, taking a domestic task out of the private sphere to be performed communally.

A female field worker’s husband also suffered, as Austin reported, for there is not the same order in the cottage, nor the same attention paid to his comforts as when his wife remains at home all day. On returning from her labour she has to look after her Children, and her husband may have to wait for his supper. He may come home tired and wet; . . . there is no fire, no supper, no comfort, and he goes to the beer shop.

This narrative seemingly places the husband and children in competition for the wife/mother’s attention. Austin concluded that “when a woman is much employed out of doors, many things in the domestic economy are neglected,” such as cleanliness and clothing.37 Similarly, Commissioner Denison noted that “women employed in field-work are not so careful and clean as others.” The result of women’s inattention, according to Denison, was that “the home to which the man returns, after his day’s work, is not so comfortable as it ought to be, and he is driven to the ale-house and beer-shop to avoid the discomforts, and to seek for that comfort which he ought to find at home.”38 Like the commissioners investigating mines and factories, Denison and Austin found that women’s work led to the demoralization of their husbands and posed a community health risk in leading men to turn to drink.
William Raynor Wood, echoing other commissioners, concluded his investigation of mines in 1842 by stressing that working women endangered the public health through their inability to manage a home. He asserted

that when they come to marry, the wife possesses not the knowledge to enable her to give to her husband the common comforts of a home; that the husband, even if previously well-disposed, is hence often led to seek at the public-house that cheerfulness and physical comfort which his own fireside does not afford, whence all the evils of drunkenness in many cases grow up; that the children, quite apart from any evils which the altered conduct of the father may bring upon them, but solely from the bad training of the mother, are brought up in no habits of order and comfort, but are habituated from their youth to all the evils of a disorderly and ill-regulated family, and must give birth to a still worse state of things in a succeeding generation; that under these accumulated evils the wife and the mother is perhaps herself the most acute sufferer from the consequences of her own defective education.39

This passage describes a cycle of degeneration: the social and physical reproduction of an unhealthy community resulting from the industrial employment of girls and women. The consequences for national strength were only too clear. In the scenario Wood paints, there is no remedy but a restriction on women’s paid work. Wood, in fact, implicitly recommended that the wages of female workers should be lowered to reduce their “temptation” to work. Referring to his catalog of the dangers of female labor, Wood resolved that “a fearful deterioration of the moral and physical condition of our working population is rapidly taking place.”40 For Wood, the evidence spoke for itself and clearly defined women’s work outside the home as a problem of public health. Likewise, the Committee of Surgeons and Physicians, whose report on Birmingham was submitted to both the sanitary and employment commissions, concluded that “the first and most prominent suggestion which has occurred to us on this subject is the better education of the females in the arts of domestic economy,” because working women’s ignorance was at the root of laboring people’s discomfort.41 In short, employment that kept women from social reproduction was a key obstacle to the improvement of sanitary conditions, a danger to the public health, and a threat to the well-being of working-class communities and the nation as a whole.
Ideas about social reproduction and public health were also mobilized by male workers struggling to reform the hours and conditions of their labor. Their motivations were often different from middle-class social and political reformers, however, as male operatives were concerned with the economic impact women's employment had on their own wages and occupational status. Public health and social reproduction gave them languages in which to express their concerns in a way that would resonate with policy makers. In the industrial centers of the north of England, activists organized committees to argue for the improvement of factory conditions and particularly a ten-hour work day. This organizing began in earnest surrounding the Select Committee of 1831–32 and continued to operate throughout the period from the passage of the Ten Hours’ Act for women and children in 1847 to the reworking of the Act in the early 1850s. Central to the arguments of Short Time activists and others concerned with the condition of the factory populations were claims about domesticity and the health of working-class communities. As Anna Clark has pointed out, “those in favor of legislative restriction on women’s and children’s work formed an uneasy and shifting coalition with Tory radicals and sanitary reformers, negotiating the meanings of domesticity in different rhetorical traditions.”42 Just as the parliamentary investigators and medical witnesses used the “rhetoric of domesticity” to argue for the restriction of women’s work, male operatives firmly placed responsibility for social reproduction on the shoulders of women.

Working-class men made arguments about the connections between domesticity and public health similar to those expressed by medical witnesses for the parliamentary investigations. Working men appealed to these connections to argue that women should spend more time caring for home, husbands, and children, but also to bolster their own claims to paid work. Women’s work away from home undermined not only the domestic health of the household but the role of the male breadwinner as well. Short Timers had an interest in limiting women’s hours to protect themselves from the competition of cheap labor. Meg Gomersall has written in this context that “the male working class neither ‘colluded with pressure from the bourgeoisie,’ nor were ‘bought off’ by the capitalists . . . but were exercising choices compatible with their cultural beliefs, experiences and values.”43 Their appeals to the connections between public health and domesticity grew out of their own experiences of home and work.44
Feminist historians have looked at the intersection of ideas about domestic life and demands for factory reform in the activism of working men. They convincingly show that gender was embedded in working-class men's demands for shorter hours. While the efforts of Short Timers initially focused on the conditions of children's employment, they increasingly included women in calls for shorter hours. Historians have debated the motivations behind male operatives' attempts to secure time restrictions for women. Some have argued that the interests of male workers were served by a cross-class alliance to restrict women's work, both in terms of bolstering the strength of the male breadwinner and in the necessary reduction of the working hours of adult males if other hours were limited. Mariana Valverde, in her study of the regulation of women's work in cotton mills, has stressed that male operatives in the Short Time movement pushed a "male-breadwinner model" in which masculinity was defined through skill and independent action, and femininity through the accomplishment of household tasks. Other historians, such as Jane Humphries, have emphasized that both men and women of the laboring classes favored limitations on women's work to allow women to spend more time at home and, as Sonya Rose puts it, "[to enhance] men's earnings and [prevent] competition between women and men for jobs." The public health implications of women's work were also present in the language of Short Time reform, but the connections between community health and women's labor in the politics of working men have received little attention.

Short Time reformers almost universally condemned the industrial labor of young women for depriving them of their domestic education and contributing to the breakdown of the health of working-class families. According to Robert Gray, "Sadler's Committee [of 1831–32] provided a fairly extensive platform for the operative short-time movement and its philanthropic allies. Adult male working-class witnesses, recruited and briefed by the short-time committee network, were probably the recognised, and in some sense elected, representatives of their trades and communities." These witnesses spoke to the impact female industrial labor had on their homes. William Kershaw, for example, testified that the behavior of his daughters resulting from their factory employment "is far from satisfactory to me; impudence and immorality of every description appear to be their growing characteristics; the longer they go, the worse they appear to be." Kershaw indicated a direct connection between factory work and increasingly unfeminine, immoral behavior. His examination continued:

Do they appear to be inclined to take any part in domestic business?—When they are working those hours they are not capable of doing it, and in fact
they refuse; they are altogether over-fatigued.

So that there is no possibility of their learning how to fit themselves for the future duties of life, if they should become wives and mothers?—None whatever.49

Kershaw blamed his daughters’ domestic incompetence on the factory system itself, which fostered bad habits, required excessively long hours, and produced fatigue, precluding women from learning domestic skills. Factory employment thus created young women who were physically unable and morally disinclined to perform the tasks of social reproduction. James Turner, a cotton-yarn dresser from Manchester, offered an even more detailed analysis of the damage factory work produced in women:

I never knew a master in all my factory experience, however well he might think of a girl in his service in the mill, who would take her as a menial servant; and if they were to apply for situations as menial servants, there would be a disinclination to take them.

Do you mean as it respects their moral character?—I mean as being unfit, because they cannot do any of the work that it is necessary for a menial servant to do; they are ignorant of those things, and we say that if they are not fit for servants, they will make very poor wives for us working men, and these young women do in general make very poor wives.50

In this man’s opinion, being a good wife was defined by the domestic skills needed to be a good servant, which is a revealing statement regarding expectations for marriage. While Turner emphasized factory girls’ “unfitness” in reference to domestic ignorance, unfitness most likely also applied to the state of health of factory girls. Both Kershaw and Turner addressed the impact women’s domestic incompetence had on men, and their testimony illustrates the way women workers were always positioned in relationship to men—as daughters, mothers, and wives.

In “The Piecener’s Complaint,” published as a Short Time Tract in November 1835, the author specifically took on the voice of a female factory child whose future was ruined through her ignorance of domestic tasks:

Our Mothers cannot teach us the things we ought to know,
To Bake, to Brew, to Wash, to Mend, to Stitch, and Knit, and Sew.
We’re over tired to learn them, when from the Mill we come,
And thus Long Hours and Ignorance are our unhappy doom.51
The intimate connection drawn between long hours and domestic incompetence points to a single solution: ten hours’ legislation. This poem emphasizes the trials of both mother and female child in a factory family. In highlighting that fatigue keeps the factory daughter from learning her domestic tasks, the author makes a direct association between physical health and domestic training. The language also suggests that the mother herself is ignorant of what she “ought to know” as well, most likely as a result of her early years as a factory worker.

Another Short Time author in 1841 linked a criticism of the industrial system to the breakdown of domestic economy and gender disorder. This writer identified a threat to the male breadwinner ideal, signaling a world turned upside-down in which women and children work while men stay at home. He argued that

the daughters of the working classes are now required to leave their home occupations, and enter the Factories. Many of these formerly possessed the means of profitable industry at home as hand loom weavers, but by the power looms they are either deprived of work altogether, or have their wages reduced to a mere pittance. Immense numbers of Hand Loom Weavers are brought into the pitiable condition of being unable to get work for themselves, and at the same time of having their daughters employed in the Factories for such long hours, as are quite inconsistent with female strength, and the performance of cottage duties.52

This author compared healthy women’s work in the home to unhealthy factory work. Home industry, he implied, even if arduous, was more compatible with the female constitution. He pointed explicitly to the dual evils of women’s factory work: damage to women’s physical health and to their ability to keep a home. He did not condemn women’s gainful employment itself but protested that women should not be employed in place of men and that the value of labor had been reduced by mechanization. Female factory workers suffered both from the physical trials of long hours and from their inability to learn domestic economy, which affected their families and communities.53

Expressing similar concerns, a Short Time petition utilized the voices of female operatives to shame members of Parliament. Their resolutions included

That your Petitioners are willing and desirous to earn their bread by the daily labour of their hands, but they feel it an extreme hardship, that they cannot
pursue their peculiar avocations, without being liable to have exacted from them an amount of toil to which their physical strength is quite unequal, and by which, as a natural consequence, vast numbers of them have their constitutions undermined and broken up....

That your Petitioners lament that the early age at which they are usually called to enter on their employments, and the extent to which those employments are carried, too frequently deprive them of all opportunity of acquiring a decent education, and a knowledge of domestic duties.

That your Petitioners feel that the hardship of their condition is deeply aggravated, by the obloquy to which they are exposed for deficiencies, which many of them are painfully conscious of, and most solicitous to supply, as far as they have means and opportunity; while they cannot but feel that the opprobrium too generally cast upon them, should, strictly speaking, recoil on those, who, in a Christian land, inflict upon them so cruel and intolerable a yoke, oppressive as Egyptian bondage itself.54

Closing with rhetoric of the antislavery movement, this petition appeals to the humanity of rulers who condemned slavery in the British empire, yet who ignored the abuse of British women at home.55 The language acknowledges both the physical and domestic difficulties facing young working women. Significantly, the petition emphasizes female workers’ desire and willingness to work for wages, implying that those they were petitioning would expect them to work. The petition goes on to argue that although women were ready to work, the hours and requirements of factory labor were injurious to the female body. The factory system thus diminished the value assigned to work. The document represents the petitioners both as recognizing that their labor kept them from fulfilling their duties as women, and as complaining that they were then castigated for something over which they had no control. They had to work the hours that were dictated to them and thus could not improve themselves with respect to domestic economy.

Female voices were again marshaled by the Short Time Committees in 1850, when the Ten Hours’ Act was under threat from new legislation. In a report by the Committee for the Protection of the Ten Hours’ Act, the factory inspector R. J. Saunders asserted that “women, and the elder girls who take an interest in domestic duties, almost invariably answer any inquiries made of them, with an assurance that they would regret returning to 12 or even 11 hours’ work, notwithstanding the increased wages they might receive.”56 This statement in effect marked any woman not favoring the shortened work day as dismissive of her domestic role.

Other evidence, however, suggests that women themselves were more
ambivalent than Saunders allowed regarding the shortening of hours. For the 1849 Reports of the Factory Inspectors, Leonard Horner and his subinspectors collected “Evidence of the Opinions of Persons Employed in Factories Respecting the Ten-Hours’ Act.” Many women did appreciate the shorter hours for allowing them to spend more time with their families and domestic chores. One married woman who worked at a cotton mill told Horner that she “thinks she has been long enough away from her children when she has been away 10 hours.”57 A weaver commented that, although she was receiving less money, “she prefers the 10 hours, for she has more time with her family, and has not to pay neighbours for working for her, such as cleaning the house, washing, cooking victuals, &c., as she used to do, for she finds time to do them herself.”58 Unlike the male operatives, these women did not phrase their support for Ten Hours in terms of a domestic ideal. Rather, they were interested in the immediate practical benefits of seeing their children more often and saving money. Similar sentiments were expressed by other married women, although a few indicated that they preferred the higher wages earned from working twelve hours.

Single women, however, more frequently took the latter position, as in the case of an eighteen-year-old throstle frame worker, who “does not mind how long she works if she can get enough to keep her.”59 There were those, moreover, like one young woman, who “prefers the 10 hours, because she has more time to herself.”60 Significantly, this single woman framed her desire for shorter hours in terms of her own needs rather than those of her family. Few unmarried women, in fact, expressed their support for Ten Hours based upon having more time to learn domestic skills.61

The Short Time Committees, nevertheless, consistently stressed social reproduction as a cross-class strategy to appeal to members of Parliament to improve factory conditions. A series of petitions in 1850 pointed directly to the relationship between long hours for females and potential domestic chaos. One document asserted

that your Honourable House must be aware that young females above the age of thirteen years are now subjected to twelve hours of actual labour per day, to which including proper time for meals, and going to and fro from their work, will engross fifteen hours out of every twenty-four, which must deprive them of all opportunity of acquiring that domestic knowledge which is so absolutely necessary for young females to possess, before they become wives, and mothers of families.62

This petition presented as common knowledge a shared understanding among men of the necessity of female training in domestic skills, as it was
assumed that all women were potential wives and mothers. Neglect of
domestic economy promised ill for the future, for women’s ignorance
would drag down the health of the community through their inability to
care for the present generation or educate future generations.

The association between female labor, the destruction of domestic
comforts, and the weakening of the health of working-class communities
was effective in appeals to laboring men as well. On the reworking of the
Ten Hours’ Act in 1850, a letter went out to factory operatives that linked
domestic unhappiness with the symbolic defeat of the Act. The authors
asked, “Will you allow the children of your bosom and the pledges of your fondest
love to be murdered by excessive toil, and your homes become the
dessolate abodes [sic] of wretchedness and misery?”63 This language sug-
gests the public health implications of forcing women to work long hours.
Significantly, women and children were represented as victims, while their husbands were given the agency to attempt to solve the problems that were facing them.

Although the conclusions of parliamentary investigators tended to
locate the need for employment regulation in the behavior of women
themselves, those protesting employment conditions imagined women victimized by industrial society, forced to work at the expense of their duties to family and home. Yet, whatever the cause of the problem, as Sonya Rose has pointed out, “working-class leaders increasingly argued that women belonged not in the workplace but in the home.”64 In the rhetoric of Short Timers and parliamentary investigators, public health problems arose because women’s work kept them from being able to properly care for husbands and children. The domestic space disintegrated and the community degenerated.

Biological and Social Reproduction: The Public Health Framework for Employment Legislation

What all this evidence demonstrates is that while women were identified
above all through their tasks of biological and social reproduction, men
were defined as paid workers. Parliamentary investigators and working-
class men alike assumed that men would be at work, needing to return
home to a properly managed household. The female reproductive body
translated into a dependent domestic role, while their able bodies meant
that men were responsible for being breadwinners. While women were
Chapter 2: The Reproductive Body, Part II

disadvantaged through their association with a reproductive model of health, men were disadvantaged by the able-bodied model that rendered irrelevant any significant political discussion of men’s health problems at work. Both models of embodiment were threatened by the conflation of moral and physical categories, as immoral behavior jeopardized both women’s domestic role and men’s ability to provide for their families. Additionally, because social reproduction was structured as a full-time job for women alone, in many ways the absence of women from their homes did cause real problems. Investigators, however, did not question women’s domestic role itself. As Commissioner John Kennedy concluded with reference to the mines of Lancashire, Cheshire, and Derbyshire, the employment of women endangered bodies, morals, and domestic duties, and had “no countervailing advantages to the people employed, or to the public.”

Parliamentary investigators worried that women’s work outside the home deprived the laboring classes of people to manage the tasks of social reproduction, which led to the physical, moral, and sanitary degeneration of laboring communities. Domesticity was here doubly constructed as a public health strategy for improving the health of laboring communities and as a way of limiting women’s work. If women did not follow moral rules and domestic responsibilities, they were seen as endangering the physical health of other individuals and the public health of their communities. Interestingly, while limiting the spaces and behaviors thought appropriate for poor women, this construction also placed these women in a powerful position. The idea that women could fail in their control over the home and health contained the assumption that they could also succeed. In a roundabout way, social reformers recognized social reproduction as work (although unpaid work) that was compromised by competing jobs outside the home.

I have no question that these ideas about the female body and public health were contributing factors in the passage of employment legislation, which implicitly would push women into domestic service or give them more time to spend at home. While the arguments about the health of women workers could be contradictory, medical witnesses shared the general assumption that women’s health was fragile and defined by reproduction. This common assumption served to override the disagreements in the medical testimony. In 1842, after the report of the Royal Commission investigating labor in mines, Parliament quickly and enthusiastically agreed to ban all females from underground work in mines; in 1844, some women’s work in factories was restricted to twelve hours a day. Female factory labor was further limited to sixty-three hours a week in 1847, which
was regarded as a victory for the Ten Hours Movement, which hoped to
limit hours for all workers.

Robert Baker, the surgeon and factory inspector, looked back in 1859 at
the positive effects of this legislation on the health of factory workers:

There is [since 1835] a gross increase of [factory] workers of 92 per cent: the
increase of females being 131 per cent., and nearly as many children as there
were formerly; and yet all the diseases which were specific to factory labour
in 1832 have as nearly as possible disappeared. We seldom or never now see
a case of in-knee or of flat-foot; occasionally one of slight curvature of the
spine, arising more from labour with poor food than from labour specifically.
The factory leg is no more amongst us, except as an old man or woman
who limps by, to remind one of the fearful past, or of the more rational and
social present. The faces of the people are ruddy, their forms are rounded,
their very appearance is a joyous one.66

It is notable that Baker remarked on gender-neutral ailments arising from
factory labor and discussed factory workers in the language used to
describe field workers; in health, factory workers became “ruddy,”
“rounded,” and “joyous.” While not forgetting the real benefits of employ-
ment legislation to women, it is important to look at the reasons and
rhetoric behind appeals for the restriction of female labor.67

Legislative regulation of employment was justified on the grounds of
public health; it was the responsibility of the state to maintain a healthy
social body even if this meant unwanted interference. The integrity of the
nation relied upon the integrity of the reproductive body at home and the
able body at work. As one physician testifying before the Select Committee
on children’s employment in 1831 put it, “the only safeguard to the state
consists in opposing [the] principle of political economy by the medical
voice, whenever it trenches on vital economy.”68 This physician placed
medical men in the important position of monitoring a national body
which was threatened by the laissez-faire policies adopted by many
employers and politicians. Because the female body was understood to be
biologically unstable, women were especially at risk from those who
neglected the realities of the reproductive body. Public health and national
concerns thus provided a framework for gendered employment legislation.
Women, it was argued, were dominated by their reproductive bodies and
could not be treated the same way as the independent, able-bodied (male)
laborer.