

## Industrialization and family

Industrialization changed the family by converting it from a unit of production into a unit of consumption, causing a decline in fertility and a transformation in the relationship between spouses and between parents and children. This change occurred unevenly and gradually, and varied by social class and occupation.

Through the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial workers continued to have relatively large families; women tended to have children about every two years from marriage to age forty. Most types of workers had little motivation for limiting family size because children continued to contribute to the family economy and infant and child mortality rates remained high in industrial cities, sometimes reaching 50% in the first year of life. Usually women stopped working outside the home once they became mothers, but often their husband's wages were too low to support a family, so



they took in tasks such as sewing to supplement the family income, but earnings were so low and hours so long, that households suffered even more than they did when women left the home to work. In France especially, the practice of sending children out to wet-nurses continued to be widespread, and hygiene reports blamed infant mortality on women who did not breastfeed their own children.

Industrialization disrupted the traditional relationship between generations, as well as the relationship between spouses. Fathers could no longer pass on skills to their children - often the only patrimony workers had when skills became obsolete. During times when the father was unemployed, family roles could be dramatically reversed: children and wives would bring home wages while the husband tended to the household. In conditions of severe poverty, "family life" could barely exist when multiple families



and individuals crowded into tiny dwellings to save on rent.

The conditions of working class families varied widely, however, according to region and economic activity, and the family often became a means to resist change or soften its worst impacts.

Particularly in textiles, male weavers went to great lengths to preserve their craft, avoid factory work, and preserve the family domestic economy. For example, French handloom weavers in the region around Cholet managed to preserve their craft for a century after linen production had become mechanized. As their own earnings declined from factory competition, they sent their wives and children into unskilled work in the local shoe and linen factories. Where textiles did become completely industrialized in France, England, and the northern United States, historians have shown that entire families would become reconstituted in workshops, keeping the family



unit together with fathers often  
supervising the work of their  
children. Families most affected by  
industrial change had a remarkable  
ability to adjust and survive.