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## "Are We Nothing But Living Machines?" A New York Sewing Woman Protests Wages and Working Conditions, 1863

New York Sun

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### **"Are We Nothing But Living Machines?" A New York Sewing Woman Protests Wages and Working Conditions, 1863**

Since at least the 1830s, New York working women endured low pay, long hours, and difficult working conditions. Concerned observers noted that some were even forced to turn to prostitution to supplement their meager incomes. During the Civil War, poor men flocked to the army (wealthier men could purchase substitutes for \$300). The women left behind were now responsible for supporting families on their own. While wartime production created additional opportunities for women to work, it also led to even greater exploitation as factory owners pushed their workers to turn out more goods. Under these conditions, some women, such as this one, suggested that collective action might provide a solution.

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When this Rebellion broke out, my brothers joined the Army, and then I must work for myself and help support my mother and my little sister. I would read the advertisements in the paper and go answer them....

A well-known hat manufactory on Broadway wanted five hundred hands. I applied for work. The proprietor...promised me 62 cents per dozen. I knew I could not make a dozen per day; but what was I to do? I wanted work, and must get it, or starve. My mother and myself worked from early morning until late at night, but could not make more than \$2.50 each per week... Are we nothing but living machines, to be driven at will for the accommodation of a set of heartless, yes, I may say soulless people...? They ought to read the commandment, "Thou shall not kill." But they are murderers that die on feather beds....

Men join the army and leave us with our employers to battle with. I trust that we will have kind friends to aid us; it is a good work. If we were paid better it would save many young girls from worse than poverty. Let us act as one, and I feel sure that with the blessings of God, and assistance of our fellow beings, we will succeed.

E.S.P., A Working Girl

Source: *New York Sun*, November 17, 1863.

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