

REPORTS OF LOCAL INSPECTORS OF FACTORIES AND AGENTS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR.

SIR,—

Department of Labour, 1st May, 1895.

I have the honour to submit to you a report upon the work done by me during the past year as Inspector of Factories.

Acting upon your instructions, I have visited factories and workrooms where women are employed in the industrial centres of both Islands, and also in the several country districts. Speaking generally, I consider the condition of the working-girl in New Zealand to be eminently satisfactory in respect to hours of labour and sanitary conditions, and fair as regards the wage question, except in the dressmaking trade and in the country districts.

These favourable conditions seem to me to be due in no small degree to the formation of public opinion in regard to women's labour by the progressive efforts of our legislators for the past twenty years, from "The Employment of Females Act, 1873," to our "Factories Act, 1894." The excessively low rate of pay noticeable in the country districts (I have met with a first-class tailoring machinist earning 12s. 6d. weekly wages) and in the dressmaking trade may be accounted for (1) by the number of fairly-educated girls who leave school year by year, and for whom occupation of some sort must be found—preferably in the immediate neighbourhood of their homes—until marriage; (2) because a considerable proportion of parents in the country districts of New Zealand are comfortably off, in so far as the possession of a home of their own. As the daughters grow up, if they can get light daily occupation, earn enough for pocket-money, and learn something about dress, that is all that is required. There is no struggle for a subsistence-wage, nor even to acquire a self-supporting trade. They live at home, and marriage is expected to follow sooner or later. Never having learnt domestic work theoretically and systematically, nor having any opportunity to gain distinction and honour in the science of domestic economics, young women, and also their parents, are apt to regard household service in their own homes or elsewhere as undignified drudgery, of no vital importance, and likely to interfere with their prospects of future advancement by marriage. It will be easily seen how this surplusage of home-girls tends to keep down the pay of those who have to live by their earnings.

As may be seen by reference to the statistical tables, by far the larger number of women are employed in the clothing trades, principally dressmaking and tailoring.

DRESSMAKING.

Dressmaking as a trade is at present on a decline. Whether this is but a fluctuation of fashion or a permanent change remains to be proved. The larger firms say that their dressmaking rooms are run at a yearly loss. First-class private dressmakers complain that their trade has gone, and that small dressmakers are multiplying indefinitely, and the latter are glad to go out to work for ladies by the day at from 2s. to 3s. Notwithstanding the protection afforded by the 25-per-cent. duty on made garments, society ladies who wish to be stylish and up-to-date get their smartest frocks from Paris, London, Melbourne, or Sydney, and let the local tailor build them a tweed suit for practical wear. The modern simplification of dress in the prevalent fashion of plain skirt, coat, and blouse has also struck a blow at the dressmaking business. Scientific methods of measuring and fitting and well-cut paper patterns abound, so that any woman of ordinary intelligence and plenty of leisure can either make her own and her children's dresses or supervise a needlewoman engaged by the day. Meanwhile girls are offering themselves in any number as "apprentices," though seldom with the idea of acquiring a self-supporting trade. These apprentices receive no pay for either six or twelve months—may be kept running messages, learning little or nothing during that time, and sent off directly they are entitled to a wage. It will thus be seen that it is improbable that the wages of dressmakers will increase, that the chances of a girl earning a fair living at dressmaking are very slight, and that mothers would do better to obtain for their daughters a thorough home and domestic training than "put them to the dressmaking" after leaving school.

As a rule, the larger firms have devoted fine big rooms, well lighted and well ventilated, to the dressmaking department, and have shown consideration for the health and comfort of their employes. The colder climate necessitates a longer season for artificial heating of the workrooms in Dunedin and Invercargill than in the northern cities. During my visit to the latter town in March I found most of the workrooms heated, and observed that the proportion of anæmic girls was greatly in excess of any other New Zealand town. I think this may be due to the plan so generally adopted of heating the workrooms by means of gas-stoves. A girl soon loses vigour, and therefore the fresh colour of health, if she has to work eight hours a day for many consecutive months near a gas-stove. The D.I.C. in Dunedin has adopted an admirable system of heating their workrooms by hot-water pipes. The more stringent regulations in regard to overtime permits have had a good effect, and the factory half-holiday is an accepted fact in the dressmaking trade.