

Nell Cusack, "City Slave Girls" (1888)

This excerpt is from a series of investigative articles by Nell Cusack about the poor working conditions in Chicago's factories. Women had been participating in the clothing industry since its inception, but the concentration of young single women in rising urban cities was a new phenomenon that many Americans found disturbing. As this account reveals, the women working in the factories lacked basic labor protections largely because they were excluded from most labor unions.

Someone passed the news that a girl was asleep in the lavatory which was formed by a simple board partition at one end of the room.

Sure enough, there was the poor girl sitting in the dirty place, her head resting against a folded apron, breathing the foul air which reeked with filth and disease.

The walls of the closet were black with pencil marks, the floor was strewn with lint and threads and the pale face of the sleeper looked ghastly in the darkness.

She was awakened and found to be sick. We helped her to a window where a place was found for her. We rubbed her temples, chuffed her hands, bathed her head and later, as I sewed away at my buttonholes, she told me her story.

"Rose and I are only six months in this country. We came from England with our brother and live on Carpenter Street. The climate doesn't agree with me and I am sick all the time. At first we worked at Marshalls Fields and Rose and I made fringe. We got \$7 a week and were so happy. It was awfully nice there. We didn't have to pay for drinking water or anything like here. There were lots of towels, whole cakes of soap, and it was also clean. We had a foreman over us and he was as good as a brother. Sometimes we let our money lay and drew it in a pile, oh such a lot it was. We put away very much of it, but I got sick and all we'd saved went for doctor and medicine. Then the work stopped. They took our names, though, and promised to send for us in the Fall. For a while we worked at the box factory but had we stayed it would have been to starve. Then we went to Ellingers and made cloaks at 30 cents each but it was so hard and we couldn't please them no matter how hard we tried. We came here today, but it's only a fit place to starve in. All the work they gave me was a dozen jerseys to button. That's 11 cents a row. I had two dozen holes to finish at 16 cents. 27 cents for the two of us, how can we live on it?" And the child began to cry again.

After meeting this girl our authoress, who had been paid 5 cents for finishing black jerseys, went to the company shop and asked to buy one. It was offered to her for \$2.