
Female Workers in Japanese Silk Factories: Did the Costs Outweigh the Benefits?

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Overview: The Industrial Revolution arrived in Japan more than a century after its arrival in Europe and about 70 years after the first textile mills were built in the United States. In building their cotton mills and silk factories, the Japanese borrowed many ideas from England, Italy, and America. It probably should be no surprise that Japanese mill workers, especially female Japanese mill workers, would experience some of the same benefits and hardships as young women in the West. Weighing those benefits and hardships is the focus of this Mini-Q.

The Documents:

- Document A: Gender and Age (photo and chart)
- Document B: Work Hours in Okaya
- Document C: Average Daily Wages (chart)
- Document D: Government Report on Working Hours
- Document E: Employment Contract
- Document F: Silk Worker Survey (chart)
- Document G: “My Two Parents” (song)

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Document A

Source: Photo, circa 1910.



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Note: Workers in a silk factory in Nagano district. They are pulling threads off silkworm cocoons that are floating in hot water basins in front of them.

Source: E. Patricia Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan*, 1992.

Gender and Age in the Silk Factories, Nagano, Japan (1901)			
Gender of Workers in 205 Mills		Ages of Female Workers in 205 Mills	
Males:	1,109 (8%)	14 and under	2,184 (18%)
Females:	12,519 (92%)	15-20	5,999 (48%)
		Over 20	4,235 (34%)
		Totals	12,519 (100%)

Note: In 1902, there were 25 million people gainfully employed in Japan, mostly in farming. About 1% of these Japanese workers worked in textile mills, many in silk factories.

Document Analysis

1. What are the women in the photo doing?
2. How would you describe the working conditions?
3. What was the average number of female workers in each of Nagano's 205 silk factories?
4. What two generalizations can you make about gender and age in a Nagano silk factory?
5. Based on the photo and the chart, what were the benefits of working in a silk factory?
6. Based on the photo and the chart, what were the costs of working in a silk factory?

Document B

Source: Noshomusho Shokokyoku and Shokko Jijo, *Condition of the Factory Workers*, 1967.

A study by the government in 1900 revealed that a normal working day in a plant in Okaya was thirteen to fourteen hours. During the busy season, the workers were roused from their beds at 4:05 a.m., sent to work from 4:30 to 6:00, given fifteen minutes for breakfast, and sent back to work by 6:15. They were allowed fifteen minutes for lunch, between 10:30 and 10:45, and a ten-minute break from 3:30 to 3:40. Otherwise they were kept on the job till 7:30 p.m. for a total of fourteen hours and twenty minutes. When the plant was particularly busy, the workers were kept until 10 p.m.

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Note: In the late 1800s, a Japanese textile worker averaged one day off every two weeks. The Western-style weekend did not exist.

Document Analysis

1. During the busy season, when did the workday begin in Okaya? When did it end?
2. What was the total meal and break time in this Okaya silk factory?
3. What were the total hours worked in a normal working day?
4. What were the total hours worked in a week with no holiday?
5. Based on this document, what evidence is there of the benefits of working in a silk factory?
6. Based on this document, what evidence is there of the costs of working in a silk factory?

Document C

Source: Adapted from James L. McClain, *Japan: A Modern History*, 2002.

Average Daily Wages for Selected Occupations (Japan, 1892)

Occupation	Gender	Average Daily Wage
Carpenter	Male	27 sen
Cotton mill worker	Male Female	27 sen 9 sen
Seasonal agricultural worker	Male Female	16 sen 9 sen
Silk factory worker	Female	13 sen

Note: In 1900, 1 yen = 100 sen = 50 US cents

- a pair of ladies' indoor sandals cost 7 sen
- a bunch of radishes also cost 7 sen
- one pound of sugar cost about 15 sen

Document Analysis

1. What was the daily wage for a female silk factory worker in 1892?
2. What was the daily wage of a male cotton factory worker in 1892?
3. What general conclusions can you make from this document about gender and wages in Japan in the late 19th century?
4. About how many hours would a female silk factory worker have had to labor to earn enough to buy one pound of sugar?
5. Based on this document, what were the benefits for females working in the silk factories?
6. Based on this document, what were the costs for females working in the silk factories?

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Document D

Source: *Government Report on Mill Workers in Japan, 1909.*

When making comparisons with factories in Western countries, one must take into consideration certain unique facts regarding the extremely long working hours in factories in our country. In our country's factories, many women are employed. Single, they stay at the factories several years before marriage; but when they wed they leave the factories. Thus for them factory labor is only temporary employment; it is not work done throughout their lives. Moreover, since they do it while in the lusty vigor of their youth, they can endure what by comparison are extremely long working hours. In the countries of the West, however, since factory labor is a lifetime job done both before and after marriage, they (female workers) cannot possibly endure the extremely long hours of labor.

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Source: *Government Report on Mill Workers in Japan, 1909.*

Reasons Female Mill Workers Left Their Jobs

	Number	Percent
Illness*	1,677	24
Related to work	393	5
Released from employment	1,001	15
Family reasons	2,041	29
Marriage	438	6
Blood relation's illness	413	6
Other reasons	983	15
Total	6,946	100

* "Illness" includes those who died of serious illness after they returned home. "Released from employment" may include some who were too ill to work.

Document Analysis

1. What is meant by "Western countries"?
2. According to the Government Report, why are fewer hours worked in Western countries?
3. Does the chart back up the statement in the report that Japanese female workers leave the factory "when they wed"? Support your answer with data.
4. Based on this document, what were the benefits for females working in the silk factories?
5. Based on this document, what were the costs for females working in the silk factories?

Document E

Source: E. Patricia Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan*, 1990.

Contract for Employment of Young Silk Worker With Girl's Parents

Amount _____, being the earnest money for the employment of _____ (Name),
silk worker (born _____ year _____ month)

We confirm that in return for contracting the above person employed as a female operative at your filature [silk factory] in the _____ year of the Meiji, we have received the said earnest money in full. Moreover, she shall commence work from the coming spring in _____ month, _____ day, or the coming summer in _____ month, _____ day without further notice and shall work without lapse until the cessation [end] of plant operations. And no matter what unforeseen circumstances may arise, during this term we will not have her work for any other silk manufacturer. If there should be any infringement [violation] of this contract whatsoever, as reparations we will pay without question a sum of (20x) the said earnest money. In witness whereof we set our seals to this contract, accepting joint responsibility.

Prefecture _____ District _____ Hamlet _____ Number _____
Meiji _____ Year, _____ month, _____ day.

Name _____

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Note: When a long-term contract like this one was signed, the parents of the hired daughter often received a large cash advance called earnest money. One elderly former silk factory worker remembered that her father accepted 100 yen each for his two daughters and sent them to work in Kawagishi. In 1906, 100 yen could build a two-story house.

Document Analysis

1. What is earnest money? (See note)
2. What did the family promise in exchange for accepting the earnest money?
3. What was the penalty if the daughter quit working at the silk factory?
4. What benefits to working in the silk mills can you find in this document?
5. What costs to working in the silk mills are revealed in this document?

Document F

Source: Mikoso Hane, *Peasants, Rebels and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan*, 1982.

Japanese Silk Worker Survey			
Survey of 580 older women who had been silk-factory workers in their younger years. The survey was conducted by Yamamoto Shigemi.			
	poor	average	good
Food	0%	10%	90%
Nature of work	3%	75%	22%
Pay	0%	30%	70%
Treatment when sick	40%	50%	10%
	harrowing	average	easy
Inspection*	90%	10%	0%
	positive	average	negative
Overall experience	90%	10%	0%

* Periodic inspections of worker performance were carried out by plant managers. These managers were usually men who were sometimes physically abusive.

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Document Analysis

1. How many women were interviewed for the survey?
2. Overall, how did the former workers feel about the food and wages they received while working at a silk factory?
3. Why do you think the conductor of this survey, Yamamoto Shigemi, made a point of telling readers that the survey was completed by “older women” who had worked in a silk factory “in their younger years”?
4. According to the former silk workers, what was the worst part of the job?
5. How can you use this document to argue that the benefits of silk mill work outweighed the costs?
6. How can you use this document to argue that the costs of silk mill work outweighed the benefits?

Document G

Source: Song by a silk worker circa 1900.

Note: Many silk factory girls knew their wages were an important help to their family but they longed for home. The following are words to a song probably written in the nighttime hours by such a girl.

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My Two Parents

When I left home my parents
Told me always to behave myself.

On days when the rain falls.
On nights when the wind blows.
I remember my parents....

Let the year's end come quickly.
I want to tell my parents
About this cruel factory.

We don't cross the Nomugi Pass* for nothing,
We do it for ourselves and our parents.

When the season of painful reeling is over
The world will be bright again,
And maybe I'll be able to get married.

* Mountain pass that separated the village from
the silk mill

Because I am poor, at age twelve
I was sold to this factory.

When my parents told me, "Now it is time to go"
My very heart wept tears of blood.

Let the year end. Let the year end,
I want to fly to my parents' side.

Mother! I hate the season in the silk plant;
It's from 4:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m.

I wish I could give my parents rice wine to drink,
And see their happy tears fall into the cup.

In the troubled world
I am just a silk-reeling lass,
But this lass wants to see
The parents who gave her birth.

Their letter says they are waiting for the year's end.
Are they waiting more for the money than for me?

Document Analysis

1. Who is the writer of these song lyrics?
2. What were this girl's work hours in the silk factory?
3. According to her song, how old was this girl when she began work in the mill?
4. What evidence is there in the song that this girl has chosen of her own will to work in the silk factory?
5. In the last two lines, what is the songwriter's worry?
6. How can you use this document to argue that the costs of silk factory work outweighed the benefits?
7. Is there any way to use this document to argue that the benefits outweighed the costs?