



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

‘Elbow grease and yellow soap’: Housework time in working-class households in late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain

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Summary: An increase in housework time has been claimed to confer welfare benefits to the household, but there is a lack of empirical evidence for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain with which to verify this claim. Using disparate sources, we address this lacuna and identify a substantial increase in domestic labour hours performed by ordinary women. We note the changing imperatives of state involvement and industrial development and explore how this additional domestic labour served the interests of state and employers as well as those of husbands and children.

Abstract

Housework is central to feminist calls for recognition of women’s work, economic histories explaining the sexual division of labour, and claims regarding the progressive role of scientific knowledge. Yet little is known about the time it actually took. We address this lacuna. We utilize British sources and find a substantial increase in the hours ordinary women spent on domestic labour between the late-eighteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. We note the changing imperatives of state involvement and industrial development and explore how the additional domestic labour served the interests of state and employers as well as those of husbands and children.

KEYWORDS

Domestic labour, Family welfare, Housework, Nineteenth-century Britain, Twentieth-century Britain

Unpaid, unrecognized, and unfairly distributed, housework has long been seen by feminists as central to gender inequity. It also features, though sometimes obliquely, in economic histories that cite changes in the sexual division of labour, patterns of consumption, public health, and the accumulation of human capital, all of which are entangled with housework, as drivers of growth. Yet even in Britain, often held to illustrate these interacting mechanisms, relatively little is known about the time ordinary women devoted to housework. We address this lacuna. We utilize several different methods and historical sources to investigate married women’s time

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use. We find that hours spent on housework increased substantially between the late-eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, one contribution being time spent in cooking and food preparation. As domestic technology in most households remained unaltered, raising standards required increased labour input. Whilst wives and mothers worked harder to improve the nutrition, cleanliness, and health of their families, we see the imperatives of developing capitalism as creating secondary pressures. Unpaid women's domestic work was seen as an expedient way to fend off disease and ensure health in working-class homes. Exhorting wives and mothers to improve standards was easier and cheaper than state investment in sanitary infrastructure or the regulation of housing quality. Thus, we revisit in a historical context earlier feminist claims that housework creates broader economic value, reproducing labour, substituting for public health expenditure, and shoring up profits.¹ Similarly, the compulsory education of children, vital in improving the quality of future generations of workers, increased the domestic burden by providing a framework within which the cleanliness of children and their clothing could be scrutinized and mothers held accountable, and by imposing additional rigidity on mealtimes.² Shift work, increasingly instituted in heavy industries to maximize the returns on expensive fixed capital, stretched mealtimes and bathing schedules and so extended the hours of domestic labour. More housework improved family wellbeing but also contributed to the capitalist economy and all at the expense of underappreciated, often unrecognized, and increasingly overburdened wives and mothers.

The paper is organized as follows. Section I provides context in terms of what early social investigations revealed about housework, the conditions under which it was performed, and its importance for wellbeing. The section also identifies contemporaneous recognition of housework's entanglement with the emerging objectives of the late nineteenth-century state and the changing labour market of maturing capitalism. Yet despite new interest, we claim that little concrete evidence accumulated on the time that ordinary women devoted to cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Economic historians have inherited an empirical gap, but nonetheless as suggested in this section, several grand narratives feature domestic labour as a factor in late-nineteenth century growth. Section II seeks to address the empirical void by providing estimates of the time spent on housework. We describe our sources and methods and find that hours spent increased substantially. Section III explores how the additional domestic labour served the interests of state and employers as well as those of husbands and children. The final section summarizes the argument that housework creates broader economic value, here demonstrated in a historical context which saw significant social and familial change in the context of the second industrial revolution.

I | CONTEXT

Early social commentators provided descriptions of nineteenth-century housework. The surveys of Charles Booth for his 17-volume record, *Life and Labour of the People of London 1889–1903*, depicted the working-class home as seen by social investigators and welfare reformers.³ The programme inspired others, including some of Booth's original researchers, who delved deeper into

¹ See Lewis, 'Family provision' for a discussion of the contested responsibilities of state and family at this time.

² See Ross, *Love and toil*, pp. 24–7, pp.196–215 for a detailed discussion of state and official supervision of parenting through, for example, the introduction of medical inspectors and School Care Committees mandated to enforce child health standards and to punish parental failure.

³ Booth, *Life and Labour*.



domestic conditions.⁴ Driven by questions around poverty, maternal health, infant mortality, housing, and living standards, Maud Pember Reeves, Florence Bell, and Anna Martin embarked on their own studies.⁵ Their descriptions and data, along with accounts provided by their working-class subjects, provide a vivid picture of the privations and challenges of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century urban life.

For other commentators the entry point was the transformation in the technology deployed within the home.⁶ Modern authors, along with some of the earlier writers, have been critical of the failure of innovation to liberate women from domestic drudgery. Late nineteenth-century writers often assumed that mechanization and mass production would transform women's domestic work.⁷ Commercial laundries illustrated how commodification could ease women's burden, but communal kitchens and commercial nurseries were also considered candidates. Martin paid tribute to the diverse tasks involved in housework '... where the mother is caterer, cook, laundress, sempstress, and charwoman, as well as nurse', but thought that specialization and market production must, eventually, overtake this package of tasks as was the case in jobs elsewhere.⁸ These utopian visions remained unrealized. One reason was that whilst technology replaced the servant in middle-class homes, housekeeping functions remained firmly centred within the family.⁹ But wives and mothers themselves resisted changes which impinged on their authority in the private sphere of the home and were proud of their efforts to deliver care and comfort to their husbands and children. Families too valued the efforts of mothers. Autobiographical accounts bear testimony. Boys' devotion to their mothers was due in large part to 'domestic efficiency and the creation of a comfortable home'.¹⁰ Indeed, Robert Collyer recorded that his mother's 'elbow grease', 'yellow soap', and 'fresh lime laid on the walls' were what made his first home so cheerful.¹¹ Similarly, many men's memoirs celebrated mothers' efforts, often in straitened circumstances, to provide regular nourishing meals.¹²

Feminists continue to demand that domestic labour be recognized as work and valued within gross domestic product (GDP).¹³ Such claims do not just hark back to the 1970s and campaigns for 'wages for housework'. New campaigners argue that preventative public health measures also represent a positive contribution that should figure in the National Accounts.¹⁴ Such measures have their counterparts in the hygiene, health, and nutrition secured in the past by unpaid work in the home—indeed, recent work has provided new historical evidence on the contribution of domestic labour to family living standards and its role in economic development as it oiled the wheels of capitalism.¹⁵

⁴ Beatrice Potter (Webb) and Clara Collet. He also influenced Helen Dendy (Bosanquet). See O'Day, 'Women' and Lewis 'Social facts'.

⁵ Pember Reeves, *Round about*; Martin, 'Married working woman'; Bell, *At the works*.

⁶ Hardyment, *Mangle*; Davidson, *Woman's work*; Schwarz Cowan, *More work*.

⁷ See Oakley, *Science*, and contemporary writers such as Black, *A new way*.

⁸ Martin, 'Married working woman', p. 34.

⁹ Schwartz Cowan, 'Industrial revolution'; *More work*, ch. 5, pp. 102–50.

¹⁰ Humphries, *Childhood*, p.140.

¹¹ Ibid, from Robert Collyer, *Some memories*, pp. 5–6.

¹² Humphries, *Childhood*, pp. 140–1.

¹³ Folbre and Wagman, 'Counting'; Gardiner et al., 'Women's'; Berik and Kongar, *Handbook*. See also Callaci, *Wages*.

¹⁴ Weale, 'Public health'.

¹⁵ Humphries, 'Careworn'; 'Respectable': Humphries and Thomas, 'Best job'; Folbre, Plenary address. See also Oakley, *Science*, pp. 82–6.



This returns us to the turn-of-the century reformers, groups with different motivations and aims but at this critical juncture drawn together by a novel interest in the working-class home. One important block represented the concerns of an imperialist state anxious to reverse the physical deterioration of the population, dramatically illustrated by the rejection rate of recruits in the second Boer War, 1899–1902.¹⁶ Ironically, the cuts in poor law expenditure following the 1834 Act appear to have fallen on families, particularly those with large numbers of children, adversely affecting life expectancy and probably contributing to the mid-nineteenth-century stagnation in health and physical competence.¹⁷ Such degeneration threatened Britain's power and status in an internationally competitive world. The state's instrumentalist interest dovetailed with the concerns of sanitarians, public health advocates, and property developers to reform the unhealthy living conditions and slum housing of the working class. Changes were wrought by concerned councils, philanthropic employers, and charities. They improved water supply and sewage disposal, instigated slum clearance and reduced over-crowding, instituted public health measures for containment of disease, and initiated education around hygiene and nutrition. Mortality rates fell and epidemic outbreaks occurred less frequently, although the relative contributions of public health and nutrition to the improved disease environment remain debated.¹⁸

These improvements occurred outside the home. Despite housework's dominance of the intersection of public health and family welfare, by and large it remained below the radar screens of the reformers, too mundane to merit much attention. However, continued high infant mortality and the persistence of diarrhoeal disease highlighted the importance of conditions and practices within the home. Simon Szreter concludes that whilst local public health measures were undoubtedly beneficial, they 'couldn't alter the short-comings of living conditions and especially food preparation in the over-crowded, working-class domestic environment of the back-to-back [house]'.¹⁹ Nevertheless, instead of attention to these material problems, heightened concern over infant welfare led to a public discussion of the adequacy of working-class mothers and particularly to the way in which paid employment distracted them from their domestic and maternal duties.²⁰ Statistical evidence correlating regional infant death rates with married women's labour force participation fuelled the debate, and although the correlations were contested, the incompatibility between good mothering and working for wages retained populist support. Contemporaries exhorted mothers to abandon the labour market and attend to their homes, shifting the Victorian family further towards a male breadwinner–female homemaker model.

Whilst the effects of women's withdrawal from paid work on their wellbeing remains debated, grand narratives have seen it as beneficial to household standards of living. Jan de Vries extends his industrious revolution thesis to argue that in the second half of the nineteenth century, consumer preferences shifted towards commodities that could not be purchased in the market. Improved health, good nutrition, and higher standards of cleanliness could only be provided

¹⁶ See Lewis, *Women*, ch. 3, and 1904 *Report of the British Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration*.

¹⁷ Green, Mesevage, Mooney, and Szreter, 'New poor law'.

¹⁸ See Szreter, 'Importance', who argues local public health measures were key to mortality improvement, in contrast to the argument for improved nutrition put forward by McKeown, *Modern rise*. The analysis is furthered by Hardy, *Epidemic streets*; Szreter, *Health*; Aidt et al., 'New perspectives'; Chapman 'Contribution'; Harris and Hinde, 'Sanitary investment'; Hinde and Harris, 'Mortality decline'; Bell and Millward, 'Public health expenditures'; Clark and Cummins, 'Urbanization'; Gorsky, 'Public Health', Hamlin and Sheard, 'Revolutions'; Mooney, 'Professionalization'; Hanlon, *Laissez-Faire Experiment*.

¹⁹ Szreter, 'Importance', p. 29.

²⁰ For a summary of the debate see Dyhouse, 'Working-class mothers'. See also Ross, *Love and toil*, pp. 195–221.



within the home and usually required additional labour time to produce.²¹ The labour was supplied by wives who relinquished any pretensions to paid work to provide these commodities for their families. According to de Vries, this reorientation of activity improved family and individual welfare—all were better off under the homemaker–breadwinner scenario.

Joel Mokyr extends the theoretical framework to argue that new technology and knowledge could increase the productivity of domestic labour.²² Improved medical knowledge, particularly around sanitation and germ theory; better education on cleanliness, hygiene, and nutrition; the provision of public goods, such as piped water; and the use of new fuels, such as gas and electricity, which enabled the development and purchase of domestic appliances, allowed tasks to be completed more effectively and with less physical labour. These changes, in combination, could be leveraged by the conscientious wife and mother to create health benefits whilst creating conditions that also increased the labour time deployed.

These rose-tinted accounts see women's domestic labour as central to improvements in living standards but rarely venture inside the household to observe the very real constraints the housewife faced or listen to what these women themselves said about their struggles to create comfort and raise standards. Ann Oakley's recent book urges us to consider the 'health implications of household behaviour', asking 'who translated into household practice enhanced knowledge about food and domestic standards of living other than the women?'²³ We need access to the working-class home to observe actual procedures.

Few authors have ventured down this road. Joanna Bourke provides a robust defence of the status and authority women were afforded through becoming housewives, supporting her claim with working-class autobiographical evidence.²⁴ Elizabeth Roberts' oral histories provide greater nuance. By 1940, smaller families meant the demands of child rearing had fallen, and some domestic conditions had improved, but even then, to keep the home moderately comfortable and children tolerably clean required immense effort.²⁵

Optimism about the role of the homemaker wife is inferred from theoretical overviews or economy-wide improvement in health, rather than informed by looking closely inside working-class homes. Indeed, Joyce Burnette has recently argued that there is a chasm in our empirical knowledge of time spent on housework that extends across Europe throughout the crucible of changing standards from 1870 to 1930.²⁶ Other accounts rely on trends in time use in the US, where domestic technology was more readily adopted and afforded than in the UK, where there was a long time-lag before any of these amenities became generally available.²⁷

II | TIME SPENT IN DOMESTIC LABOUR

We start by establishing a long-run trend in domestic work time within which to set our nineteenth- and twentieth-century observations. Jane Humphries has constructed a series on the

²¹ De Vries, *Industrious revolution*, ch. 5, pp. 186–237.

²² Mokyr, 'Why "More work"?'.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

²⁴ Bourke, 'Housewifery'.

²⁵ Roberts, *Woman's place*, pp. 202–3. See also Ross, *Love and toil*, pp. 45–50.

²⁶ Burnette, 'Mismeasuring women's work', Economic History Society conference, Glasgow 2025.

²⁷ Scott and Pavlisa, 'Labour saving durables'.



cost and content of board and lodging for people of good standing from 4600 individual observations between 1270 and 1850. This covers ‘commercial’ provision of household services to paying guests and live-in employees and demonstrates the simultaneous increase in acceptable consumption and the labour input required.²⁸ From a grain livery providing only basic food in the medieval period, standards rose so that the artisan might expect better food and a roof over their head. The early modern period saw demands for more domestic comfort: a bed, heating, light, and some privacy. Greater variety of food, laundry, a clean environment, and facilities for personal hygiene and sanitation were needed for respectability by the mid-nineteenth century. Controlling for differences in source, region, skill level of recipient, the day rate for women’s labour, and the content of the package through regression analysis, Humphries reveals the rising costs of a respectable consumption, which can be subdivided into the increased expenditure on goods and the daily labour cost for the domestic services that its provision entailed.²⁹ Costing this female labour and aggregating it across households without servants reveals that women’s unpaid labour constituted some 20 per cent of aggregate national income.³⁰ This estimate excludes any labour expended in childcare and breastfeeding, and thus understates the actual welfare contribution.³¹ Women’s domestic work represented a large and unrecognized contribution to social reproduction and thus to economic growth.

Here we use the coefficients from Humphries’ regression to extract the monetary cost per day of women’s labour required to produce the changing package of domestic comfort overtime.³² We then translate this cost into the hours of housework performed by dividing by women’s day wage in casual work.³³ Somewhere around 6–8 hours per day were required to produce the Tudor and early modern package of food, board, and lodging for a semi-skilled worker (figure 1). This rose to 13 hours or more once the package became more complex and sophisticated.³⁴ We benchmark the hours laboured by actual women observed in a number of different kinds of historical source against these trends.

Our estimates of women’s hours of domestic labour are typically based on individual cases, sometimes collected through oral histories and sometimes as components of surveys on women and their work. There is also information from autobiographical accounts, commentary by social reformers, and documents underpinning unpublished studies.³⁵

Typically, the accounts summarize the woman’s day in moderate detail, often recounting a daily routine. Unlike more recent surveys, the sources did not request recall of the daily number of hours devoted to a task and thus avoided the pitfall of double-counting when activities

²⁸ Humphries, ‘Respectable’; ‘Careworn’.

²⁹ Humphries, ‘Respectable’, t.2, col. 4, ‘Careworn’, t.3.

³⁰ Humphries, ‘Careworn’, p. 345.

³¹ For the contribution that breastfeeding made to National Income see Henderson and Humphries ‘Breastfeeding’, and Jane Humphries, ‘Caring about care: the economic history of caring labour’, Alice Murray Distinguished Scholar Lecture, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, 27 February 2025.

³² Humphries, ‘Careworn’, t.3.

³³ Humphries and Weisdorf, ‘Wages of women’, app. t.A.1, p. 431.

³⁴ The computation assumes an 8-hour workday for this casual wage on the basis of London labourers’ and agricultural workers’ hours; see Voth, ‘Time’, and Burnette, *Gender*, pp. 86–7, pp. 95–6. As the maintenance package provided on a commercial basis became more complex, it might be expected that the work became more skilled. Applying a skill premium of 1.5 (Van Zanden, ‘Skill premium’, figure. 2, p. 128) to domestic work would reduce the hours needed to produce maintenance for a skilled artisan to around nine per day by the 1830s.

³⁵ See full list of sources and the data extracted in Appendix.

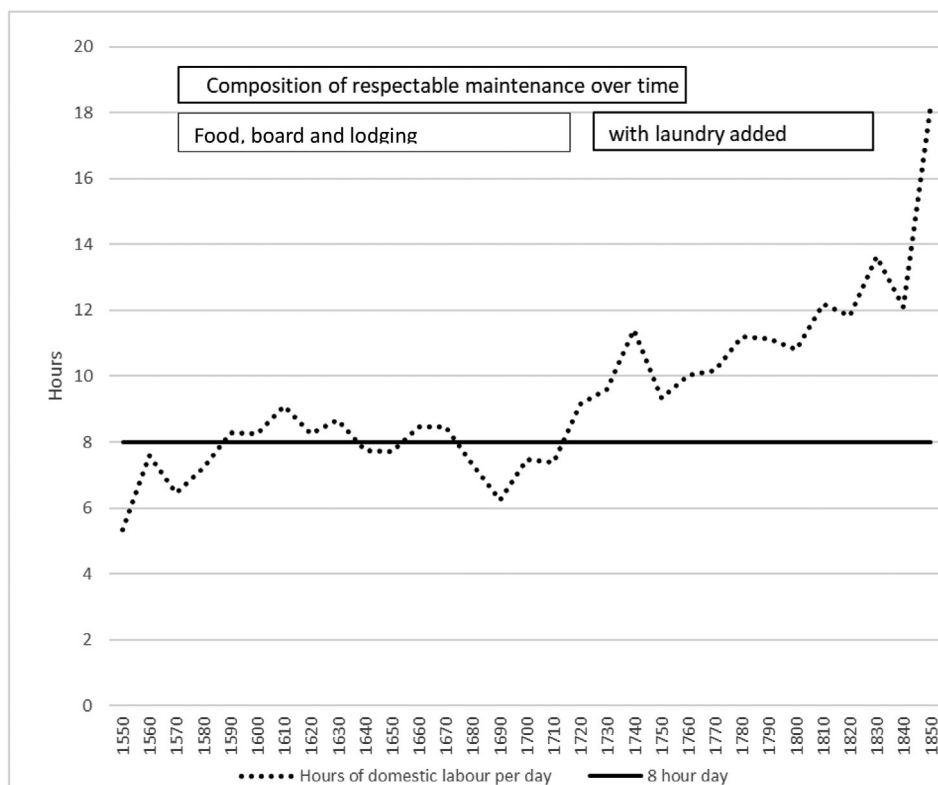


FIGURE 1 Hours of domestic work, 1550–1850. *Note:* Constructed from Humphries, ‘Careworn’, t.3; Humphries and Weisdorf, ‘Wages of women’, app. t.A.1, see text.

were performed jointly, such as childcare.³⁶ Indeed, child-centred time was limited and largely confined to washing, dressing, and feeding children and babies. With whole families living in just one or two rooms, child supervision was probably an adjunct to nearly every task.

The earliest estimates we have of a woman’s working day is for Catherine Walkden, the wife of a farmer and non-conformist minister in Lancashire in 1725–30 and 1733–4.³⁷ She had no domestic help, was pregnant and gave birth, cared for three other young children and several teenagers from her husband’s first marriage, fed and accommodated various workers, and hosted numerous of her husband’s colleagues on the methodist preacher circuit. Incidental references to Catherine’s activities in her husband’s detailed diaries allow for Catherine’s work schedule to be reconstructed. Activities such as laying fires and collecting water are not reported and so are not included in this reconstruction, leaving Catherine’s obligations understated.

When we revisit Catherine through her husband’s diaries in 1733–4, she had diversified her activities: putting out spinning for the local woollen industry, tending a flock of sheep, and keeping pigs. Her domestic duties included large amounts of baking, cooking, and preserving as well as the household’s washing. Cleaning was less frequently noted, either because below it was the diarist’s radar or because the family’s austere furnishing required little attention.

³⁶ An exception was [Spring Rice](#), *Working-class wives*, (p. 24) who asked for leisure time.

³⁷ [Humphries](#), ‘Micro-history’.



The mid-eighteenth and earlier-nineteenth-century observations come from a study of time use by Nicholas Collins based on court depositions of criminal and coroners' cases from the west of England for the years 1700–1850.³⁸ Collins uses the third party criterion to identify work, that is, any activity that could be performed for another person is considered work, whether paid or unpaid. Activities not covered by this criterion are classified as leisure or personal care. By enumerating the activities undertaken by women, then adjusting for sleep, time of day, and women's underrepresentation in the source, the distribution of tasks throughout the day and the average time spent can be captured. The court depositions cover all women, not just married women with families, thus moving away from the domestic focus of Catherine Walkden. Sheng's similar analysis, using London's Old Bailey records for the 1750s and 1830s but without Collins's identification of domestic work, also provides cases.³⁹

The mid-nineteenth-century observations are taken from the detailed household accounts collected by Frederic Le Play in the 1850s and his colleagues at the *Société Internationale des Etudes Pratiques d'Economie Sociale* between 1857 and 1899.⁴⁰ These vignettes include seven English households, four from Le Play's initial sample headed by skilled industrial workers. In these families the wives were largely engaged in household activities but did remunerated work such as childminding, fermenting a drink to sell, and pig-keeping. The Société captured three more affluent property-owning families. One was headed by a farm supervisor in Nottingham who owned livestock and had access to a garden. His wife was involved in keeping poultry, tending to the cows and pigs, and making cheese and butter to sell commercially, all recorded as paid work in our classification, alongside looking after her household, minding her children, and doing the family's laundry. Another household head was a cowman in Lambeth, whose wife was involved in all the dairy work, selling milk during the day and cleansing the dairy utensils at night. She also cared for her three children and made the family's clothes. The third was a foreman at a tannery with four adult working children and a fifth still at school. This wife did all the household work. Le Play and his colleagues reported the days in the year spent by each family member in each productive activity, and valued the woman's output and labour time, whether formally marketed or not. The women worked between 135 and 365 days in the year. We use this information to estimate the time these women spent on housework and paid work. The days worked are converted to hours per day by assuming that the workday Le Play envisaged was 12 hours long, an assumption supported by other information in the accounts.⁴¹

As we move into the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the observations again relate to individual women. An exception is Jane Humphries and Ryah Thomas's use of autobiographical and ethnographic evidence to reconstruct a miner's wife's day.⁴² They note the particularly heavy labour needed to clean the clothes and bodies of miners following every shift. This added some 18 hours per week onto the 33 hours of normal household labour a married women might

³⁸ Collins, 'Time use', revised figures provided by author.

³⁹ Sheng, 'Did women?'

⁴⁰ Le Play, *Les Ouvriers*; Société Internationale, *Les Ouvriers*, series 1, 5 vols., and series 2, 5 vols. Online version: [ouvrieresdeuxmondes.huma-num.fr/monographie/\(title of worker\)](http://ouvrieresdeuxmondes.huma-num.fr/monographie/(title of worker)).

⁴¹ For example, the Derby iron worker put alloy in a furnace on 12-hour shifts, alternating 7 days and 7 nights and working 14 days in a 2-week period. Le Play records this as 355 days of work, *Les Ouvriers*, p. 406, p. 414. The farm supervisor worked from 4 a.m. until 8 p.m. with 2.5 hours of breaks for food, so 13.5 hours per day (Société, observed 1856). Burnette, 'Mismeasuring', considers Le Play had a 10-hour day in mind. Our results remain largely unaltered if a shorter working day is assumed.

⁴² Humphries and Thomas, 'Best job', t.4 p. 111.



anticipate performing, and as it was necessary for the miner to fulfil his paid work obligations but was not provided by the employer, represented a transfer of unpaid labour to the colliery company.

By the late-nineteenth century concern about the nation's health, recognition of the insecurity of much industrial employment, and evidence of widespread poverty spurred social investigators to understand working-class life and its challenges, and often, to try to influence attitudes and practices. Officials, such as school attendance officers and health visitors, or representatives of well-meaning institutions such as the Charity Organisation Society (COS), became common in the mean streets of Britain's cities.⁴³ Surveillance was facilitated by the improved health environment that confined infectious disease to fever nests' in slum areas, and so emboldened middle- and upper-class women to venture into working-class homes.⁴⁴ These women often held strong views about the merits of women's paid work and its consequences for child development, as well as the appropriate balance between self-help and charity, but their findings open windows onto domestic conditions. Whilst largely involved in overseeing and analysing his mammoth survey of London, Booth also visited households in East London and even went the extra mile by lodging with some families.⁴⁵ These investigations exposed working-class lives to public view.

Maybe the best known and most used accounts of women's domestic labour and household circumstances are those collected by Pember Reeves and the Fabian Women's Group published as *Round about a pound a week*.⁴⁶ The accounts were collected through weekly visits to homes in Lambeth between 1909 and 1913. Booth described this area as being a maze of small streets and courts and noted that the area provided regular employment for both skilled and unskilled workers. However, the rents were high, accommodation poor, and families large, resulting in high infant mortality.⁴⁷ The husbands of the women in Pember Reeves' survey were in permanent jobs, rather than casual work, and earned between 18 and 30 shillings per week.⁴⁸ The women were of reproductive age. Indeed, the sample was selected from outpatients at a lying-in hospital with the aim of studying the effect on mother and baby of sufficient nourishment during pregnancy and early infancy. All the mothers were feeding their babies at the time of the survey, but this was hardly atypical, as women at this time usually breastfed their children for some months and they might expect to have a new arrival every 18–24 months. Whilst we have information on fewer than 30 families, and sadly, little of the original information on housing and daily routines survives, Pember Reeves provided accounts of the daily chores of 5 women. To this we add a further two from the surviving original account books.⁴⁹ These covered only 'ordinary' days, so missed wash day, which was stated to take an extra 10 hours, and the additional time spent cooking on a Sunday.⁵⁰ We incorporate this information to capture an average day for each woman—these women were working for their families for 15 hours and 41 minutes a day. Only 2 hours and 47 minutes was spent in nursing the baby or eating with the children, activities that

⁴³ See Lewis, *Women*, p. 12; and 'Social facts'.

⁴⁴ Hardy, *Epidemic streets*, p. 210.

⁴⁵ Booth, *Charles Booth: a memoir*.

⁴⁶ Pember Reeves, *Round about*, Ch. XIII, 'Mothers' days', pp. 145–53.

⁴⁷ Booth, *Life and labour*, final volume (1903), pp. 372–3.

⁴⁸ £0.90 to £1.50 in decimal currency.

⁴⁹ Maud Pember Reeves account books, LSE archives, COLL MISC 847, book 17, pp. 8 ff, a packer's wife with five children and the wife of a stoker in a glass blowers with six children.

⁵⁰ A Manchester Council survey in 1918 concluded that it took close to 10 hours per week, much of it heavy labour, to do the laundry for a family of five people, Ross, *Love and toil*, p. 137, n. 28.



the women often classified as ‘taking a rest’. If this so-called repose is deducted these London wives worked 12 hours and 54 minutes in unpaid domestic labour most days of the year.

Unfortunately, few other time budgets for the early twentieth century contain the detail provided by Pember Reeves, but we have found a number of accounts that yield reconstructed time budgets. Bell described the Middlesborough iron workers whom she lived among.⁵¹ From her chapter on the iron workers’ wives and daughters, we can combine Mrs N.’s schedule of her day with Mrs M.’s weekly Wednesday washing and Thursday ironing routine to devise a representative day in 1907. There was no public laundry, so washing was undertaken at home. Mrs N. got up at 6:00 a.m. and went to bed at 10:00 p.m. Most of her 16-hour day was taken up with 13 hours of domestic labour.

The routine of women in paid employment was rather different, often arranged around days of the week rather than through the day, although there were daily tasks to be completed as well. Roberts’ oral histories detail aspects of the lives of interviewees’ mothers who undertook paid work, mainly focusing on the northern textile town of Preston.⁵² Here many women worked as weavers, winders, carders, and spinners in the factories, often through financial necessity, as male wages were lower than elsewhere. Full-time factory work meant that these women’s days were predominantly ‘bed and work’, with housework squeezed in between. The Factory Act 1847 had limited hours of work to ten per day for women, but working 5.5 or 6 days a week was common. In addition to this paid work, we can surmise from Mr Terry’s account that his mother rose at 5:45 a.m. and continued until 9 or 9:30 p.m., working ten of these hours in the factory.⁵³ If close enough to the mill, mothers might return home to serve a quick lunch. Even if this was not possible, these women still baked their own bread, did their families’ washing, and ensured respectable standards were met, down to donkey-stoning the front doorstep. Mrs Harrison’s account suggests 55 hours per week of paid work and maybe 5 hours a day cooking and housework time on workdays.⁵⁴ Laundry and baking were started at night and a thorough cleanup happened at the weekends, possibly adding a minimum of 6 hours to domestic labour time.

Although providing no estimates of time use, Edward Cadbury, M. Cecile Matheson, and George Shann suggested that the standards achieved in the homes of employed and homemaking mothers were similar.⁵⁵ These authors were broadly unfavourable to married women’s work for wages, but they recognized that low levels of pay in Birmingham made it ‘practically impossible for a man and wife to bring up under efficient conditions even one or two children on a labourer’s wage’.⁵⁶ On domestic work they wrote, ‘No woman can do all the housework required by a growing family and at the same time spend the day in the factory. A great many try to lead this double existence, washing and cleaning on Saturdays, and paying parents or neighbours for a little care and supervision of children during the week’.⁵⁷ They surmised that wives undertook paid work from financial necessity, and although they felt this had an adverse effect on homes and families, they sympathized that a choice was being made between ‘the lesser of two evils, that is,

⁵¹ Bell, *At the works*, p. 235 (Mrs N) and p. 177 (Mrs M).

⁵² Roberts, *Woman’s place*.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁵⁵ Cadbury et al., *Women’s work*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 211.



whether the children are to be almost starved or more or less neglected'.⁵⁸ On closer inspection, they were pleasantly surprised by the comparable conditions found in the homes of employed and homemaker wives, despite the former's absence for 11 hours a day.⁵⁹

The lives of the 1500 married women in paid work around the country interviewed in 1909–10 by Clementina Black and her associates were, if anything, even more arduous.⁶⁰ Mostly employed in home-working and sweated trade activities, they laboured at tasks for pitiful piece rates from dawn to dusk. In addition, these women maintained decent family homes but did so by working late into the evening and at weekends. We can only patch together their accounts, but the very long hours of toil are evident, as is the now familiar story of putting together meals and getting children up before leaving for work, sometimes returning at midday to feed those children home from school, and the regular routine of chores in the evening and at weekends to ensure the household was maintained. Young children were often cared for by a (paid) grandparent or at a creche, but these mothers invariably did their families' baking, cooking, cleaning, washing, mending, and even clothes-making. Leisure was an unfamiliar concept. In Yorkshire, B. L. Hutchins reported that industrial work took 9 or 10 hours of the day 'with the duties of nurse, cook, housemaid and maker of clothes, which begin and conclude the day. It is also still usual . . . to bake bread at home.'⁶¹ Again domestic work was organized by day of the week. Mrs E10, a rag picker, was married to an underemployed miner and had three boys. She did the family's washing, baking, cleaning, and cooking and sometimes made their clothes. On Monday night she began the wash, on Tuesday she finished the wash and mangled and mended the clothes, on Wednesday and Thursday nights she cleaned the room, and on Friday she baked bread. Saturday was pay day so then she went to the market to get meat for Sunday's dinner. There were leftovers for her husband on Monday and Tuesday, when she and the children ate potatoes and gravy. Sunday offered little respite, as she cooked dinner and mended clothes.⁶² In Newcastle, a women cleaning and dressing skins in the processing of rabbit down worked from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. in the factory and also did the housework for her family, comprising an intermittently employed husband and two young children.⁶³ In Leicester, the wife of a brewer's man left at 9:00 a.m. for the factory, having first made ready on the gas stove the meal which she came home to cook at midday for her two children who were at school.⁶⁴

Martin considered the lot of married women in London in paid work in 1911 and furnishes us with an account of a seasonal worker in a jam factory.⁶⁵ A set of autobiographical accounts

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 220.

⁵⁹ A table of comparison is instructive:

| | Woman works | | Woman at home | |
|---|-------------|--------|---------------|--------|
| Healthy/fairly healthy children | 70.8% | | 77.9% | |
| Children attend school reasonably regularly | 46.2% | | 65.2% | |
| Man's earnings per week | > 25 s | < 25 s | > 25 s | < 25 s |
| Homes clean, tidy, comfortable | 55.4% | 44.7% | 63.5% | 49.4% |

Source: Cadbury et al., *Women's work*, pp. 220–2.

⁶⁰ Black, *Married women's work*.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 136.

⁶² Black, *Married women's work*, contribution by B. L. Hutchins, pp. 157–8.

⁶³ Ibid, pp. 196–7.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 224.

⁶⁵ Martin, 'Married working woman'.



for those women born between 1892 and 1899 come from Angela Holdsworth, who researched women's lives for a BBC series *Out of the Doll's House: the making of the modern women*, aired in 1988. One of the evocative transcripts enables us to reconstruct the day of a factory weaver with children.⁶⁶ Margaret Pollock's collection of accounts of people's working days provide a further account by a woman in paid work around 1923.⁶⁷

The final accounts of women's lives come from a nationwide survey of 1250 married working-class women in 1933–4.⁶⁸ The focus was maternal health and its relationship to living conditions, with women being selected through health and charity organizations, though this was not deemed to create a biased sample.⁶⁹ Sadly the original returns have not survived but the detailed accounts included within the book provide evidence on time use. Spring Rice herself summarized a representative routine.⁷⁰ The length of the working day was about 12.5 hours.⁷¹ External verification comes from a report on the gas industry in 1939 which noted that, in the ordinary family, 'the housewife may work, unpaid, for fourteen hours a day'.⁷² The *New Survey of London Life and Labour* also furnished an account of a housewife's day in Bermondsey, London. She rose at 6:30 a.m. and retired at 10:00 p.m., having ensured her three children and husband were all washed and fed, with just a little leisure on two afternoons a week.⁷³ In 1934 a typical domestic labour day could still reach 15.5 hours.

Of the 46 individual observations of women's work, only 4 are identifiably from rural areas, and one-half come from London, this latter perhaps a consequence of interest occasioned by Booth's survey and the influence of local charitable societies. We account for the regional concentration through regression analysis, but given that around one-fifth of the population of England and Wales lived in London in 1931, we anticipate that this concentration is neither unexpected nor likely distorting.⁷⁴

2.1 | DOMESTIC LABOUR TIME

Displaying the raw data on time use in domestic labour and in all forms of productive work reveals what we have already intimated: women's total work time per day increased a little between 1720 and 1933 but, within this, there was a significant shift to more time being spent in housework activities, rising from around 6 hours per day from 1720 to 1850 to 12–14 hours per day between 1850 and 1933 (figure 2a, b). The relatively small amount of domestic work in the eighteenth century is

⁶⁶ Holdsworth, 'Out of the doll's house'.

⁶⁷ Pollock, *Working days*, Mrs B., pp. 261–2.

⁶⁸ Spring Rice, *Working-class wives*.

⁶⁹ A wide range of women were selected, many taken from birth registers, others the neighbours of those called on by Health Visitors and factory welfare workers. Care was taken to avoid selecting those known to be in poor health. 'It can therefore fairly be claimed that the investigation provides an honest sample of the health and the social and domestic environment of the average working-class mother'. Spring Rice, *Working-class wives*, p. 22.

⁷⁰ Ibid, ch. 5, pp. 94–127, particularly pp. 96–100, p. 108.

⁷¹ There is information on when women rose and went to bed and whether they had any leisure time – most reported none or very little – we deduct 1.5 hours per day for meal times, personal care, and leisure, so arriving at 12.5 hours.

⁷² *Political and Economic Planning, Report*, p. 82.

⁷³ Cited in *Women's Group, Our towns*, app.2, pp. 114–6.

⁷⁴ Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics*, t.3, p. 11; t.6, p. 25.

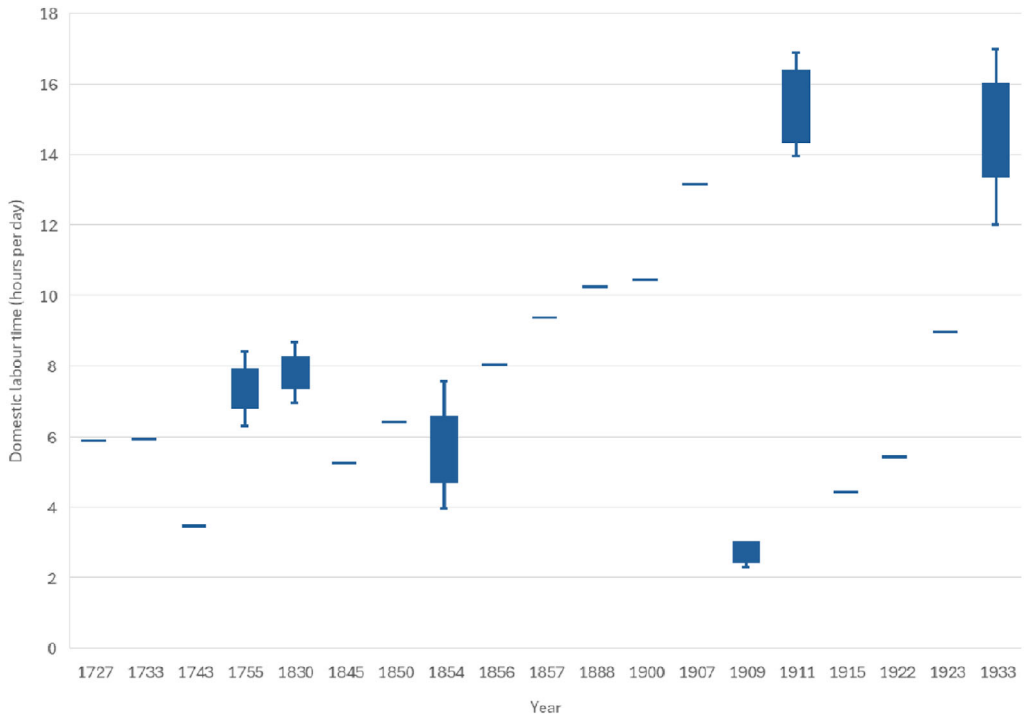


FIGURE 2a Domestic labour time observations by year (hours per day).

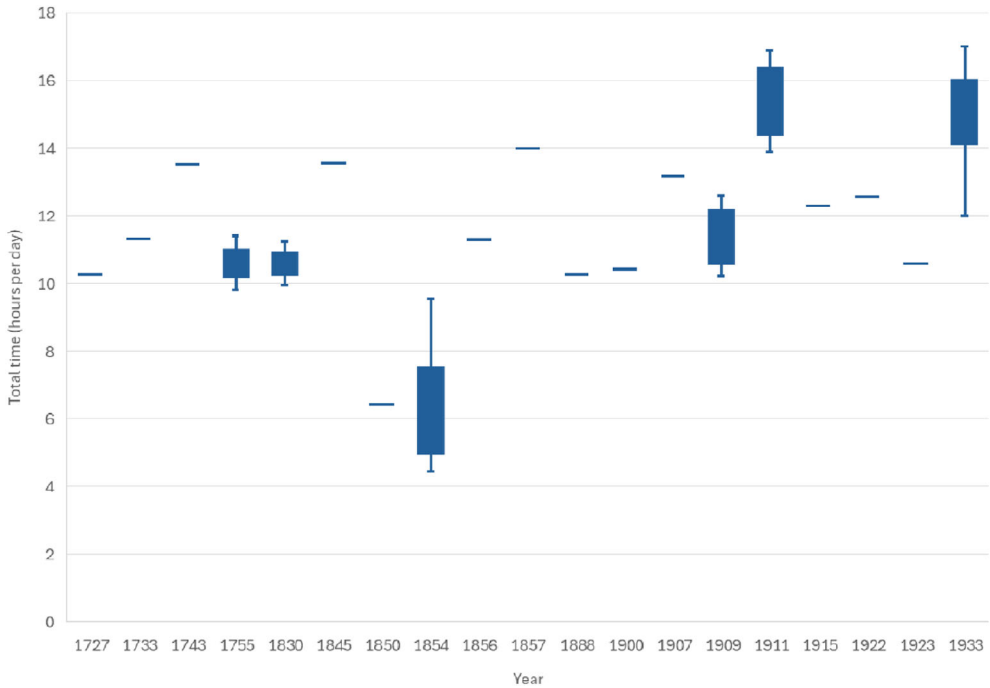


FIGURE 2b Total labour time observations by year (hours per day). Note: Dashes represent a single observation in a year, box and whisker plots detail the distribution of a larger sample in the year.

**TABLE 1** Regression results.

| Dependent variable | Domestic labour time | Total labour time |
|--|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Constant | 0.055 (0.02) | 6.462 (3.14)*** |
| Region: London | 3.246 (2.45)** | 2.989 (2.72)*** |
| Region: North | 1.506 (1.08) | 2.598 (2.24)** |
| Occupation: miner or ironworker | 2.264 (1.98)* | 1.470 (1.55) |
| Family size (approximate) | 0.305 (2.35)** | 0.280 (2.60)** |
| Additional labour available in household | -3.112 (-2.32)** | -0.133 (-0.12) |
| Woman undertakes paid work | -6.342 (-7.54)*** | -1.400 (-2.01)* |
| Time trend | 0.046 (4.15)*** | 0.016 (1.72)* |
| Male observer | 0.956 (0.64) | -3.145 (-2.55)*** |
| Adjusted R^2 | 0.783 | 0.539 |
| F statistic | 21.35*** | 7.59*** |
| Sample size | 46 | 46 |

Notes: Weighted OLS, weights based on source of data; t -ratio in parentheses.

*Indicates significance at 10% level.

**Indicates significance at 5% level.

***Indicates significance at 1% level.

consistent with other findings for this period. Using court depositions, Jane Whittle finds just 17 percent of married women's work time was spent on unpaid labour for their families.⁷⁵

As Anna Martin concluded in 1911: 'The general rise in the standard of comfort on which social reformers congratulate themselves has made life harder for the mothers'. An interviewee put flesh on the observation. 'When I was ten years old', said one, 'I was helping my parents by gathering stones for the farmers; now, I send four girls to school every day with starched pinafores and blacked boots. Except on Sundays, my father never had anything but bread and cold bacon, or cheese, for his dinner; now I have to cook a hot dinner every day for the children and a hot supper every evening for my man'.⁷⁶

Given the diversity of our sources, we use regression analysis to control for aspects we expect to affect the amount of domestic labour required by the household, such as whether the woman was engaged in paid work, the regional location of the household, husband's occupation, and family size (table 1).⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Whittle, 'Putting women back', p. 1131.

⁷⁶ Martin, 'Married working woman', pp. 8–9.

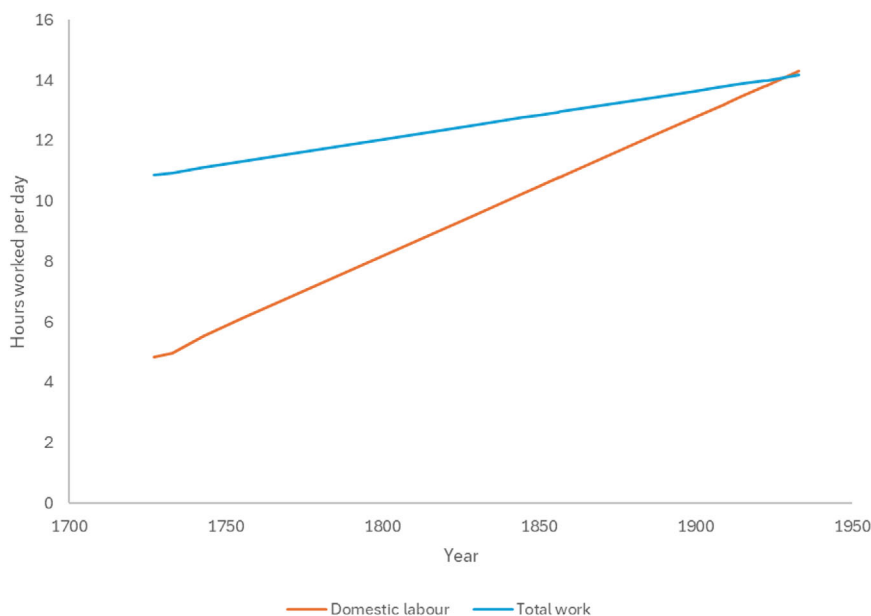


FIGURE 3 Time trends of domestic labour and total work time from regression results.

We use the regression coefficients to calculate the total time spent in productive labour and in housework activities for a family of five, living in London, where the woman did not engage in paid work.⁷⁸ The results reveal a slight upward trend in women’s total work time but a more marked steep increase in domestic work hours (figure 3). Women’s productive time became almost exclusively devoted to her domestic activities, for working-class women life as a homemaker mother had become typical. The 12.75 hours of productive work being done by a married woman in a mid-nineteenth-century day had risen to over 14 hours, with more than 13 hours being defined as housework by the 1930s.⁷⁹ The volume of housework is consistent with what we know from later studies.

In 1935 the Electrical Association for Women collected data from its branch associations to demonstrate that women could spend much less time on housework if their houses were fully electrified.⁸⁰ Even so, the fully electrified home still had the housewife working almost 50 hours a

⁷⁷ Dummy variables for London; mining or ironworking family; additional labour, such as mother-in-law, in household; and whether the woman also engages in any paid work. Actual family size was available for 33 households and estimated for the rest. A dummy capturing whether the woman was married was included to reflect the time use observations taken from court depositions where single and widowed women were also part of the sample proved insignificant. Male observer captures the author of the source material, specifically Le Play and colleagues who may have underestimated the amount of work women were doing. Court depositions are not considered to suffer male observer bias, although written by men they should be a near verbatim record of activities as stated by the victim, witness, or defendant.

⁷⁸ Total time = $6.462 + (5 \text{ in family} \times 0.280) + (\text{London} = 1 \times 2.989) + (0.016 \times \text{time})$.

Domestic labour time = $(5 \text{ in family} \times 0.305) + (\text{London} = 1 \times 3.246) + (0.046 \times \text{time})$.

⁷⁹ Servants were also expected to work similarly long days, suggesting that this amount of labour was not deemed unusual. See, for instance, Lilian Westall, who, as the only servant in a house in Chiswick, London in 1909, spent 13.5 hours a day doing housework with 1 day off a week, and Lavinia Swainbank, an underhousemaid in a larger establishment in 1925, whose daily working hours totalled 11.5 with just one evening a week for leisure, Burnett, *Useful toil*, pp. 215–21; 222–7.

⁸⁰ *Electrical Association*, Elsie. E. Edwards’ *Report*, t.7.



week, adding back their deducted time for the savings in a home without electricity gives around 10.5 hours of housework being performed each day, and this before any childcare activities were added.⁸¹

Somewhat later, in 1948 a survey of 76 working-class housewives conducted across three different London County Council housing estates found the average housewife's weekday consisted of about 12 hours total work, 4 hours leisure, and 8 hours sleep. Housework took 8–9 hours, childcare around 2 hours on average, and paid work also came in at just over 2 hours per day.⁸² The 1950s surveys continued to find women working a 10-hour day for 7 days of the week.⁸³ Oakley's own in-depth interviews of 40 London women with children in 1971 showed no improvement. These women still had a house-working week of 77.5 hours, 11.1 per day.⁸⁴ Indeed, Oakley's own diary for 1967 when she was caring for an 8-week old baby revealed a 15.25-hour day starting at 5:00 a.m. and finishing at 11:00 p.m. with nearly 7 hours spent on cleaning, washing up, cooking, and laundry before any infant care.⁸⁵ It was not until the later 1970s that any reduction in housework time was clearly evident.⁸⁶

These trends in time use also fit with what is known about women's work more generally over the later nineteenth century. Women's employment, particularly married women's employment, is notoriously difficult to track during these years. The census definition of productive work shifted from including household work until 1881 to explicitly excluding it by 1911.⁸⁷ The early census commentaries lauded the contribution women made to the home: 'it requires no argument to prove that the wife the mother ... fills offices and discharges duties of no ordinary importance',⁸⁸ but soon a distinction between those providing domestic services for pay and those doing it because of family obligation was made and later censuses were concerned to ensure that any double-counting of women with both an occupation and a domestic responsibility was avoided. The 1881 Census stipulated that unpaid household work should be excluded from the count of those economically active.⁸⁹ Working from the published census figures, Catherine Hakim reconstructed women's activity rates accounting for these definitional changes. Men's activity rates were largely unaffected, with more than 94 per cent of the relevant age group classified as working from 1851 to 1931, but the changes transformed the proportion of women classified as economically active. Around 25 per cent of married women were so classified in 1851 but only 10 per cent by the 1900s.⁹⁰ This decline is reflected in the trends observed here, that women worked more hours but these hours were increasingly unlikely to be remunerated or in the paid labour market.

⁸¹ Davidson, *Woman's work*, p. 191.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 191–2.

⁸³ Moser C.A. 'Social research: the diary method' in *Social Service Quarterly*, 1950, no. 24, pp. 80–4 and *Mass Observation Bulletin* no. 42 (May/June 1951) *The Housewife's Day*, quoted in Oakley, *Sociology*, t.5.4.

⁸⁴ Oakley, *Sociology*, p.87, t.5.3.

⁸⁵ Oakley, *Science*, prologue, p. xvi.

⁸⁶ Gershuny, *Social Innovation*; Bowden and Offer, 'Household appliances', p. 734, t.2 report between 3 hours and 6.5 hours of housework being performed per day in both 1975 and 1985, depending on how long women worked in the labour market.

⁸⁷ Lewis, *Women*, p. 146.

⁸⁸ 1851 Census of Great Britain, Population tables II, vol. I: report, H.M.S.O. London 1954 p. lxxxviii, cited in Hakim, 'Census reports', p. 556.

⁸⁹ Hakim, 'Census reports', p. 557.

⁹⁰ Hakim, 'Census reports', p. 559, t.1 and p. 560 t.2. Higgs, 'Women', t.5 p. 76 estimates a fall in the proportion of all women working in England and Wales from 28.5% in 1851 to 25.4% by 1891.

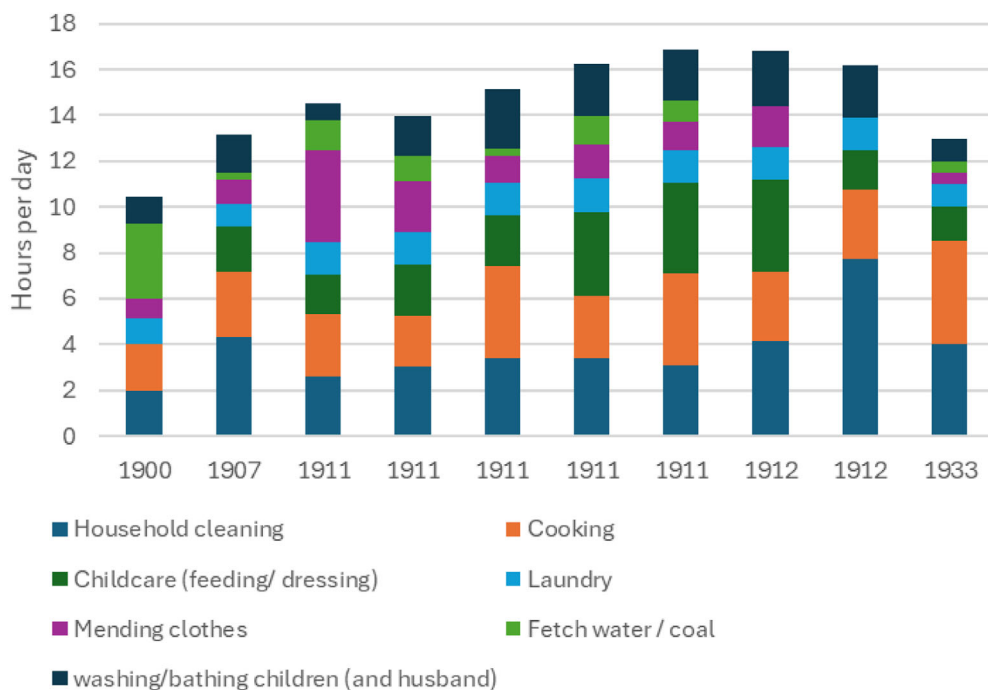


FIGURE 4a Hours spent in various domestic work activities in individual households.

2.2 | COMPONENTS OF HOUSEWORK

In ten of the twentieth-century households surveyed, we can assign the time spent by the housewife to specific tasks. None of these women engaged in paid work. In 1900 the observation was for a miner’s family, and in 1907 an ironworker’s family. For 1911–2 the average family size was 6.4, and the families in other years were six in number. Meal preparation could take up to 3 hours per day, household cleaning and laundry averaged around 5–6 hours, and bathing children and husbands took a further 2 hours per day (figure 4a). There is a hint that these four tasks together assumed greater importance over time (figure 4b).⁹¹ We turn now to the context of changes in domestic labour in turn-of-the-twentieth-century British economic and social change.

3 | DOMESTIC LABOUR, STATE, AND INDUSTRY

The demonstrably longer hours of domestic labour pose questions for conventional accounts of improvements in wellbeing in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, allegedly an era when public utilities reached more working-class homes and new equipment took some of the back-breaking labour out of home maintenance. Why was it that hours increased and who benefitted from this extra work?

Labour-saving devices have been celebrated as instrumental in reducing the housewife’s load from the late-nineteenth century onwards. Cooking moved from open fire to a range to a stove,

⁹¹ 60.2 % of total domestic work time in 1900, to 80.8% by 1933.

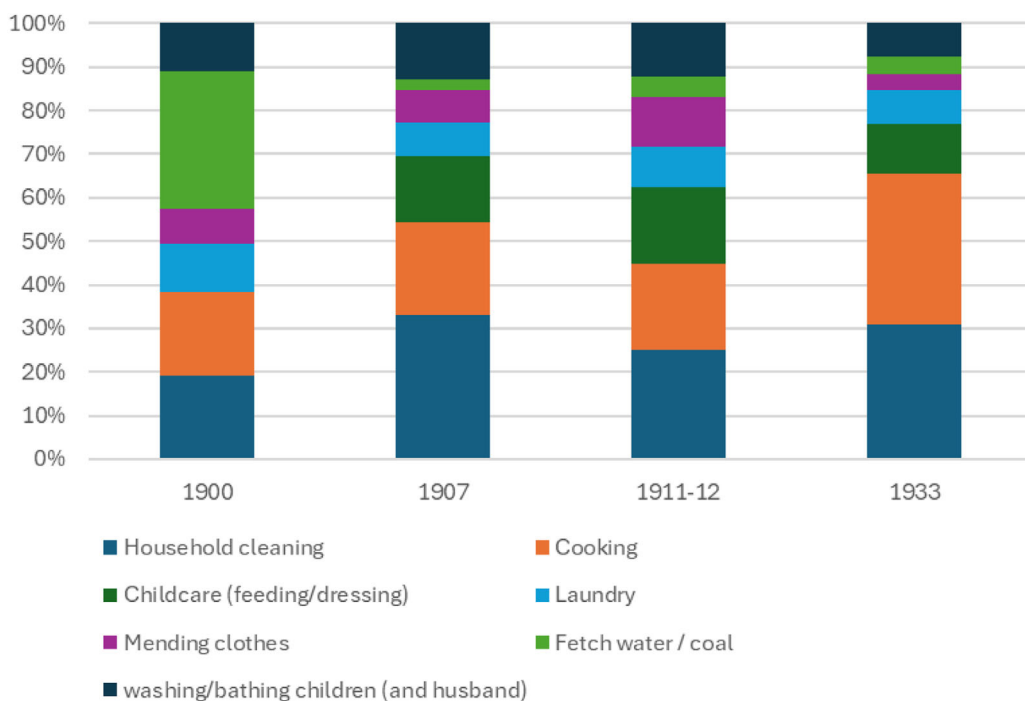


FIGURE 4b Proportion of time spent in various activities in individual households.

whilst *regulo* temperature control expanded culinary methods. Refrigeration allowed groceries to be purchased in more economical quantities and avoided gastro-intestinal illnesses caused by food spoilage. The vacuum cleaner meant more efficient dirt removal. Lighting and ironing were simplified. Washing machines eased the labour required to launder and hot water systems and dedicated bathrooms aided both domestic and personal hygiene.⁹² In principle, domestic labour had been revolutionized and women's load dramatically reduced.⁹³ The reality exposes a different story.

In urban areas, conditions conspired to make life harder for the working-class family. From 1850 industrialization had continued apace, population grew, and there was increased urbanization.⁹⁴ The so-called second industrial revolution occasioned the increased application of mechanization and technology to industrial processes. Heavy industries, such as iron, steel, coal mining, and ship building, came to the fore, whilst consumer industries, such as textiles and small metal goods, continued to expand. A total of 41 per cent of the population lived in towns by 1931 with extremely rapid growth of some conurbations.⁹⁵ Over-crowding in industrial areas became an ever more pressing problem. Whilst the average number of people per dwelling across the country fell from 5.0 in 1870 to 4.5 by 1914, working-class urban areas witnessed the influx of migrants and building projects, such as railway terminals and slum clearance,

⁹² These developments are described in detail in [Hardyment, *Mangle*](#).

⁹³ See [Schwartz Cowan, *More work*](#), for background on the uptake of these inventions in the USA and a critical discussion of their consequences for the workload.

⁹⁴ [Baines and Woods](#), 'Population and regional development'.

⁹⁵ Population:



reducing available accommodation.⁹⁶ Rents increased and overcrowding was commonplace. Booth classified nearly half of Lambeth accommodation as overcrowded.⁹⁷ He himself accepted similar rates of occupancy when lodging with London families.⁹⁸ Constricted space was almost invariably accompanied by inadequate facilities, and contributed to poor health and disease transmission.⁹⁹ In coal mining, new deep seam pits were sunk in uninhabited places and cheap rudimentary housing put up without sanitary provision.¹⁰⁰ The expansion of utilities struggled to keep pace with population growth and shifts in its distribution.

The problem of adequate urban water supply was largely solved by the twentieth century, but distribution remained patchy. For instance, in 1912, Oxford could claim that every street had water, but the taps were outside people's homes and communally shared, with often just 1 tap for 6–12 households.¹⁰¹ In 1934, *The New Survey of London Life and Labour*, Hubert Llewellyn Smith's replication of Booth's investigation, found that in half the houses surveyed, water required fetching 'from outside the tenement, often from a tap on the landing, sometimes from across a yard, at others up or down three flights of stairs'.¹⁰² Sanitary reform in rural areas and mining villages lagged behind. Even by 1947, the supply of water remained surprisingly limited. A Government survey found that 7 per cent of households had no piped water, rising to one-fifth of households in rural areas.¹⁰³ Hot water was in even shorter supply, as 44 per cent of homes had no piped hot water and water had to be heated on a fire or stove.¹⁰⁴ In addition, 45 per cent had no bath tub, 21 per cent had no water closet, and 12 per cent survived without a kitchen sink.¹⁰⁵

Although gas was introduced into many British towns in the late-nineteenth century, its main use was for public street lighting. Companies started to promote domestic use in the 1880s, enticing householders by hiring out appliances and introducing prepayment, 'penny-in-the-slot' meters, to help monitor fuel expenditure.¹⁰⁶ However, the use of gas was frequently limited to cooking. Coal remained the main source of domestic fuel in most British homes even in 1939.¹⁰⁷ Families

| Population | | | | | | | | |
|------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|---------------|----------------|-------------|------------|----------|---------------------------------|
| Mid-year | | | | | | | | |
| | England and Wales ('000) | Greater London | S.E. Lancs | W. Midlands | W. Yorks | Merseyside | Tyneside | % population living in towns |
| 1871 | 22789 | 3890 | 1386 | 969 | 1064 | 690 | 346 | 36.6% |
| 1931 | 39988 | 8216 | 2427 | 1933 | 1655 | 1347 | 827 | 41.0% |
| Growth | 75.5% | 111% | 75% | 100% | 56% | 95% | 139% | |

Source: Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics*, t. 3 p. 11; t. 6 p. 25.

⁹⁶ Harris, 'Health', p. 145.

⁹⁷ More than two people per room, Booth, *Life*, final vol., pp. 4–5, 11–14.

⁹⁸ Booth, *Charles Booth*, pp. 105–29.

⁹⁹ Black, *Married women's work*, app. III, p. 272 found occupancy rates rising to 2.9 per room for London trades. This reached 2.73 per room in the 1930s; Spring Rice, *Working-class wives*, extracted from individual accounts.

¹⁰⁰ Benson and Neville, *Studies*.

¹⁰¹ Davidson, *Woman's work*, p. 31.

¹⁰² Llewellyn Smith, *New Survey*, vol. 6, ch. 12, p. 318

¹⁰³ Davidson, *Woman's work*, p. 32; Zmrocek, 'Dirty linen', p. 173.

¹⁰⁴ Zmroczek, 'Dirty linen', p. 173, p. 176. This fell more heavily on the poorer family; in 1942 the *Heating of Dwellings Enquiry* found nearly three-quarters of these households had no piped hot water supply, cited in Dauntton, *House*, p. 242.

¹⁰⁵ GB GRO Census 1951. *England and Wales: Housing report*, HMSO.

¹⁰⁶ Davidson, *Woman's work*, pp. 35–6.

¹⁰⁷ *Political and Economic Planning, Report*.



also cooked on coal, often on a triple-purpose range that had the advantage of simultaneously providing heat and hot water.¹⁰⁸ A survey of 62 housing estates, half council, half privately owned, covering 12,500 dwellings, recorded that in 84 per cent of these households families were cooking in the living room on a range or open fire and 87 per cent were heating their water this way.¹⁰⁹

Most of the new labour-saving appliances required electricity but supply was patchy. By the end of WWI only the rich had access, with just 6 per cent of houses wired for electricity.¹¹⁰ Despite subsequent improvement, supply did not reach most households until the 1950s and even then electricity was still only used for simple domestic purposes, such as lighting, ironing, and occasional space heating, as costs remained high, restricting the adoption of appliances.¹¹¹ Refrigerators were notable by their absence. Only 2 per cent of households owned a refrigerator in 1948. Spring Rice's 1930s study notes the difficulty lack of food storage posed for housewives.¹¹² Little had changed since district nurse Martha Loane wrote of 1900s homes, 'there is also a general lack of cool larders and dry store cupboards, and without these economical catering is impossible'.¹¹³ Even in 1943, many in towns were 'cooking on a bedroom grate and no [food] storage except a closed cupboard'.¹¹⁴

Public utilities and labour-saving devices were not the panacea to domestic overwork for most British women. They continued to collect water for washing, cooking, and cleaning from communal taps; cart it up flights of stairs to be heated over a coal fire; and dispose of it in outside drains and shared lavatories. Improvement in domestic amenities were slow to arrive for these women, yet at the nexus of health, hygiene, and housework, and with the meagre resources at their disposal, they were exhorted to achieve more. Women were held to account for conditions in their homes, the comfort of their husbands, and the wellbeing of their children.¹¹⁵

As noted earlier, the late nineteenth century saw growing concern about the *quality* of the population, particularly compared with rival European states whose citizens appeared to benefit from effective social policy. Contemplating a more active state, the Balfour government set up an interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. Whilst the Committee's report recognized a variety of factors associated with widespread poor health—overcrowding, pollution, and parental neglect—employed mothers' supposed failings was a particular focus. Some historians hold that the Report did signal a shift towards improved public health policy.¹¹⁶ However, its emphasis on individual responsibility, particularly of mothers, ensured that the state was not held accountable.¹¹⁷ The report recommended training and paternalistic advice over substantive reform.¹¹⁸ Indeed, although many of our sources recognized the problems that poor amenities and slum housing created, they too cite housewives' ignorance, bad management, and downright

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 87.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, pp. 86–7.

¹¹⁰ Davidson, *Woman's work*, p. 38, n. 21.

¹¹¹ In 1948, whilst 86% of households owned an electric iron and 64% had an electric fire, only 19% used an electric cooker, 15% a water heater, 4% washing machine, and a tiny 2% a refrigerator. Corley, *Domestic*, p. 16.

¹¹² Spring Rice, *Working-class wives*, p. 151.

¹¹³ Loane, From their point, p. 173.

¹¹⁴ Women's Group, Our towns, pp. 40–1.

¹¹⁵ Henderson and Humphries, 'Caring labour'.

¹¹⁶ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Women*; Pope et al., *Social Welfare*.

¹¹⁷ Searle, *A New England?* Berridge and Gorsky, *Public Health*; Boyer, *Winding Road*.

¹¹⁸ Searle, *A New England?*



sloth as factors in poor living conditions. It was easier and cheaper to blame the victims than press for a faster rollout of infrastructure and stricter regulation of private housing. Punishing hours of domestic labour substituted for public and private spending on utilities and housing. This substitution, through wellbeing externalities, transferred benefits. Women's longer hours contributed to the improvement in standards that did occur, benefitting their families, although not necessarily themselves, but since husbands and children became stronger and less prone to illness, domestic labour also furthered the national interest and economic efficiency.

Other social changes added to domestic burdens. The observed increase in time spent in food preparation might suggest women's provision of more nourishing and palatable meals for their families as their awareness of the virtue of adequate nutrition increased.¹¹⁹ But it also has to be set against the introduction of new routines. The 3 hours spent feeding the family was not all for private welfare gain.

The descriptions of women's days in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries often placed wives working alongside their husbands or engaged in related activities. Providing meals took time but families could eat together: the Walkdens, the farm foreman, the cowman, and the Nottingham tanner all enjoyed four meals a day spaced over 12–14 hours and usually eaten alongside their families.¹²⁰ Social and economic changes disrupted these routines and meant women had to spend more time providing meals. One factor was the introduction of compulsory schooling.

The benefits of education are undeniable, and these spilled over from the individual to society more generally, but one forgotten cost was the disruption to traditional scheduling of meals and the extra work involved when family members ate at different times. Educational provision for children aged 5–11 years was established by Forster's Education Act of 1870 and school attendance made compulsory under the Education Act of 1880, resulting in children keeping school hours during the day. For many this meant departing for school around 8:30 a.m. and finishing around 4:00 p.m. Nearly all returned home for the midday meal around noon, and headed back to school at 1:30 p.m. or a little later, returning, ravenous for tea at 4:15 p.m. In the sample of mothers' days recounted by Pember Reeves, five women had children at school and their routines broadly followed this pattern, but this did not always coincide with the eating times of male earners who also often returned in the day for their dinner or needed it prepared and taken to them. Further, the men returned at 7:00 p.m. or 8:00 p.m. needing supper. This dislocation of schedules meant women were constantly preparing or cleaning up after meals. Spring Rice has women reporting the inconvenience of many disparate mealtimes, 'dinner may last from 12 to 3. Her husband or a child at work may have quite different hours from the school children', who will be back for their dinner at 12 noon. 'Then comes tea, first the children's and then her husband's, when he comes home from work'.¹²¹

Sending children to school involved mothers in other additional work. Children had to be made to look neat and clean and regularly deloused, not to mention forced to go to school in the first place!¹²² Otherwise, mothers risked interference from one of the new army of compliance officers, the school nurse or (horrors) attendance officer, whose attentions would impugn their

¹¹⁹ Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, 'Housework, hygiene, and health', working paper explores the nutritional content of the food eaten by some of these families.

¹²⁰ See discussion of sources above. Breakfast started the day, dinner (the main meal of the day) around mid-day, tea after work (around 4 p.m. to 6 p.m.), and a small supper meal of tea, bread, and cheese before retiring to bed.

¹²¹ *Spring Rice*, Working-class wives, pp. 98–9

¹²² Mothers frequently detailed washing children's faces and hands and the daily airing of beds in the recounting of their days to the social investigators; see, for example, *Pember Reeves*, *Round about*, pp. 97–108.



competence and even their love.¹²³ The price of non-compliance with these laws and regulations was not only ‘countless humiliations’ but fines, imprisonment, or even the loss of child custody.¹²⁴ As Martin said, to be a mother in these circumstances was to become ‘the unpaid nursemaid of the state’.¹²⁵ Indeed, the state pushed childcare further into the home with the 1907 Consultation Committee on Education of Children under 5, which refused attendance of infants at school.¹²⁶

Another change imposing extra work on homemakers was the spread of shift working. The intensive employment of the capital stock in key industries such as coal, steel, and transport required new forms of labour organization, with workers attending in shifts spread throughout the day. Domestic labour had to be reorganized in sync. In the mining family this would involve providing meals at times consistent with the start and end of shifts as well as many additional hours put into bathing miners, cleaning their clothes, and sweeping out the steady stream of industrial filth that they brought in.¹²⁷ However, the demands of capitalism extended far beyond the mining sector. As processes became more mechanized throughout the economy, shift working spread. The ‘24/7, 365 days of the year’ processes associated with iron and steel making offer an extreme example, but we observe shift working in transport, printing, baking, and glass manufacture just within our sample.

The impact on family routines was enormous. Pember Reeves’ mothers all rose with their husbands to see them off to work.¹²⁸ Three of the seven had husbands who were involved in shift work.¹²⁹ One was the mother of a young baby whose husband worked 1 in 3 weeks on nights. In a day-time week she would get him his tea at 5:00 p.m. but noted that the night shift was ‘less convenient’ with dinner being prepared for ‘whenever he gets up’. A mother of eight children was married to a printer’s labourer whose normal work was at night. Her work hours illustrate the way in which shift working interacted with school hours to extend demands on homemakers. Having got the children off to school at 8:45 a.m., the mother then cooked breakfast for her husband at 9:30 a.m. when he returned from his night shift. She would give the children their dinner and tea and then cook her husband’s dinner at 5:00 p.m. and ‘cut his food for him to take to work’ at 6:30 p.m. Her day was a steady round of catering and feeding.

Bell’s book on the Middlesborough ironworks gives a detailed account of the trials of shift work.¹³⁰ Shift patterns varied by function but the rhythm of everyone’s day was dictated by the works. Many rotated between 8 hours worked early in the day, through the afternoon and evening, or overnight. Others worked over two long-day shifts, and yet others had work dictated by the tides. The women accommodated these work regimes in various ways. Some occasionally bought ‘ready cooked [food] from an eating house or a fried-fish shop’, but many did the cooking themselves ‘not only for the family meals in the house, but for the food the husband is to take over

¹²³ Ross, *Love and toil*, pp. 24–6; ch. 7, pp. 195–221.

¹²⁴ Martin, ‘The mother and social reform’, p. 40.

¹²⁵ Martin, ‘The mother and social reform’, pp. 39–40. Similarly, the ‘medical professions late 1800s discovery of ‘breast is best’ as far as infant feeding was concerned also placed additional responsibility on working-class mothers, many of whom lacked the time and energy nursing required, not to mention the additional income that was needed to augment their own diets and thus support lactation; see Lewelyn Davis, *Maternity*.

¹²⁶ Louis Henderson (2025) ‘The market for early children education in England before the Elementary Education Act 1876’, LSE working paper.

¹²⁷ Humphries and Thomas, ‘Best job?’. See also Pollock, *Working days*, pp. 74–5.

¹²⁸ Pember Reeves, *Round about*, pp. 145–53.

¹²⁹ Ibid, and LSE MISC COLL 0847 a/c 17, factory packer’s and stoker’s wives’ accounts.

¹³⁰ Bell, *At the works*. pp. 92–7; 179–80; 235.



to the works with him'.¹³¹ Describing the routine of one man on shift, his wife related that 'no sooner has she got tea cleared away than it is bedtime [for the children], then her husband wants supper, and the next morning's food prepared to be taken with him, either on the night shift at 10:00 pm or the next morning at 6:00 am'.¹³² This usually involved meat or bacon or ham and eggs. Those on long days who occasionally worked through the night also needed food provided for the evening at work and hot suppers were prepared for those shift workers on nights.¹³³ None of this was easy to combine with the routine of the school child. One mother managed by giving her children bread and butter when they came home from school, their father would have a hot meat dinner at 2:00 p.m. if on a morning shift, and the children would get any leftovers for their tea. The afternoon shift enabled them all to eat a meat dinner together at 12 noon.¹³⁴

These hassles were not confined to the heavy industrial regions. Booth recorded how women's provision of meals revolved around the scheduling of men's work whilst lodging with families in turn-of-the-century London.¹³⁵ His upstairs neighbour, Mr Rowley, drove a horse cart. He started early but returned home for breakfast at 7:30 a.m., again in the middle of the day for a luncheon of whatever was available, and then ate dinner after finishing work in the evening.¹³⁶ District nurse Martha Loane reported the inconvenience that one woman faced in having her husband and three sons at different places of work. Feeding them meant that 'meals is going on pretty well all the time', and only Saturdays and Sundays offered some respite.¹³⁷ This was compounded in cases where hours were irregular and the return from work uncertain.

Spring Rice notes how shift work continued to impact on family life into the 1930s. 'Most of them get up at 6:30. If their husband and/or sons are miners, or bakers, or on any nightshift, they may have to get up at 4 (possibly earlier), make breakfast for those members of the family'.¹³⁸ A mother with four children had a husband who worked on shift work at the Flour Mills, including nightwork. She got up at 6:30 and went to bed at 11 or 12 'according to husband's work'.¹³⁹ Mrs K of Durham was married to an unemployed miner but got up at 3:00 a.m. to see her eldest son, aged 15 years, off to work. She got up again at 7:00 and went to bed at 11:00 p.m., and she had three other children—and no gas, no bath, no electricity to help her with her chores, as she cooked on an open fire.¹⁴⁰

The changes in the late-nineteenth century industrial economy militated against many families sitting together to eat dinner (lunch), their main meal of the day. For many this appears to have been little changed by the 1930s. Instead, mealtimes were extended and cooking occurred in sporadic bursts. The appearance in the time budgets of more time spent cooking and preparing

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 92.

¹³² Ibid, p. 95.

¹³³ Ibid, p. 96, p. 235.

¹³⁴ Ibid p. 97. See also Pollock, *Working days*, pp.149–60; 161–70, whose interviews with blast furnace workers emphasize the conflict between children's needs and workers on shifts.

¹³⁵ Booth, *Charles Booth*.

¹³⁶ Ibid, p. 110.

¹³⁷ Loane, *From their point*, p. 170.

¹³⁸ Spring Rice, *Working-class wives*, pp. 96–7.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 113.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid p. 122. Riordan and Wambach's comment about infant care that "'Good" mothering ... drifted towards meeting ... schedules imposed ... [by] the needs of the growing industrial sector', could be extended more generally, *Breastfeeding*, p. 58.

food was, at least in part, dictated by industrial patterns of work. Whether this was accompanied by better nutrition and health benefits remains to be ascertained. What is clear is that when men worked shifts their wives' sleeping was likely disrupted and curtailed as they fitted a domestic shift around the demands of the labour market and school board, and similar to men's shifts, these domestic shifts were not stable but could be disordered and need rethinking according to workplace rotas. Shift working is known to be unhealthy, implicated in many chronic and acute illnesses for both men and women but particularly hazardous for women.¹⁴¹ The disrupted sleep and extended working hours that men's shift working meant for their wives and mothers imposed some hidden costs as well as the reported ones of exhaustion and stress.

4 | CONCLUSIONS

We have used disparate sources to map the domestic workload of ordinary women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Women devoted increased hours and effort to domestic labour, consistent with arguments about the evolution of the homemaker/breadwinner household and the impact of scientific knowledge around dirt and disease, nutrition and nourishment. Mothers spent an increasing amount of time on preparing, cooking, serving, and cleaning up after meals; regularly washing their children's hands and faces; airing the beds; laundering the clothes; and ministering to their husbands when they returned from work. But housework was a Sisyphean task in the conditions they faced, as they rolled their domestic burden up an unrelenting mountain of poor sanitation, slum housing, overcrowding, and rudimentary equipment. In Britain the rollout of public utilities was slow, and labour-saving domestic appliances had largely failed to cross the thresholds of the average working-class home even by the 1940s. The state and its representatives proselytized about the need for cleanliness but generally presented this as a personal responsibility, offering little concrete support to the foot soldiers in the war against filth: working-class housewives. Indeed, extra effort was required to meet the higher standards that the authorities proclaimed but failed to facilitate through supporting infrastructure and public services, especially given the absence of financial support for families with large numbers of children.¹⁴² Longer hours were also simultaneously imposed by the need for wives and mothers to accommodate compulsory schooling and shift working. Although other family members gained from women's unpaid domestic work, it also provided external benefits to state and industry, substituting for expensive public infrastructure and workplace services, and accommodating unsocial and family unfriendly working time. Not only was there more work for mother, but much of the benefit seeped away to be enjoyed by relieved taxpayers and uncaring employers.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available in [supplementary material](#).

¹⁴¹ Chung, et al, 'Sleep'.

¹⁴² Green, Mesevage, Mooney, and Szreter, 'New poor law'.



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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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