

Women and Work



Transformation of work and social life in the 19th century

- There is a shift from a family farm economy to wage-based factory economy
 - Importance of the individual wage-earner
- Increasing importance of cash as the medium of exchange
- Industrialization
- Emergence of an urban lifestyle and society
 - 1840s: Large-scale immigration of impoverished German and Irish immigrants
 - Half of Irish immigrants are women; mostly single

Recap: the “family economy”

- Cash-strapped economy; people bartered for products they need
 - Women’s work often associated with the generation of cash
- All members of the family contributed
- There’s “men’s” work and “women’s” work , but women’s work still valued
- Economic contributions of all members of the family were expected even children

Impact of the rise of a wage economy on women

- Introduced a new distinction between “men’s” and “women’s” work
 - Men labored for wages in the market place
 - Only 10% of free women earned wages in 1860; 13.7% in 1870
 - Very few trades/professions open to women
 - Women labored for love in the private home, must raise the children
 - Led to a devaluing of married women’s household labor
 - Lack of wages rendered women’s household work increasingly invisible
 - Women’s household tasks not even seen as real work

Class, gender and work

- Women's relationship to work divided along class lines
 - Middle class
 - For women, leisure comes to be regarded as a positive good
 - “Ladies” increasingly supervised domestic help and oversaw household purchases
 - Working class
 - Shift from household production to wage labor
 - Young women began to work in industry; factories

What was “outwork”?

- Synonymous with “women’s work”
- Employers distributed raw materials individual workers, who converted the materials into products by hand
 - Most common in garment industry
 - Numerous advantages for the manufacturer
 - A few advantages for women workers
 - Could do the work at home; at one’s own convenience
 - BUT, it kept workers isolated from one another
- For working-class people, industrialization brought work *into* the home

Domestic service

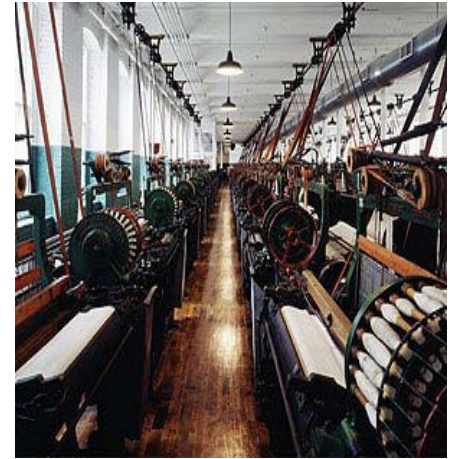
- Most common occupation for working women in the 19th century
 - More than 50% of all female wage earners
- Shift from “help” or “hired girls” to “domestics”
 - Increasing social distance between domestic workers and the families they served
 - Domestic servants often immigrants or African-American
 - MC tried to imagine employers as benevolent figures
 - But in fact, such relation were often strained

Teaching

- Early 19th century witnessed emergence of the modern public school system (“common schools”)
- In the US, teaching comes to be defined as women’s work
 - Not true in Europe
 - Response to severe labor shortage
 - Role of teacher reconceived (maternal figure)
 - Women paid only 30-50% of the wages paid to men
 - Most schools would hire only single women

Lowell as a national symbol

- Lowell was considered a model
 - Of industrialization
 - Benevolent paternalism of mill owners
 - Relatively high wages
 - Comparatively good working/living conditions
 - Of American womanhood
 - Lowell mills girls challenged the notion that women who worked for wages were coarse, crude
- Many foreign visitors; Charles Dickens came to see the Lowell factory system



First textile mills



- Home production
- First mills built in Pawtucket, RI (1791)
 - Samuel Slater
 - Produced yarn, not cloth
 - “family system”
 - Hired families, including children over eight years
- Waltham system (1814)
 - Francis Cabot Lowell
 - First modern factory in the US
 - Vertical integration
 - Used the new power loom (introduced in 1810)





Workforce at Lowell

- Primarily young, unmarried farm girls (80%)
 - Average age 16
 - Most had kin working at the same mill
- Preferred mill work to other options
 - More independence than domestic service
 - Better wages than teaching
- Most worked only about 5 years
 - Viewed employment as an interlude between childhood and marriage
 - Many worked to earn dowries
 - Some to educate their brothers



Work in the mills

- 12-13 hour days (in the winter)
- Highly regimented time schedule
- New girls paired with more experienced workers
- Extremely loud; overwhelming



Gender division of labor

- 15% of labor force was male
 - Men performed different jobs
 - Handled the initial phases; picking and carding
 - Repaired machinery
 - Worked as supervisors
 - Worked in different spaces
 - Typical workroom had 2 male supervisors; 80 female operators; 2 children
- Allowed employers to avoid the issue of equal pay for equal work

Boarding Houses

- All unmarried girls had to live in company boarding houses
 - Generally run by matronly widows
 - Partially subsidized by the company
- Strict rules
 - Curfews; room cleaning; church attendance
- Allowed girls to leave home and work for wages without risking their reputations
 - Reassured parents
- Important political consequences; fuelled worker solidarity

Policing morality

“A girl, suspected of immoralities, or serious improprieties, at once loses caste. Her fellow boarders will at once leave the house, if the keeper does not dismiss the offender. In self-protection, therefore, the patron is obliged to put the offender away. Nor will her former companions walk with her, or work with her; till at length, finding herself everywhere talked about, and pointed at, and shunned she is obliged to relieve her fellow-operatives of a presence which they feel brings disgrace.”



Ethos of self-improvement

- Lowell mill girls were renowned for their pursuit of education and self-cultivation
 - Formed lending libraries, benevolent associations, debating clubs, missionary societies
 - Took evening classes
 - Lucy Larcom studied German, Botany and Ethics
 - Some workers even pooled resources to hire teachers
 - Ran a company-sponsored newspaper, *The Lowell Offering*
 - Attended Lyceum lectures
 - Debated issue of slavery; dilemma of working on cotton products supplied from the South

THE
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OF
ORIGINAL ARTICLES ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS,
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THIS NUMBER WHOLLY WRITTEN
BY FEMALES EMPLOYED IN THE MILLS.

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LOWELL, MASS.

PRINTED BY A. WATSON, 15 CENTRAL STREET.

For Sale at all the Bookstores; and by Tower, in the angle of Central and Gorham sts.;
and at Billings' Variety Store, Merrimack st. opposite Tremont Corporation.

Title page of the *Lowell Offering*, 1840 The Lowell female textile workers wrote and published several literary magazines, including the *Lowell Offering*, which featured essays, poetry and fiction written by female textile workers. They also actively participated in early labor reform through legislative petitions, forming labor organizations, contributing essays and articles to a pro-labor newspaper the *Voice of Industry* and protesting through "turn-outs" or strikes.

1834 Walk-out

- 800 women (1/6th of the workforce) turned out to protest a proposed wage reduction
- Strike was defeated within a week
- Significance
 - Showed the women's willingness to defy ideals of feminine propriety
 - Revealed how they viewed themselves as workers
 - Did *not* draw on a discourse of class conflict
 - Instead used an older, Revolutionary-era language
 - “Daughters of free men”

1834 poem

Let oppression shrug her shoulders,
And a haughty tyrant frown,
And little upstart Ignorance,
In mockery look down.

Yet I value not the feeble threats
Of Tories in disguise,
While the flag of Independence
O'er our noble nation flies.

1836 Lowell Strike

- Occurred during an economic boom
 - When workers were in short supply
- Had a much greater impact
 - Involved twice as many workers
 - 1/4th of the labor force
 - Lasted several months; significantly affected production
- Workers were better organized and more sophisticated
 - Formed the Factory Girls' Association
 - Still drew on “liberty rhetoric,” but were also begin to see themselves as industrial workers

1836 song

Oh! isn't it a pity,
such a pretty girl as I
Should be sent to the factory
to pine away and die?
Oh! I cannot be a slave,
I will not be a slave,
For I'm so fond of liberty,
That I cannot be a slave.

Legacies of the 1830s

- News of Lowell success spreads to other mill towns, and other women workers join the Factory Girl's Association
- Factory Girl's Association calls for a 10-hour workday, a call adopted by the male labor movement as well

Ten-hour day movement

- In 1845, workers formed the Female Labor Reform Association and began fighting for a 10-hour day
 - Led by Sarah Bagley; had worked in the mills for a decade
 - Allied with the New England Workingmen's Association
 - Petitioned the MA state legislature rather than appealing to mill owners
 - Founded their own publication, *The Voice of Industry*

Decline of Lowell system

- 1840s and 1850s saw decline of high profits
 - Overproduction; increased competition
 - Employers reduced wages; instituted “speed ups”
- End of the boarding house system
 - Newcomers had to live in privately run tenements or as boarders
 - Attempt to undermine worker solidarity
- Rise of immigrant labor
 - Mainly Irish, both male and female
 - More tractable workforce

Changes in the Lowell workforce

- 1830s
 - 74% female; 93%unmarried
 - 96% native-born Americans
 - 80% between ages of 15-30
 - 2.3% children under 15
- 1850
 - 38.6% foreign-born
 - 6.5% children
- 1860
 - 61.8% foreign-born
 - 15% children

Significance

- In some ways, the Lowell mill girls were among the nation's first "modern women"
 - Because they had their own savings before marriage, they had more choice in regard to marriage
 - May have expected a greater degree of independence after marriage
 - And encouraged daughters' independence
 - Married later and had fewer children than their peers
 - More likely to settle in towns and cities
 - Upward social mobility