

TEXT › WORK IN THE MINE

I got married at 23 and that's when I went to the mine. Before, when I was 12 years old, I was a weaver. I can't read or write. I haul the coal wagons and work six hours in the morning and six at noon. I stop for almost an hour at noon to eat, a little bread and a little butter, with nothing to drink. I have two children, but they are still too young to work. I've pulled the wagons even while pregnant. I know a woman who came home, washed, got into bed, gave birth, and was back to the same job in less than a week. I have a strap around her waist and a chain between my legs, I have to crawl. The slope is very steep and we hold onto the rope or whatever we can. In the well where I work there are six women and six boys and girls. It is a very tough job for a woman. The well is always wet and the water is up to our knees. My clothes are almost always soaked. A cousin of mine takes care of the children during the day. I can't do anything when I come home at night, and sometimes I fall asleep before I wash. I have dragged wagons until my skin is ripped off. And it is much worse when a child is expected. My boss has hit me several times because I was not prepared.

testimony of Betty Harris before a Parliamentary Commission
of Inquiry on working conditions (1842)

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