

[Japan Society-New York: Documents Project. (1800-1890, economics)]

**Document 8: “Factory work is prison work.” Factory Girls’ Songs, 1880s**

Company song for factory girls to sing:

Put all your strength into your work.

It’s for yourself,

It’s for your family,

It’s for the country of Japan.

Workers’ songs

In Suwa geisha get thirty-five sen.

Common prostitutes get fifteen sen.

Silk reelers get one potato.

*The Prison Lament*

Factory work is prison work,

All it lacks are iron chains.

More than a caged bird, more than a prison,

Dormitory life is hateful.

Like a horse or a cow,

The reeler is fenced in.



Like the money in my employment contract,

I remain sealed away.

If a male worker makes eyes at you,

You end up losing your shirt.

How I wish the dormitory would be washed away,

The factory burn down,

And the gatekeeper die of cholera!

At six in the morning I wear a devil's face,

At six in the evening, a smiling face.

I want wings to escape from here,

To fly as far as those distant shores.

Neither silk-reeling maids nor slops

Are promoted or kept for long.

### *My Two Parents*

When I left home my parents

Told me always to behave myself.



On days when the rain falls,  
On nights when the wind blows,  
I remember my parents. . . .

In this this troubled world  
I am just a silk-reeling lass,  
But this lass wants to see  
The parents who gave her birth.

Their letter says they are waiting for the year's end.  
Are they waiting more for the money than for me?

**Source:** E. Patricia Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan*.  
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, 93, 90, 98-99, 101-102.

**Context.**

Japan's economy began to take off in the 1880s, in part because of the development of the silk industry, which spurred a great increase in trade with Europe. The silk fabric was produced in factories where the overwhelming majority of workers were females from Japan's mountainous rural regions, most of them under twenty years of age. They were paid low wages; they lived in crowded, dirty, fenced-in dormitories where they shared beds with girls on a different shift; they worked twelve-hours at a time; and they were subjected to sexually predatory or cruel supervisors. While government officials and factory owners talked glowingly about their work as "service to the nation," the laborers themselves described their situation more realistically in songs such as these.

**Questions.**

1. List the abuses and hardships described, both directly and indirectly, in the factory girls' songs.
2. Why might farmer parents have agreed to allow their daughters go off to work under conditions such as those described in these songs?
3. What would owners and officials have meant when they told the girls their work was "patriotic"?

**Terms.**

*Suwa.* A region in Nagano Prefecture, in the Japan Alps, from which large numbers of girls were hired to work in the silk factories.

*Sen.* Monetary unit in the Meiji era (1868-1912), worth one hundredth of a yen.

*Slops.* A slang term for sloppy, lazy people, or drunks.