

## Protecting the Fairer Sex: Indiana's Move to Improve the Lives of Working Women, 1910-1920

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### Abstract

In 1900, there were 5,319,000 women in the national work force, but in just twenty years the number had risen to 8,637,000.<sup>1</sup> The state of Indiana was experiencing similar growth of women with some 51,422 women working in 1880 and had climbed to 155,731 by 1910.<sup>2</sup> Women's waged work drew political, social, and economic concerns and this influx of women brought working conditions to the forefront of the American conscious. Beginning with the Supreme Court decision of *Mueller v. Oregon* in 1908, Americans were making an active push for protective legislation of women in the workplace on the basis of biological "difference between the sexes,"<sup>3</sup> as Justice Brewer noted in *Mueller*. This difference between the sexes refers to the concern that Progressive Era Americans had with the potential impact that poor working conditions would have on a woman's reproductive capability. As a result of the poor working conditions women endured and the American concern for the well being of the more delicate sex, both government and private interest groups conducted studies based on the concern for women's wages, hours and working conditions. These studies were used as a means for state governments to determine the appropriate legislation to aid women in the workplace. Governor Ralston of Indiana started one such study in the early 1910's; he commissioned a committee to travel around the state and document the conditions of women engaged in waged work outside the home. The hope of this study was to decipher the needs of women in labor and turn those needs into protective legislation. As the committee found, there was no one clear answer when it came to handling women in the workplace; this project will explore the various answers that Indiana employed.

### Significance of Project

By focusing on the government legislation and the work of the committee that influenced decisions on the legislature, we can gain a better understanding of the motives of later legislation and the change in norms regarding women and work, as the percentage of women in gainful employment continued to rise for

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau. Web: [www.dol.gov](http://www.dol.gov)

<sup>2</sup> Thirteenth Census of the United States, J919. Vol.4. Population. Occupation Statistics, p. ~  
ibid., pp. 48-49.

<sup>3</sup> *Muller v. Oregon* (1908).

decades. Governor Ralston's committee took a very in-depth look into the working women of Indiana; by using these committee notes, we can begin to understand some of the underlying causes and effects of poor working conditions for women. The importance of looking to Indiana for a better understanding behind women's labor legislation comes from its typicality of American life and its early adoption of reform measures. In the late nineteenth century, more Americans lived in urban places of twelve thousand to seventy-five thousand then in cities with populations of half a million or more.<sup>4</sup> Indiana allows us to compare and contrast both the benefits and costs to society of protective legislation when based in a smaller urban environment, the sort of cities in which the majority of Americans lived. By studying the committee reports across the state, we begin to understand the lives of working women all over the country.

The most common problem women faced in the workplace was low wages. It was estimated that the women in Lake County Indiana needed \$6 to survive a week.<sup>5</sup> However, the same report documented that the women of Lake County made between \$2.50 and up to \$8.<sup>6</sup> One factory reportedly paid just \$0.11 a day on piecework.<sup>7</sup> The chronic low wages of women worried Progressive Era reformers because of the alternative the low wages left women with, often prostitution. The question for Indiana became "would an eight hour day reduce wages and would reduction in hours raise the cost of public commodities?"<sup>8</sup> In my study "Protecting the Fairer Sex," the examination of the Indiana Trades and Labor reports from the investigation initiated by Governor Ralston reveals the sorts of economic, social, and political concerns generated by the influx of women into the workforce.

My study has its roots in the larger women's movement for better working conditions. Both society women and working women all over the nation were pushing for better working conditions and the women in Indiana were no different. It was often an uphill battle to convince the men in the legislature that more protective laws were needed. This can be seen in the Trade and Labor Council proceedings from all over

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<sup>4</sup> Sharon Wood, *The Freedom of the Streets: Work, Citizenship, and Sexuality in a Gilded Age City*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Trade and Labor Council of Lake County in *Proceedings from Hammond*, 16 September 1914, Chicago Commission on Working Women Meetings & Reports, 14, Indiana State Archives, Indianapolis (hereafter cited as Hammond Meeting & Report), 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

the state of Indiana. While there are many studies that have focused on the women's movement in larger cities all over the nation, Indiana has not been the focus of one such study. However, the women's movement in Indiana faced many of the same hurdles, and because of its mix of rural and small urban population, the story of Indiana resonates with other places all over the nation.

### Select Annotated Bibliography

Autobiography of a Shop Girl. *American Magazine*. May 1903, 53-61.

This is a magazine story that depicts the fictional, although strongly based on reality, life of a shop girl. While the story is not set in a specific city, the story depicted rings true for working girls across America and serves as a narrative of the lives of working girls, including many of the trials of the working girl.

Gleason, Caroline. *Report on the Social Survey Committee of the Consumers League of Oregon on the Wages, Hours, and Conditions of Work and Cost and Standard of Living of Women Wage Earners in Oregon with Special Reference to Portland*. June 1913.

Gleason's work analyses a great deal of data from the working women of Oregon, including wages, hours, conditions of labor, and the cost of living. Like cities all over the county, the report displays the vast gap between the wages paid and the cost of living.

Wood, Sharon E. *Freedom of the Streets: Work, Citizenship, and Sexuality in a Gilded Age City*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

This book assesses the many effects of women moving into public spaces. One particular section focuses on prostitution in regards to its causes and effects on society.

These sources represent important aspects of the fight for protective legislation for working women. By focusing on both Indiana and other studies set in other cities, I will be able to substantiate my claims in a broader sense.

### Statement of Central Objective

The objective of my project is not only to understand the fight for more protective legislation for working women in Indiana, but also understand how the movement in Indiana compares and contrasts with other legislation struggles and studies around the county. To do this, I will focus on the Trades and Labor Commission Reports from cities all over Indiana, as these findings were the basis for further protective

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 17.

legislation in Indiana. I will then compare these findings with other similar reports from across the county as well as analyzing other state's protective legislation from the same period. I will also investigate the documents from the Board of State Charities to gain a better understanding of the needs of working women, as well as the letters to Governor Ralston regarding opinions of further protective legislation in Indiana. In order to compare and contrast, I will look at analysis of other states labor legislation with the goal of finding the similarities and differences between the Indiana reports and other studies. These studies assert that women were making subpar wages, like a New York based study on Macy's department store workers that asserted "two-thirds of the girls in department stores were immoral...because they haven't enough to live on."<sup>9</sup> Based on an analysis of both primary and secondary sources, it would suggest that the commission reports would recommend greater protective legislation in the five years following the reports of 1914-1915.

### **Methods**

My research examines the records of the Trades and Labor Council meetings across the state, ranging during the years of 1910-1920, as well as similar studies conducted in other states. In regards to Indiana, I will engage in a close reading of the transcripts of the Trade and Labor Council meetings held in various cities across Indiana and the recommendations and letters sent to Governor Ralston, as well as the documents from the Board of State Charities. To contrast the Indiana data, I will also analyze works from others places in the country, including Val Marie Johnson's examination of wage and work conditions of Macy's Department store employees from 1913, and Sharon Wood's analysis of the intersection between the women's public and private sphere within Davenport, Iowa. Indiana provides the perfect location for study for its largely rural population, because a large portion of the United States was still rural. By studying the lives and trials of the rural working women of Indiana, it allows gives a window into the lives and trials of other rural women in the country.

### **Progression of the Project**

**Fall 2012**

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<sup>9</sup> Val Marie Johnston, "The Rest Can go to the Devil," *Journal of Women's History* 19, no. 1 (2007): 34.

I completed HST 342: Working Women in the Modern City, in which, I completed a small research project about the lives of working Hoosier women. During this semester, I did background research on the Trades and Labor Commission created by Governor Ralston. I also read many secondary sources focusing of studies done in cities across the country. I will reanalyze many of the studies and books about the condition of working women in other cities. For the Spring 2013 semester, I have enrolled in a directed reading course with Dr. Deno. This will ensure I am reading for the project while interning in Washington, D.C.

#### **BSI Week 1**

I will spend this week reviewing the information I have gathered about the Commission. This will allow me to formulate new questions as well as identify new pathways of research. I will also be analyzing the initial reports of the Commission.

#### **Weeks 2-3**

These two weeks will consist of an archival review of the Commission reports. The files included in the collection at the Indiana State Archives are the reports for the ten cities studied, as well as the final recommendation.

#### **Weeks 4-5**

These two weeks will consist of an archival review of the Board of State Charities. The files in this collection are broken down by county and include the applications and reports for the Board. The Board also has multiple published reports that are of interest to me.

#### **Week 6**

I will reread my notes and analyze what information I have. I will form a few new questions. I will then go back to the files and fill in any gaps in my research as well as answer the new questions my research has led me to.

#### **Week 7**

I will conclude the research portion by tying up any loose ends that I have. This will include rereading secondary works and the writings that I have read in advance to the Summer Institute.

#### **Week 8**

I will spend this week composing an essay of my findings.

**Week 9**

I will spend this week synthesizing my findings into a presentation to be given at the Undergraduate Research Conference.

**Feasibility**

I do not foresee any expenses other than the few books I have ordered to complete my secondary source research and, possibly, some copies at the archives. Travelling to and from the archive will add up in gas money; however, these expenses should be covered in the stipend.

**Working on Campus**

I will not have to live away from campus to do my research; however, much of my research will be done at the State Archives.

**Personal**

I became very interested in the lives of working women while taking HST 342 with Dr. Deno. As a woman and a historian, I feel that women have tended to be overlooked in the nation's history. I also took a cultural geography class with Dr. Bigelow in which we discussed the Midwest and its relative unimportance when looking at other culture regions. However, I believe that studying the Midwest in terms of the labor movement can show that the Midwest has played a vital role in the nation in terms of labor movement. The studies that have been done in other cities as well as the Commission reports done in Indiana gave working women a voice. It allowed society to see the gross injustice of their wages and working conditions and it allowed them to fight for better.

The skills I will acquire in this project will help me in my future work as a lawyer by helping me with my research and argument skills. I have taken other courses that pertain to this kind of research. These include Working Women in the Modern City, Topics in History: Walls, and American Visions.

**Presentation**

I will present at the URC in the spring of 2014 and will look for other opportunities to present my research at regional conferences in the spring of 2014.