The Sexual Morals of Working-Class Women: A Female View (c. 1891)

Abstract

Minna Wettstein-Adelt (b. 1869) was inspired by Paul Göhre's experiences as recounted in his book *Three Months in a Workshop*, which is excerpted in the previous document in this chapter. She resolved almost immediately to recreate his experiment but with more attention to the circumstances of female workers. She first attempted to join the accounting office of an armaments factory in Spandau, near Berlin, and even wrote to the Prussian minister of war for permission to do so, but her request was denied. She then worked for a total of 3 1/2 months in four different factories in Chemnitz (a large industrial city in the Kingdom of Saxony) and for one month in the nearby countryside. In contrast to Göhre, Wettstein observes that married working-class women and men were usually faithful. Some women lived together with men outside of marriage, and even bore their children, but these couples often got married later. Wettstein notes that all female factory workers opposed prostitution as a moral failure and did not speak to known prostitutes. Nor did they socialize with men of higher social rank, because they knew that marriage between unequal partners was out of the question.

Source

As far as morals are concerned, I discovered precisely the opposite of what Göhre found in many areas. Above all, I consider his claim that men love freely, whereas women remain faithful, to be incorrect. The status of morals is exactly what I have examined most intensively, as it appeared to be the most important chapter.

Discussions of women's fidelity and men's tendency toward free love obviously refer to the married contingent; almost everywhere—and I have collected detailed information—both husband and wife either remain faithful to each other or go their separate ways. Of course, I am not denying that there are exceptions, but these are in fact so rare that they are hardly worth mentioning.

Frequently, a woman brings an illegitimate child into the marriage, often two; but these are usually the children of the man she is marrying. At the factory, the girls speak quite innocently of their children, when they are teething or ill; the others listen sympathetically and none would even think of considering it an indecency. True, there is less eagerness for social interaction with these unmarried mothers, but only because the mothers of illegitimate children, no matter how young they may be, are more earnest, less concerned with pleasure and appearances, and generally tend toward a more stable lifestyle. On Sundays, this sort of woman often goes for walks with her neatly groomed child and her darling, and her own mother often watches them proudly from the doorstep.

In many cases, female workers live in concubinage with male workers; for example, on our factory floor, one worker had lived for three years with a master weaver in Dresden, had spent one year with a stoker in Zwickau, and was currently living with a spinner in Chemnitz, with whom she had been for six months; there were no children, however.

However free and coarse female workers may be in their love lives, they display deep and serious indignation over any type of prostitution, especially when it concerns girls who sell themselves to "elegant gentlemen." Sure, their own darlings may give them clothes, jewelry, lingerie, but they do not accept payment for their love; the gifts have to be voluntary.

This constitutes a sign that these people do not deem free sexual intercourse to be immoral but rather natural, the satisfaction of a natural instinct that must never sink to the level of income earning.

I knew one girl who had recently worked for a physician, that is, before she was dismissed for hanging around with soldiers at night. She always dressed very nicely, wore genuine silver jewelry, and ate better than the others. She was also hired for piecework and didn't really mind skipping work for a day or two; she worked with obvious nonchalance. Even on the first day, I noticed that everyone treated this blonde more or less harshly; they did not drink from the same pitcher and never took a bit of her food, although she was always abundantly supplied with it. I asked the girl next to me to explain this curious behavior. "Oh well," she commented disdainfully, "Lydia is a rotten kind of person; she is seeing lieutenants, and she does not care for work!"

On the whole, the female workers had a general dislike for the military, especially common soldiers and lieutenants; anything in between was regarded with less disapproval, since there was the possibility of marrying a non-commissioned officer or sergeant.

But their hatred of "ink wipers," as they dubbed clerks and businessmen working in offices, is downright fanatical.

I remember that one morning an older female worker, about 30 years of age, gave a rousing lecture on morals, which closed with the following words: "And let me tell you, a proper factory girl knows what she owes herself, she does not associate with any damned ink licker of that sort; don't even look up at them when you see them on the street. And you had better gather up your skirts so that ink from these rascals doesn't get on them. They don't even wash themselves; these paupers lick the ink from their paws, and still they wear a pince-nez. I am telling you, better the dirtiest, blackest worker than such a vile loafer and toady!"

I could well understand those girls' aversion to the young businessmen; indeed, as long as I myself was a worker I shared their sentiments wholeheartedly. I would present those people with the following accusation: that they are largely responsible for the demoralization of females; that, if a working girl refuses to give herself willingly to them, they use intrigue, slanderous remarks to the director, malicious suppression, and harassment to force her into the arms of Social Democracy, all the more since the Social Democratic male factory personnel treats the girls better, more politely, and more humanely than others.

Source: Frau Dr. Minna Wettstein-Adelt, *3½ Monate Fabrik-Arbeiterin*. Berlin: J. Leiser, 1893, pp. 24–26. Available online at: https://digital.slub-dresden.de/werkansicht?id=5363&tx_dlf%5Bid%5D=93042&tx_dlf%5Bpage%5D=1.

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