

A Woman Coal Mine Worker Tells Her Story

The working conditions in industries and mines during the industrial revolution provoked numerous investigations by law makers and others interested in protecting the health and morals of workers. In Great Britain, a parliamentary investigation of the coal industry in 1842 produced the document from which the following woman mine worker's story is taken.

Betty Harris, age 37: I was married at 23, and went into a colliery [mine] when I was married. I used to weave when about 12 years old; can neither read nor write. I work for Andrew Knowles, a little Bolton [Lancashire], and make sometimes 7 shillings a week, sometimes not so much. I am a drawer [someone who pulls coal carts], and work from 6 in the morning to 6 at night. Stop about an hour at noon and eat my dinner; have bread and butter for dinner; I get no drink. I have two children, but they are too young to work. I worked at drawing when I was in the family way [pregnant]. I know a woman who has gone home and washed herself, taken her to bed, delivered a child, and gone to work again under the week.

I have a belt round my waist, and a chain passing between my legs, and I go on my hands and feet. The road is very steep, and we have to hold by a rope, and when there is no rope, by anything we can catch hold of. There about six women and about six boys and girls in the pit I work in; it is very hard work for a woman. The pit is very wet where I work, and the water comes over our clog-tops, always, and I have seen it up to my thighs; it rains at the roof terribly. My clothes are wet through almost all day long. I never was ill in my life but when I was [recovering from birth].

My cousin looks after my children in the day time. I am very tired when I get home at night; I fall asleep sometimes before I get washed. I'm not so strong as I was, and cannot stand my work so well as I used to. I have drawn till I have bathed [scraped] skin off me; the belt and chain is worse when we are in the family way. My feller [husband] has beaten me many a time for not being ready. I were not used to it at first, he had little patience.

I have known many a man beat his drawer. I have known men take liberties with the drawers....

Review Question

1. What type of work did Betty Harris do in the coal mines?
2. How were women coal mine workers treated?
3. What effect do you think the government report had on conditions in the mines?