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Biding Their Time: Women Workers and the Regulation of Hours of Employment in the 1920s

This chapter examines the impact on gender relations of the legislative regulations placed on the hours of employment of women workers, focusing particularly on the debates which took place in the 1920s.¹ Restrictions on the hours of employment for women workers, and specifically the exclusion of women from night shifts in certain industrial sectors, were first introduced in the nineteenth century. The controversies which the original night shift prohibition aroused, including the resistance to the imposition of the protective measures by women workers themselves, the antagonisms generated with both male colleagues and employers, and the disputes arising between different manufacturing districts, were evident also in the 1920s. By the early 1930s, however, scientific 'evidence' was beginning to be published which challenged the basic assumption that night shift employment was injurious to women.

In the nineteenth century, the extent of resistance to factory regulation on the part of some factory owners and, to a greater degree, the level of antagonism between different groups of industrialists are illustrated by the debates surrounding the introduction of the first major protective labour laws with respect to women workers in the mid-1880s. The debates on the regulation of female labour also illustrate the point that the proponents of protective measures in this period did not always consider the improvement in the conditions of employment for the women as their primary concern. Giffin's study of the introduction of the prohibition on night work by women in the cotton textiles industries in 1885 highlights the antagonism which developed between St Petersburg industrialists, who initially proposed the regulation, and factory owners in the Moscow and central industrial regions, who, on the whole, opposed the night work restrictions in the hope of maintaining their competitive economic edge.²

The industrial slump of the early 1880s proved especially severe in St Petersburg, where many factories were forced to lay off parts of their labour force. In 1884 the St Petersburg industrialists, who, already aware of their competitive weakness, had earlier sought the introduction of a law prohibiting night work by women, presented a petition to the government in which they identified the widespread use of night shift employment in Moscow and the surrounding regions for overproduction in the manufacturing industries. The relatively advanced nature of the production process in St Petersburg, with its broader use of more techno-logically advanced machinery and the fostering of higher levels of skill within its industrial labour force, had already resulted in the introduction of shorter hours of work and the virtual absence of night shift employment. The St Petersburg industrialists also put forward an argument on humanitarian grounds that night work was physically and morally harmful to women.

In Moscow and the central industrial region, however, night work was far more common in the textile industries than it was in St Petersburg. Aware of their own competitive advantage, the industrialists in these areas campaigned to stop the introduction of the prohibitive regulations. They argued that night work was an essential feature of Moscow factory life and that the St Petersburg industrialists' motivation for private gain was insufficient grounds to justify the introduction of the restrictive measures. The representatives of the central industrial region industrialists at the Manufacturing Council in Moscow argued

that production in this area was greatly dependent on the employment of women workers, who comprised around one-third of the total labour force at this time. They argued that manufacturing output would decline significantly if the hours of women's work were restricted. They suggested further that night work by women was no more harmful than some of its alternatives and that it was regarded as an essential part of family integrity in manufacturing districts, where often both wife and husband were employed at night.

The divisions which emerged during the course of the negotiations among the factory owners of the central industrial region themselves, however, were finally to settle the dispute. The high prices of fuel had raised the costs of production to such an extent that night work had already been abandoned in some areas. In practice, those factories which operated only daytime shifts had not suffered in relation to those still employing night workers. On the basis of such arguments, the Manufacturing Council eventually conceded to the introduction of a night work prohibition for women workers. The potentially damaging impact on levels of industrial competition and on industrial production, therefore, seem to have been the major concerns informing the introduction of the first night work regulations for female labour in Russia, rather than concern for the impact of such employment on the women workers themselves.

On 3 June 1885 the Minister of Finance introduced regulations, applicable from 1 October 1885, which banned the employment of women, and of young workers up to the age of 17 years, on night shifts initially in cotton-spinning factories, and then also in other textile factories. The hours of night work were not set out in the decree but, on the basis of earlier regulations, were generally agreed to fall between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. Provision was made in the decree for the Ministry of Finance to extend the night shift prohibitions to other sectors of industry. Under the terms of the 1885 provisions, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of the Interior were charged with investigating further the regulation of night work and were to submit a report on this issue within the next three years.

It would be safe to assume that the provisions of the 1885 protective labour law prohibiting night work by women did not receive wide-spread practical application. One recent survey of nineteenth-century Russia has noted that 'there had been some factory legislation in the 1880s but this was widely ignored. It was insufficient to protect the workers but enough to irritate industrialists.'³ The problem arose of enforcing the new regulations. Another study has noted that 'these laws were not immediately enforced, and some years passed before the government inspectorate was efficient, before its officers could stand up to the hostility or persuasion of employers'.⁴ Glickman, in her study of Russian female factory workers, has also pointed out that the decree failed to establish any sanctions to be used against factory owners who did not comply with its terms, nor did it ascribe supervision of the decree to any specific administrative body. Responsibility for determining punishments, therefore, fell to the factory inspectorate, which imposed only limited fines on errant employers.⁵ Proper sanctions for failure to observe the terms of the night work regulations were not introduced in law until 1890.

One of the earliest initiatives of the Bolsheviks when they came to power in October 1917 was to introduce a number of decrees which regulated the hours of work of the industrial labour force and for service and professional employees. Most significant in respect to female labour was the fact that one of these decrees introduced a universal prohibition on the

employment of women in night work, which in practical terms was defined as falling between the hours of 9 p.m. and 5 a.m., and in overtime work.⁶ These prohibitions were reiterated in the 1918 Labour Code, which stated that women should be excluded from employment under such conditions in any circumstances. The intention at this time was that the employment of women on night shifts would be reduced steadily and that it would be totally eliminated over the following three years.

The stringent regulations on the hours of work for female labour, despite their limited application in reality, had some unfortunate consequences. In the tumultuous economic circumstances of the immediate post-revolutionary period, one Soviet commentator has noted that such protective measures helped to foster an unfavourable attitude towards working women in general in some enterprises and that women soon became an easy target for dismissal at this time. Astapovich cites a number of examples of married women being dismissed from work altogether after the ratification of the night work regulations. The metallurgical workers' trade union successfully protested against this practice in their industry and secured the return to work of women made redundant. In fact, many trade unions and local workers' organisations sanctioned the employment of female labour on night shifts despite the legal prohibition.⁷

The Bolsheviks themselves, however, quickly came to realize that such a stringent prohibition was neither practical nor desirable. It soon became obvious that a whole range of essential services which were reliant on the employment of female labour around the clock could not function properly without the employment of women on night shifts. On 4 October 1919 the formal prohibition was revised by the introduction of a decree which allowed the employment of women at night temporarily in a number of specified occupations, thus making provision for the continuous operation of essential services. These were to be jobs where women formed an important element in the labour force, such as medical personnel and communications staff, and which could not operate effectively without the continuation of a night shift.⁸

In many respects the limitations on night work by women in most industrial and professional occupations were difficult to enforce during the chaotic years of war communism and Civil War. For example, a decree introduced in 1919 permitted women to be employed for up to six hours on night shifts in the tobacco industry when the erratic supply of electricity disrupted daytime production.⁹ One commentator has suggested that the requests for exemption from the restrictions on night and overtime work by women in these years were anyway only a mere formality.¹⁰ In addition, it has also been suggested that many workers were unaware of the existence of such laws or did not understand the terms of the decrees. They had little time or desire to find out about the provisions.¹¹

The legal restrictions on overtime work by women were also reviewed in the period immediately following the promulgation of the 1918 Labour Code. On 29 December 1919 the People's Commissariat of Labour of the Russian Federation (Narkomtrud RSFSR) relaxed the restrictions on the employment of women in overtime work in state institutions. The decree stated that female labour could be employed in overtime work temporarily, if the local labour inspectors and trade union organizations were satisfied that it was impossible to extend any further overtime work by male employees.¹² However, the prohibition on the employment of pregnant women after the fifth month of pregnancy and nursing mothers in overtime work

and for both pregnant women and nursing mothers at night was reiterated and reinforced by two separate decrees issued on 24 November 1920.¹³

In a study of contemporary problems of female labour in the early 1920s, S. I. Kaplun, who was active in the campaigns to introduce legislative protection of female labour, argued that overtime work by women was rarely used in industrial sectors of the economy but was a common feature of rural employment. He offered an optimistic picture of the elimination of night shift working by women at this time and put forward medical evidence to support the further implementation of the prohibition. In the second edition of a study, published in 1925, Kaplun calculated that women constituted 45 per cent of workers in industries operating a night shift but comprised only 7 per cent of those actually working at night, and these were in such sectors as transport, medical-sanitary services and mining enterprises.¹⁴

In support of his argument, Kaplun cited a study which had been conducted in Odessa in 1920. This study had revealed that the rates of illness among female night workers were 50 per cent higher than among women working on daytime shifts. In comparison, male night workers recorded a 36 per cent higher level of sickness. Kaplun suggested that if women were to be employed at night it should be in the non-heavy sectors of the economy and in non-hazardous jobs. In industrial enterprises, he argued, predominantly men should work at night.¹⁵ Another contemporary commentator also noted that 'Soviet law rightly forbids night work to women as it is more difficult'.¹⁶

The prohibition on night shift employment and overtime work by women was confirmed in the 1922 Labour Code, which added that adult women should only be employed in these conditions 'where there is a special need'.¹⁷ Such work was to be considered only under exceptional circumstances and as a temporary measure. In some instances the official prohibition on night work by women was subsequently reinforced by individual decrees. For example, a decree of 9 November 1922, which dealt with night work in bakeries, reiterated the ban on the employment of women and young workers at night 'under any circumstances'.¹⁸ As a result of such measures, the controversies which had been evident before the revolution in the attempts to implement tsarist factory legislation in the regulation of hours of work for female labour, were renewed and continued throughout the 1920s, with many women themselves again vociferously opposing the ban on night and overtime work.

The early retractions of the 1922 Labour Code prohibition on the employment of women on night shifts and in overtime work were operative on a sectoral level, and again came into force particularly in service industries which required around the clock operation. For example, a decree of 2 February 1923 confirmed that women were permitted to work temporarily at night as telegraph and telephone operators because of the 'uninterrupted nature of this work' and the difficulties experienced in these tasks of substituting male workers for female employees.¹⁹ It has been argued in addition that this was an area of work for women, 'where night duty is necessary and cannot be undertaken by male workers alone' and that 'few men are acquainted with this profession'.²⁰

On 27 November 1923 Narkomtrud SSSR issued a decree, which, in view of the uninterrupted nature of service in the transport sector and the difficulties already experienced in transferring women from night work, permitted women workers to be employed at night in nine different tasks in transportation, largely as cleaners, guards, ticket and luggage cashiers and clerks. The decree again upheld the prohibition on the employment of pregnant women,

nursing mothers and young workers in the stated occupations.²¹ A subsequent decree supplemented this list with two further categories of employment specifically on the railways, as watchwomen on stations and level-crossings. The decree also noted the temporary nature of these provisions.²²

Growing concern over the rising levels of female unemployment during the period of the New Economic Policy (NEP) led to the prohibitive principles of the 1922 Labour Code concerning hours of employment being reviewed so that future retractions would encompass all categories of night work by women. By the mid-1920s some campaigners for the lifting of the ban on night and overtime work were beginning to question the general benefits of laws prohibiting such work by women. There was also some recognition of the fact that the alternatives for female labour to employment in night and overtime work offered no more favourable conditions of work. These alternatives, as women themselves pointed out and as a number of contemporary commentators were beginning to recognize, could indeed be grim.²³ On an informal level at least, the restrictions on night work by women were beginning to be relaxed by 1924.

In fact, despite the official prohibition on night and overtime work by female labour embodied in the 1922 Labour Code, there is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that women continued to be employed widely under such circumstances throughout the 1920s and 1930s (although the extent of this would be impossible to quantify) and that women were often the most active opponents of the prohibition. It is important to note also, however, that night work itself was not without its dangers for women. In her study of the male-dominated printing industry, Koenker has noted that recorded complaints of sexual assault were much more common among night shift employees.²⁴

A circular issued by Narkomtrud RSFSR on 23 February 1924 clearly illustrated some of the contemporary concerns of the reformers. The circular itself questioned the practical utility of restricting night work by women in circumstances of widespread female unemployment. The protective nature of the prohibition under such conditions, the circular pointed out, was being undermined and this 'gives rise to justifiable criticism from women that prostitution, hunger and depravation, to which they are doomed by unemployment, have a more pernicious effect on them than night work'. The circular proceeded to indicate that present conditions were also leading to a lowering of qualifications among women, because when they were transferred to daytime shifts they were being allocated to less skilled jobs or they were otherwise faced with the threat of redundancy.²⁵

The circular set out the instruction that women should not be transferred from night shift production if it would result in their dismissal or transfer to less skilled employment. Local trade union and department of labour organizations were sanctioned to grant permission temporarily to enterprises in order to allow women to work at night, on the submission of the relevant supporting documentation, before official confirmation was received from Narkomtrud. As in previous legislative revisions, however, the circular repeated the prohibition on night work for pregnant women and nursing mothers.²⁶

The question of the necessity of night work by women, however, had clearly not been resolved even within Narkomtrud. A few months later, in June 1924, the newly established Narkomtrud SSSR Commission for the Improvement and Study of Women's Labour in Production reported that the removal of women from employment both on night shifts and in

hazardous occupations was taking place too slowly. The commission called for the circulation of instructions recommending that women should be transferred immediately from such employments.²⁷

The question of the impact of the prohibition on night shift employment by women on the rising levels of female unemployment was subsequently raised at the Sixth All-Union Trade Union Congress in November 1924. The People's Commissar for Labour, V. V. Shmidt, himself acknowledged that protective labour legislation did not always serve women's immediate or best interests.²⁸ Meleshchenko, a delegate to the congress from Rostov-on-Don, argued that the low levels of skill among women resulted partly from the night work prohibition. In the printing industry, for example, some highly skilled and technical tasks were conducted only on night shifts, from which women were legally excluded. Women's labour, it was argued, was devalued by the ban on night time employment. In addition to this, extra men had to be recruited to work at night and this could prove expensive to enterprises and disruptive to production.

Meleshchenko argued that a relaxation of the prohibition could only prove beneficial for female labour. Women would be able to pay for their own 'crusts of bread' and would not be forced to sell themselves on the streets.²⁹ In one of the closing sessions Shmidt proposed a resolution which argued that the prohibition on night work was resulting in women being forced out of jobs and that this contributed to widespread unemployment among the female labour force. The congress was called upon to review the existing laws on night work.³⁰

The revision of official policy on the night work prohibition for female labour, it has been argued, owed more to the practical demands of enterprise managers and to the workers themselves than to any fundamental change in attitude among the contemporary Bolshevik reformers. Waters has argued thus:

It was not that the regime had been suddenly converted to a feminist critique of protectionist legislation and to an appreciation of the ways in which labour policy reflected and reinforced traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Concessions to managerial prejudices were preferable to the implementation of radical changes in the training and deployment of the female labour force.³¹

It is evident from this that the fundamental legal provisions of the 1922 Labour Code were being gradually eroded from the mid-1920s, allowing increasing numbers of women to work on night shifts and in overtime employment, while at the same time officially retaining the prohibition for pregnant women and nursing mothers. A circular issued by Narkomtrud SSSR on 13 April 1925 upheld the principles of the February 1924 Narkomtrud RSFSR circular on a Union-wide basis. This circular argued that in view of the potential for women to be excluded from production, female labour could henceforth be employed on night shifts in all branches of production with the exception of those areas of employment from which women were already generally prohibited because of the hazardous nature of the work. These revised regulations were to apply not only to enterprises currently working a night shift but also to enterprises where night work was a new element in the production process as a result of the expansion of plant or the opening of new departments. Pregnant women and nursing mothers, however, were to be transferred to daytime shifts.³² The relaxation of the night work regulations was noted in the report of a British women's delegation to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1925.³³

Writing during the course of these revisions, however, Kaplun again supported the maintenance of protective measures on night work by women but he conceded that, on the basis of recent research, night work did not have as negative an impact on the female organism as some of the alternative, more hazardous employments. He clearly felt that while it was important to avoid a situation where women would be removed from the productive sphere altogether by such legislative regulations, there was still a need to offer some form of protection to female labour. By 1925, however, he seemed to have been defeated in his goal of prohibiting women altogether from working at night and on overtime. In future, the enforcement of these restrictions in practice was to apply most strictly only to pregnant women and nursing mothers, who were to be transferred immediately to work exclusively on day shifts.

The regulation of the hours of work for pregnant women and nursing mothers remained an area of contention. One commentary on the protective measures of the maternity provisions noted that the original statutes did not establish the length of time in which the employment of pregnant women and nursing mothers would be prohibited at night and in overtime work.³⁴ This had clearly been interpreted in some cases to encompass the entire duration of the pregnancy and time spent in breastfeeding. Subsequent decrees also did not always set out the duration of the prohibition for pregnant women and nursing mothers when women had been permitted temporarily to work at night.

The restrictions on the hours of work for pregnant women and nursing mothers were not clarified until the end of the decade. On the basis of the findings of a government commission into the impact of the seven-hour working day, a decree was issued on 2 January 1929 which introduced amendments to various articles of the 1922 Labour Code. This decree determined the hours of night work as falling between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. It reiterated the legal prohibition on the employment of pregnant women from the sixth month of pregnancy and nursing mothers during the first five months of breastfeeding on night shifts and in overtime work specifically in enterprises operating a seven-hour working day.³⁵ In the following month the duration of the prohibition on the employment of nursing mothers on night shifts and in overtime work was extended to six months.³⁶

Towards the end of the 1920s the debates on the introduction of the seven-hour day and the continuous working week, especially in the textile industry which had a predominantly female labour force, also showed recognition of the specific impact of the legislative regulation of hours of work on the employment of women workers. Some contemporary commentators were sceptical of the utility of the proposed new work regimes and they themselves put forward arguments that set out the limited economic benefits and the potentially negative social consequences of night shift employment. It is probable that many women who were employed at night also had a range of domestic tasks and family responsibilities which reduced their time available for sleep and rest during the day. It is possible to infer from this also that such demands on women's time during the day had a negative impact on their effectiveness in paid employment, by reducing their levels of labour productivity and increasing levels of wastage.

In an analysis of the impact of the introduction of the seven-hour working day in the textile industry, where every third week workers were required to work at night, N. E. Akim, a Moscow-based sanitary inspector, argued that 'the night shift results in the greater fatigue of

the worker, in a lower productivity of labour and to a greater level of spoilage in comparison with day time shifts'.³⁷ Akim proceeded to elaborate a complex plan for the distribution of work hours over the course of a three-week period, which was designed to minimize the necessity for each individual worker to be employed at night while, at the same time, maximizing the operational capacity of the factory. Akim also set out a different scheme of work for pregnant women and nursing mothers with the intention of minimizing the number of hours that they would be required to work at night over a two-week period.³⁸

In reality, the proposed changes to established work regimes, which were debated during the early years of the Soviet industrialization drive and introduced in practice from 1928, significantly undermined the provisions of earlier legislation which had, in theory at least, restricted the hours at which women could be employed. The introduction of the seven-hour day, three-shift system and the continuous working week would, in practice, increase the number of workers employed at individual enterprises and, in addition to this, required that women should be employed at night alongside male colleagues.³⁹

In a speech to the Second Trade Union (VTsSPS) All-Union Meeting on Work among Women in June 1928, the deputy Commissar of Labour, Tolstopyatov, drew attention to some of the issues concerning the employment of female labour under the conditions of 'rational-ization' of production and the introduction of the seven-hour working day. He pointed out that in general women had been laid off more readily than men, as enterprise managers considered them to be less profitable. He called on the trade unions to stem the trend of female unemployment. The prohibition on night work for female labour, according to Tolstopyatov, had undoubtedly contributed to the levels of unemployment experienced in the 1920s and, as he was aware, a government commission to investigate the impact of the seven-hour working day had decided to permit women to work at night. He also called on the trade unions to enforce more effectively the regulations in regard to pregnant women and nursing mothers, who, he pointed out, 'as experience has shown, quite often themselves circumvent this decree'.⁴⁰

It is clear from these examples that the potential impact on female labour of changes in working practices was being widely debated in the later 1920s. As an outcome of these debates, one line of argument suggested that the transfer to a seven-hour day would be beneficial as it would result in a reduction in the amount of time labour was required to work on night shifts to six hours, thus making night work more suitable for women. The newspaper *Trud* called for the expansion in the use of female labour at night as early as the beginning of 1928.⁴¹ Some of the enterprises in the textile industry were transferred gradually to the new patterns of work from 15 January 1928 and these factories came to provide the focus for a range of studies on the impact of the rationalization measures.

Particular concern in the contemporary discussions was directed towards maintaining the prohibition on the employment of pregnant women and nursing mothers on night shifts and in overtime work 'under any circumstances'. The prohibition was maintained, at least officially. Attention was also given to the needs of working mothers with young children, who constituted a significant proportion of the workers employed on night shifts.⁴² It was considered important that these women should be able to sleep soundly during the day and have access to childcare facilities when they were working at night. It was also felt to be disruptive for working mothers, on finishing a night shift, to interrupt their children's sleep

when they came to collect them from the nursery. For working mothers on night shifts, therefore, childcare provision needed to be extended throughout the night so that mothers could wait to collect their children in the morning.⁴³ All efforts were to be made to maintain child care provision on a three-shift basis in order that children could be cared for at all times when their mothers were working.

The difficulties encountered in implementing protective labour legislation, in the face of widespread resistance on the part of women workers themselves, were clearly demonstrated by the example of various practices which were initiated in the textile industry in this period. An analysis of the actual impact of the revised work regimes and of the debates surrounding the question of the employment of women on night shifts in the textile industry is provided by Ward's study of cotton workers during the NEP.⁴⁴ Ward expresses some of the objections put forward by the workers themselves to the operation of the ban on night shift employment for female labour. Some male workers clearly felt that if selected categories of employees were exempted totally from night work, then others would be condemned to working permanently at night. Women workers themselves objected to being excluded from night shifts and Ward cites reports of female textile workers in the Ivanovo district refusing to obey the terms of the legislative regulations.

Official pleas to the workers, however, continued to urge the women to think first of their own health and that of their children before insisting on working at night.⁴⁵ Local party committees at individual enterprises were instructed to ensure that women workers complied with the terms of the prohibition in order to safeguard the health of both the mother and child. A case was reported where at one factory a nursing mother who had been employed on the night shift for only one week ceased to produce any milk to feed her baby. On the basis of such reports, local departments for the protection of women's labour and party cells at the factories were instructed to speed up the rates of transfer of pregnant women and nursing mothers from night shift employment.⁴⁶

However, as Ward points out, pregnant women and nursing mothers themselves could be the most vociferous of the protestors.⁴⁷ In Rodniki, where special arrangements had been made for the employment of pregnant women and nursing mothers exclusively on daytime shifts, women won the assent of their local trade union organization in ignoring the restrictions on their employment at night. Further to this, Ward notes that the newspaper of the textile industry, *Golas tekstilei*, reported cases in which pregnant women were forced to conceal their pregnancies and that some women may even have resorted to backstreet abortions in order to avoid the legal prohibitions on their hours of work.

More generally, women raised a number of important objections to the suggestion that they should be excluded from night work. A series of articles in the women's journal, *Kommunistka*, drew attention to their complaints. Loyalties to other workers on their shifts, attachment to the operation of specific equipment and machinery and fears of reductions in wages, as Ward has also pointed out, all influenced the demands which women put forward to be allowed to work on night shifts. Women feared that by not working at night they would lose access to their machines and tools, and pregnant women and nursing mothers in particular argued that their wages would be lower if they were only allowed to work during the day.⁴⁸

The habits of set work patterns proved difficult to break. It was argued that 'on other machines output decreases. They fear that pregnant women and nursing mothers will not be allocated to the best machines. In addition, they do not know with whom they will be working.'⁴⁹ Payment by piece rates meant that workers wanted to ensure being placed with the most efficient colleagues on alternate shifts. One report noted that 'they are afraid of losing their own machines or their work mates on their shift, or they consider that it would be more convenient to work at night'.⁵⁰ The ban could also have a detrimental effect on family relations and many women disliked having to work a different shift from their husband.

Despite the wide-ranging discussions on expanding night shift employment by women more generally, the prohibition was maintained officially for the employment of pregnant women from the seventh month of pregnancy and nursing mothers in the first six months of breastfeeding.⁵¹ The most difficult period of night work, from which such workers were to be excluded entirely, was regarded as falling between 1 a.m. and 4 a.m. Women themselves argued that with the efficient organization of shifts, working at the most difficult hours of night could be avoided and that these hours could be reserved for special work brigades or used for maintenance and running repairs on the machines.⁵² On the basis of this argument it was suggested that the first daytime shift should not begin before 4 a.m. and the late shift was not to finish after 1 a.m.

On the other hand it was argued that by not starting the first shift until 6 a.m. factories were still able to run two full daytime shifts on which pregnant women and nursing mothers could be employed.⁵³ Individual factories continued to operate their own policies on shift arrangements, some of which facilitated the employment of pregnant women and nursing mothers for a minimum number of hours at night. In Shuya, for example, pregnant women and nursing mothers were given the option of working at night. Pregnant women and nursing mothers, according to one account, were also being admitted to night work in Ivanovo-Voznesensk, Vladimir, Tver and parts of the Moscow region.⁵⁴

The disputes arising over the prohibition on the night shift of pregnant women and nursing mothers in the textile industry are also illustrative to a limited extent of the continuing competitive economic rivalry between the two major industrial centres, Moscow and Lenin-grad, at the end of the 1920s. The Department of Labour Protection of Narkomtrud RSFSR, officially at least, clearly regarded the transfer of pregnant women and nursing mothers from night shifts as an urgent matter by 1929. In Leningrad, however, various objections were raised. In this region most of the textile factories still operated on an eight-hour, two-shift pattern, with the second shift running from 4 p.m. to midnight. It was argued that if women were to finish work by 10 or 11 p.m., then their machines would be left standing idle for the final part of the shift and the norms of output for those remaining at work would have to be raised. In Leningrad also, women complained of being taken away from their machines and transferred to lesser paid jobs.⁵⁵

A handbook on the work of the state scientific-research Institute for the Protection of Labour published in 1930 provides some indication of the outcomes of their earlier observations into the impact on workers of night shift employment. It is interesting to note that the institute was headed by Kaplun. The report suggested that if employment at night stopped before 2 a.m. and did not begin before 5 a.m., and that if workers were able to gain sufficient rest at home after their shift, then the negative consequences of night work, such as lower productivity and

greater fatigue, could be significantly ameliorated. Moreover, the observations conducted by the institute revealed that night work did not seem to have such a detrimental impact on women as it did on men: 'The woman's organism is more easily adapted to night work than men's, which is apparently a consequence of the fact that women generally before all else are mothers, they have a much greater reason than men to accustom their bodies to sleeplessness.'⁵⁶ The report argued that where factories already operated a night shift there would be no benefit in prohibiting night work to women.

Lili Korber's account of life in a Soviet factory confirmed the continued employment of women on night shifts in the Leningrad metallurgical factory where she herself found temporary employment at the beginning of the 1930s.⁵⁷ It seems that even the provisions prohibiting the employment of pregnant women and nursing mothers were also being ignored by the beginning of the 1930s. One commentator claims that 'illegal overtime and night work for pregnant women, as well as under-ground work for all women, seem to have been fairly common during the 1930s'.⁵⁸ Despite the widespread discussions in the 1920s and early 1930s on the question of the regulation of the hours of work for female labour and the introduction of the legislative prohibition on night work, it is evident that not only in these decades but also throughout the entire Soviet period women were widely employed on night shifts, often in greater proportions than men, and in overtime work in a whole range of sectors of the economy in direct contravention of the Soviet Labour Codes.⁵⁹

The official debates on the regulation of women's hours of work illustrate a number of issues relating to gendered employment practices in the interwar Soviet Union. Women's physiological constitution and their social role as mothers resulted in female workers being viewed as physically weaker and more vulnerable elements in the labour force. A number of legislative measures were introduced, including the night work regulations, which aimed to protect women from the worst excesses of industrial employment. However, some of the protective labour laws also excluded women from the more highly skilled and more highly paid areas of employment.

In the example of the night work regulations, women were clearly able to articulate their opposition to those which undermined their earning potential and levels of skill, and which threatened to separate them from their workmates and machines. It was the economic imperatives of the industrialization drive, however, with the need to expand industrial output and recruit increasing numbers of workers to industrial production, which resulted in the official retraction of some of the earlier restrictive practices with respect to the employment of women and, on an informal level, the widespread infringement of the remaining protective labour laws in the 1930s.

Notes

1. The research presented here forms part of a much broader study of Soviet women workers and protective labour legislation. See M. Ilic, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy: from 'Protection' to 'Equality'* (Basingstoke, 1999).
2. F. C. Giffin, 'The Prohibition of Night Work for Women and Young Persons: the Russian Factory Law of June 3, 1885', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1968) pp. 208-18. A succinct account of the debates and their outcome is also to be found in

- R. Glickman, *Russian Factory Women: Workplace and Society, 1880-1914* (London, 1984) pp. 146-9.
3. J. D. White, *The Russian Revolution, 1917-1921* (London, 1994) p. 15.
4. H. Seton-Watson, *The Russian Empire, 1801-1917* (Oxford, 1967) p. 527.
5. Glickman, *Russian Factory Women*, pp. 148-9.
6. Decree of Sovnarkom RSFSR, 29 October (11 November) 1917, 'O vos'mychasovom rabochem dne, prodolzhitel'nosti i raspredelenii rabo-chego vremeni', *Sobranie uzakonenii i rasporyazhenii RSFSR*, no. 1, article 7, 1917.
7. Z. A. Astapovich, *Pervye meropriyatiya sovetskoi vlasti v oblasti truda* (Moscow, 1958) pp. 54-5.
8. Decree of Narkomtrud RSFSR, 'O nochnoi rabote zhenshchin', *Sobranie uzakonenii i rasporyazhenii RSFSR*, no. 48, article 470, 1919.
9. Decree of Narkomtrud RSFSR, 25 December 1919, 'O nochnoi rabote v tabachnom proizvodstve', cited in *Byulleten' NKT*, nos. 11-12 (1919) p. 80.
10. S. I. Kaplun, *Zhenskii trud i okhrana ego v sovetskoi Rossii* (Moscow, 1921) p. 20.
11. Z. Tettenborn, *Sovetskoe zakonodatel'stvo o trude: leksii, pročitannye na kursakh dlya Inspektorov Truda* (Moscow, 1920) p. 95.
12. 'O vremennoi razreshenii sverkhurochnykh rabot zhenshchin v sovetskikh uchrezhdeniyakh', *Sobmnie uzakonenii i raspo lyazhenii RSFSR*, no. 65, article 587, 1919. Cited also in *Byulleten' NKT*, nos. 11-12 (1919) p. 80.
13. Decrees of Narkomtrud RSFSR and VTsSPS, 'Ob okhrane truda beremennykh i kormyashchikh grud'yu zhenshchin', *Sobranie uzakonenii i raspo lyazhenii RSFSR*, no. 91, article 477, 1920, and 'O vospreshchenii nochnykh rabot beremennymi i kormyashchimi grud'yu zhenshchinami', *ibid.*, no. 91, article 478, 1920.
14. S. I. Kaplun, *Sovremennye problemy zhenskogo truda i byta*, 2nd edn (Moscow, 1925) pp. 91-2.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 94-5.
16. M. Bukhov, *Kak okhranyaetsya trud rabotnits po sovetskim zakonam* (Moscow, 1925) p. 5.
17. See articles 130 and 131.
18. Decree of Narkomtrud, 'O nochnikh rabotakh v khlebopekarnyakh', *Izvestiya NKT*, no. 7 (1923), p. 8. All references to Narkomtrud after the foundation of the USSR in 1922 are to Narkomtrud SSSR, unless otherwise indicated.
19. Decree of Narkomtrud, 'O nochnoi rabote zhenshchin na telegrafe i telefone', *Izvestiya NKT*, no. 6 (1923) p. 14.
20. See, for example, A. Pasternak, *Chto dolzhna znat' rabotnitsa ob okhrane zhenskogo truda: s prilozheniem deistvuyushchego zakonodatel'stva v oblasti okhrany zhenskogo truda i okhrany materinstva* (Kharkov, 1923) p. 11, and Bukhov, *Kak okhranyaetsya trud*, p. 6.

21. 'O nochnoi rabote zhenshchin na transporte', *Izvestiya NKT*, no. 12/36 (1923) p. 8, decree no. 159. See also *Trud*, 2 December 1923.
22. Decree of Narkomtrud, 2 April 1924, 'O nochnoi rabote zhenshchin na zheleznodorozhnom transporte', *Izvestiya NKT*, no. 14 (1924) p. 12, decree no. 147/363. See also *Trud*, 13 April 1924.
23. For example, see V. V. Sokolov, *Prava zhenshchiny po sovetskim zakonam* (Moscow, 1928) p. 20.
24. D. Koenker, 'Men against Women on the Shop Floor in Early Soviet Russia: Gender and Class In the Socialist Workplace', *American Historical Review*, vol. 100, no. 5 (1995) p. 1454. Koenker proceeds to note that 'perhaps women who worked at night were considered to be outside the protection of the law'.
25. 'O nochnykh rabotakh zhenshchin', *Izvestiya NKT*, no. 9 (1924) pp. 12-13, circular no. 23/907.
26. Ibid.
27. GARF, f. 5515, op. 4, d. 8, I. 202. Minutes of a meeting of the Commission on 19 June 1924: a report by Vinnikov, of the Labour Protection Department.
28. VTsSPS, *Shestoi s"ezd professional'nykh soyuzov SSSR* (11-18 November 1924) (Moscow, 1925) pp.184-5.
29. Ibid., pp. 222-4.
30. Ibid., pp. 638-9. See also A. Artyukhina, 'Chto skazal 6-i s"ezd profsoyuzov o rabotnitse', *Rabotnitsa*, no. 24 (36) (1924) pp. 3-4.
31. E. Waters, 'From the Old Family to the New: Work, Marriage and Mother-hood in Urban Soviet Russia, 1917-1931' (Ph.D. diss., CREES, University of Birmingham, 1985) p. 100. See also E. H. Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, vol. 1 (London, 1958) pp. 368-9 and *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-23*, vol. 2 (London, 1952) p. 70.
32. 'O nochnykh rabotakh zhenshchin', *Izvestiya NKT*, no. 20 (1925), p. 11, circular no. 109/346.
- 33J *Soviet Russia: an Investigation by British Women Trade Unionists: April-July, 1925* (London, 1925) pp. 26-7. The report cites the examples of the relaxation of the night shift regulations for workers in transportation and the postal and telegraph services, which were covered by specific decrees.
34. P. D. Kaminskaya, *Sovetskoe trudovoe pravo* (Kharkov, 1925) p. 216.
35. Decree of TsIK and Sovnarkom, 'o semichasovom rabochem dne', *Sobranie zakonov i rasporyazhenii SSSR*, no. 4, article 30, 1929.
36. 'Ob izmenenii st. 8 postanovleniya TsIK i SNK soyuza SSR ot 2 yanvarya 1929g. o semichasovom rabochem dne', *Sobranie zakonov i rasporyazhenii SSSR*, no. 16, article 133, 1929. The decree is dated 22 February 1929.
37. N. E. Akim, 'K voprosu o vyrabotke ratsional'nogo rezhima dlya tekstil'nykh fabrik s semichasovym rabochim dnem', *Gigiena, bezopasnost' i patalogiya truda*, no. 9 (1929) p. 46.

38. Ibid., pp. 46-8.
39. It should be noted, however, that multi-shift working patterns were not widely adopted throughout Soviet industry. As Granick has pointed out, there were problems not only with labour supply (including difficulties in operating night shifts where no public transport was available) but also administrative, managerial and technical issues to be overcome. See D. Granick, *Soviet Metal Fabricating and Economic Development* (London, 1967) pp. 99-103.
40. Tolstopyatov, 'Ratsionalizatsiya proizvodstva, provedenie 7 chasovogo rabocheho dnya i uchastiya v ekonomrabote soyuzov', GARF, f. 5451, op. 12, d. 168, II. 17-19. The convention was held on 25-30 June 1928.
41. I. Reznikov, 'Semichasovoi rabochii den', *Trud*, 3 January 1928.
42. The problems experienced by this group of workers in Shuya are discussed in N. Alekseeva, 'Na khoroshie mashiny - v dnevnyu smenu', *Rabotnitsa*, no. 48 (1928) p. 6. The dangers of night-time employment for pregnant women and nursing mothers are outlined also in I. S., 'Beremennym i kormyashchim grud'yu nel'zya rabotat' noch'yu', *Rabotnitsa*, no. 48 (1928) p. 18.
43. See for example the discussion in Z. Prishchepchik, 'Semichasovoi rabochii den' i nashi zadachi', *Kommunistka*, no. 3 (1928) p. 30.
44. C. Ward, *Russian Cotton Workers and the New Economic Policy* (Cambridge, 1988). See particularly pp. 214-27 for the debates on the issues which follow.
45. See for example the articles by Z. Prishchepchik, 'O semichasovom rabochem dne', *Kommunistka*, no. 1 (1928) p. 29, and 'Semichasovoi rabochii den' i nashi zadachi', *Kommunistka*, no. 3 (1928) p. 30.
46. See Prishchepchik, 'Semichasovoi rabochii den' ... ', p. 30 and the example provided by N. Gurvich, 'Opyt perekhoda na semichasovoi rabochii den', *Kommunistka*, no. 3 (1928) p. 37.
47. See for example the account given by Borisova, 'Trudnosti perekhoda', *Kommunistka*, no. 5 (1928) p. 48.
48. A-na, 'Itogi promyshlennogo soveshchaniya', *Kommunistka*, no. 2 (1928) p. 24.
49. N. A., 'Pereshli na semichasovoi', *Kommunistka*, no. 2 (1928) p. 64.
50. Prishchepchik, 'Semichasovoi rabochii den' ... ', p. 29.
51. 'Usloviya truda pri 7-chasovom rabochem dne', *Trud*, 12 January 1928.
52. N. A., 'Pereshli ... ', p. 66.
53. B. Kaplun, 'Kogda nachinat' rabotu?', *Trud*, 12 January 1928. Kaplun was acting as special correspondent at the Sobolevo-Shchelkovskoi textile factory, which needed to recruit 400 new workers on transferring to the three-shift system of operation.
54. Prishchepchik, 'Semichasovoi rabochii den' ... ', p. 29.
55. See 'O vyvode beremennykh i kormyashchikh iz nochnykh smen po tekstil'noi promyshlennosti', GARF, f. A-390, op. 3, d. 1267, I. 122, and the various notes on this matter, II. 116-21.

56. S. I. Kaplun, *Nauka na sluzhbe okhrany truda: kak rabotaet gosudarstvennyi nauchnyi institut okhrany truda* (Moscow, 1930) p. 19.
57. L. Korber, *Life in a Soviet Factory* (London, 1933) *passim*.
58. N. T. Dodge, *Women in the Soviet Economy* (Baltimore, 1966) p. 64.
59. See, for example, the evidence which came to light under Gorbachev in A. Levina, 'Tysyacha i odna noch', *Rabotnitsa*, no. 4 (1988) pp. 12-15, and 'Zhenshchiny v SSSR', *Vestnik statistiki*, no. 1 (1990) p. 42. These and other protective labour law violations are discussed in M. Ilic, "'Generals without Armies, Commanders without Troops': Gorbachev's 'Protection' of Female Workers" in R. Marsh (ed.), *Women in Russia and Ukraine* (Cambridge, 1995) pp. 228-40.