

Parliamentary Hearings on the Treatment of Women in Factories Great Britain, 1815

Adapted from "Factory Conditions," *Eyewitness to History*, Edited by John Carey. New York: Avon books, pp. 295-298.

Characters involved:

- Elizabeth Bentley – a young woman who worked in a factory for years
- Members of Parliament (M.P's) 1, 2, 3
- Harmon: Committee Chairman
- Speaker of the House: Mr. Habeeb

Speaker: Hear ye, Hear ye, this session of the Committee on the treatment of women in Factories will begin. Mr./Ms. Harmon if you would please...

Harmon: What age are you?

Bentley: Twenty-three

Harmon: Where did you live?

Bentley: Leeds, England.

Harmon: When did you begin work at the factory?

Bentley: When I was six years old.

MP #1: At whose factory did you work?

Bentley: Mr. Burk's.

MP #1: What kind of factory is it?

Bentley: A textile factory. We made spun raw cotton into fabric.

MP #2: What was your business at the mill?

Bentley: I was in charge of a cotton-spinning machine.

MP #2: What were your hours at the mill?

Bentley: From 5 in the morning until 9 at night, when we were really busy.

MP #2: For how long might you work such an excessive schedule?

Bentley: I worked that sort of schedule for more than a year at one point.

MP #3: Was time allowed for meals?

Bentley: We got 40 minutes at noon.

MP #3: Did you have any time to eat your breakfast?

Bentley: No, we just ate when we could find a minute.

MP #3: What about time for drinking water or tea?

Bentley: No, just whenever we could.

Harmon: Do you consider your job to be physically difficult?

Bentley: Yes.

Harmon: Explain what you had to do.

Bentley: When the frames are full of cotton thread, the frames are stopped. I took the flyers off, and the full bobbins of thread off, and then carried them to the roller. I then put empty bobbins on, put the flyers back on and then got the frame going again.

M.P. #2: Does that keep you constantly on your feet?

Bentley: Yes, there are so many frames and they run so quick.

M.P. #2: Is your labor very fast and tiring?

Bentley: Yes, you don't have time for anything.

M.P. #1: Suppose you slacked a little bit, were late to work - what would they do?

Bentley: They would strap us with a strap of leather.

M.P.#1: And they are in the habit of strapping those who are the slowest at their job?

Bentley: Yes.

M.P. #1: Girls are hit as well as boys?

Bentley: Yes.

M.P. #1: Have you ever been strapped?

Bentley: Yes.

M.P. #1: Have you ever been strapped severely?

Bentley: Yes.

M.P. #3: Is the strap used so as to hurt you excessively?

Bentley: Yes it is. I have seen the overseer make little girls hug poles and then go down a row of them and just strap them as hard as he could.

M.P. #3: What was his reason for that?

Bentley: He was very angry.

Harmon: Are you permanently disabled as a result of your work?

Bentley: Yes I am. I have problems standing up straight. I have constant pain in my knees, shins, and back.

Harmon: When did these injuries begin to appear?

Bentley: When I was thirteen. It has gotten worse since. I cannot express the pain and weariness that I feel.

M.P. #2: For all this work, did you at least earn enough money to support your family?

Bentley: The money I made did help my family out. But it took all of us, including all 5 of my brothers, working just to barely make it. I guess I would have made more if I had been a man, but as a young girl I got paid hardly anything.

M.P. #2: What do you mean “as a young girl”? What does being a young girl matter?

Bentley: The factory owners said that kids can do less work than adults. So kids got paid less. They also said that girls are less capable than boys so they paid us girls even less. It always seemed to me though that I worked just as hard as anyone else. I think the owners just hired people like me so they could save money.

M.P. #3: One thing I’ve been wondering - how did you find time to go to school with all the hours you worked?

Bentley: I didn’t. I would love to learn to read and write, but I think it’s too late now. The owners used to call us stupid. I think he was right. I’ve never been able to go to school.

M.P. #1: What are you doing now?

Bentley: Because of my injuries, I cannot work a normal job. I am in the poorhouse.

Harmon: Thank you, Ms. Bentley. That will be all.

Speaker: Session in recess.