

Changing Role of Women

Before the industrial era, most women in Britain worked with men on farms and in domestic (home) industries. Women usually managed the dairy, gardens, orchards, and farm animals. They were also primarily responsible for raising children and running the household.

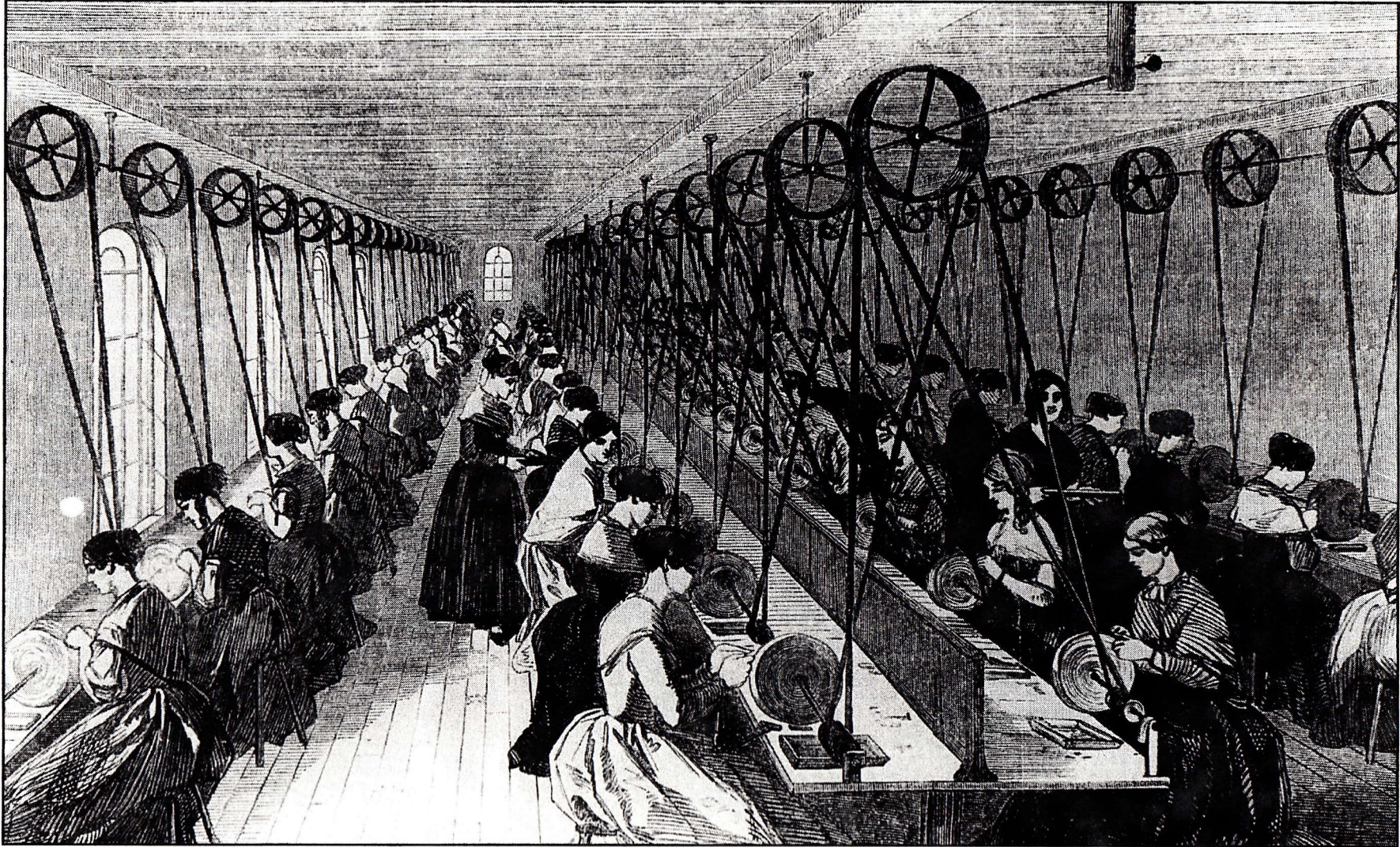
During the Industrial Revolution, many women moved with their families to urban areas and began to work in textile (cloth) mills and other factories. The shift to work in the factories meant women spent long hours away from their children and could only do the housework after 12 to 14 hours of labor outside the home. Women and men no longer worked together as partners, and there was little time to spend with children.

Working conditions in the factories were hazardous. Lace workers wore wooden rods along their backs to support them during the long hours they bent over their work, resulting in deformed ribs and chests. This made women more susceptible (at risk) to lung disease, which also plagued textile factory workers, who breathed the stuffy, dusty air in the mills. Women's long skirts and hair made them more likely to be caught in the machinery and crippled.

Many women worked as domestic (household) servants in the homes of wealthy people. Single women left their homes to serve as cooks, maids, and nurses for children. By the late 1800s, one third of all women employed outside of their homes were domestic workers.

Women were paid one-half to one-third of men's wages, making 5 shillings a week when men made 10 to 15 in 1780. Women had few rights, and most of their earnings by law had to be given to their fathers or husbands. Many factory owners preferred to hire women because they were cheaper employees and more submissive (obedient) since they needed their wages to support children at home. Women were preferred as household workers because it was considered better for women than men to work with children.

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Here we see a woodcut of an early English pen factory in Birmingham that employed women exclusively.