Analyzing change and continuity in women's experience as wage earners, 1840-1940
Vagel Keller
Magazine of History; Fall 2000; 15, 1; Research Library
pg. 32

Vagel Keller

Analyzing Change and Continuity in Women's Experience as Wage Earners, 1840-1940

This lesson plan enables students to examine continuity and change in women's working conditions during the industrialization of the United States. Between 1840 and 1940, the proportion of American women who worked for wages outside their homes increased from 8.4 percent to 25.4 percent. Many of the women who joined the American labor force during this hundred year period worked in factories. The era was also characterized by changes in the composition of the female labor force and the conditions under which women worked. But even though their numbers grew to represent a significant segment of the total workforce by the late 1930s, women still did not enjoy equality with their male counterparts. Women's jobs in many industries were segregated from those of men, much as they had been in 1840, and policies toward women workers still tended to emphasize their traditional domestic role. The activities in this lesson challenge students to analyze contemporary images and documents and demonstrate an understanding of what changed for women, what stayed the same, and why.

Time Frame

The lesson plan contains two parts, designed to fill two fifty-minute class periods. Optional assignments may be used as learning measurement tools or to generate additional collective learning experiences.

Objectives

1. To examine women's motivation for working outside the home before and after American industrialization.
2. To analyze continuity and change in women's working conditions.
3. To examine women wage earners' responses to conflict between laborers and management at different periods in American history.
4. To develop student skills in analyzing a variety of historical materials, drawing reasonable conclusions, and expressing them in written form.

Overview

Part I

From the earliest years of European settlement in North America, women were important producers of the goods necessary to sustain life. For roughly 250 years after the founding of Jamestown, most Americans lived on farms or in small villages and, for much of that period, the family was the basic unit of production for the manufacture of necessities. Work performed by wives and their unmarried daughters played a critical role in the family economy, whether on a farm or in a craft workshop. In addition to caring for livestock, assisting men in the fields, and processing and making food, farm women performed the essential tasks of making and repairing clothing, as well as producing consumable dry goods, such as soap and candles. What they produced in excess of family needs went in trade for other necessities and luxury items from merchants or skilled artisans in nearby villages.

The women and girls in an artisan's household also performed wage work that contributed to the family economy. Wives and daughters of shoemakers, for example, worked as binders, sewing together the leather uppers for shoes and boots. Shoe binding was the most tedious and least skilled step in the shoemaking process. It required only an awl, a needle, and thread, and could be done as well in the kitchen as in the workshop. Therefore, shoe binding lent itself to traditional women's work (sewing) and workplace (the kitchen), and it could be performed in conjunction with other domestic responsibilities. Despite their importance to the family economy, however, women's status as workers was subordinate to men's; social tradition and legal opinion treated women as dependents. This was reflected in the productive tasks commonly assigned to women; whether it was stitching a button hole on a shirt or binding the uppers for a pair of shoes, women's work was limited to the most tedious and repetitious tasks, requiring little skill and paying wages below subsistence levels.

Between 1800 and 1850, a shift from small craft shops to factory production brought two changes in women's working conditions.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

First, the decline in household manufactures made it less important for unmarried daughters to stay at home as domestic laborers. Second, the need for cash to buy factory-made goods drove young, single farm women to seek wage work—and their families to encourage them to do so. At the same time, married women, especially those with young children to care for, sought wage work that they could perform at home.

Textile manufacture and shoemaking reflected the complex changes in women's work during the first half of the nineteenth century. Textiles were the first goods to be made in fully centralized mills, concentrated in New England, and these mills attracted large numbers of young, single women from surrounding farms and villages. But, although these so-called "factory girls" enjoyed a degree of independence unheard of a generation earlier, their lives were still closely supervised while they lived and worked away from home. Shoe manufacturing underwent a more gradual process of centralization and shoe factories developed essentially as larger versions of the traditional family-operated cobbler shop. Women performed the same tasks in the emerging shoe factory system as they had in the past, except that now they acted as independent contractors, binding shoe uppers in their homes and delivering them to a central factory, where they were assembled. This system, known as "given-out" or "put-out" work, allowed women and girls to contribute to their families' incomes within a more traditional domestic setting. Despite differences, however, women's work in the two systems was carefully segregated from men's, and women continued to be treated as dependents, subordinate to men.

This photograph illustrates the conditions under which many women once worked for wages. A woman, "Mrs. Tortora," makes lace in her New York City home for a contractor, while her two children and husband look on. Photograph by Lewis W. Hine, 1911. (Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration, NWDNS-102-LH-2719.)

Part II

After the Civil War, the composition of the female labor force changed from overwhelmingly young and single to include more older, married women. The period from 1870 through 1930 saw the industrialization of American manufacturing; machines run by semi-skilled operators replaced skilled artisans and their hand tools. Industries concentrated around large cities, and production soared while wages remained at or below the subsistence level for most blue-collar workers. In this urban, industrial environment, women continued to play a critical role as wage earners in the economy of the working-class family. In contrast to the "put-out" work system of the nineteenth-century shoe industry, increasing numbers of married women joined their single counterparts in the factories and mills. Virtually every sector of manufacturing was industrialized by 1900, and working-class women found employment in many of them. Meat packing was one such industry.

Like the textile and shoe industries a century earlier, the meat packing industry segregated its female workforce in low skilled, tedious hand-work tasks, a condition that persisted into the late 1930s. Due to its key position in the emerging transcontinental railroad system, Chicago emerged as a major meat packing center after the Civil War. Entrepreneurs like Gustavus F. Swift and Philip Armour—prominent names in meat packing to this day—developed integrated packinghouses that acted like factories in reverse: they systematically disassembled live animals into their component parts. As was the case in other industries transformed by the factory system, the meat packing industry divided labor among semi-skilled and unskilled workers and along gender lines.

The meat packing industry in the 1930s illustrates three important changes in the female workforce over the past hundred years. First, it contained more older, married women. Although married women working outside the home had been present in the labor force since the 1830s, by 1890 they still constituted only 14 percent of the total number of female workers. However, their proportion had more than doubled by 1930, and increased to 36 percent by 1940. At the same time, the proportion of working women aged twenty-five and older increased from 33 percent of all working women in 1890 to 47 percent in 1940. So, on the eve of World War II, more married, middle-aged women than ever before earned wages in an environment physically separated from their traditional domestic workplace. Second, the industrial workforce unionized in the late 1930s, and women participated in sexually integrated labor organizations. Finally, the ethnic composition of the female workforce in the late 1930s reflected the influx of immigrants and the urbanization of African Americans prior to 1920.

Women who worked in Chicago's meat packinghouses during the late 1930s illustrated the important changes that characterized the female workforce during the industrialization of the United States. But they also bore witness to the persistence of traditional sexual roles. Although more married women were working outside the home, they were still treated as dependents. In some cases, they accepted that subordinate role; in others, they resisted. Women also participated in labor organizations to varying degrees, possibly based on distinctive ethnic cultural values. In terms of actual working conditions, little had changed. Women still worked at tedious, unskilled manual tasks in unhealthy conditions.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Lesson I

Materials

Handouts A, B, and C (included below)

Procedure

A. Have students read Part I of the "Overview" and the handouts with illustration before class.

B. In class, lead a forty- to fifty-minute discussion based on the following questions.

1. Why did these women chose to work for wages? Why do you think Sarah Trask chose "put-out" work while Mary Paul left home to work in a factory?

2. How did the living and working conditions of "factory girls" differ from those of home workers? Which category do you think was better off? Why?

3. From Mary Paul's letters and Sarah Trask's diary, what can you conclude about how women viewed wage work?

4. Based on the testimony recorded during the investigation of labor conditions, what were the most frequent complaints by women factory workers? How did they express them? Do you think Mary Paul would have agreed or disagreed with those complaints? Why? Which kind of source contributes most to an understanding of women's work in early factories?

Lesson II

Materials

Handouts D and E, included below

Procedures

A. Have students read Part II of the "Overview" and the handouts with illustration before class.

B. Lead a forty- to fifty-minute discussion based on the following questions.

1. How did these women view wage work? How did they view themselves as workers? As women?

2. How had the makeup of the female workforce changed since the nineteenth century? How did that affect women's working conditions and their response to problems with management?

3. What are the primary complaints of these women? How are they different from or similar to those of their nineteenth-century counterparts?

4. How had women's resistance changed? Why?

5. Judging from the examples of the textile, shoe, and meat packing industries, to what degree did women's working conditions and their role in the industrial workforce change between 1845 and 1939?

Optional Homework Assignments

These assignments are intended to follow the second lesson.

A. Have students assume the role of a 1939 meat packer and write a letter to Mary Paul telling her what has changed and what remains the same for factory women since she worked in the Lowell mills.

B. Have students conduct an oral interview with a female parent, grandparent, or other adult acquaintance who works or worked in the manufacturing sector. Have the students record answers to the questions below. Then, have the students answer the same questions for the meat packing women of 1939 and prepare a table comparing the answers.

1. Did/do women and men have the same kinds of jobs where you work(ed)? Was/is your supervisor a man or a woman? Was/is it possible for a woman to be a supervisor? If so, under what conditions?

2. Did/does management consider your job skilled or unskilled? Did/do you agree with management's definition of skill?

3. Did/does your job involve primarily hand work or machine operation? What kind of tools did/do you use in your job?

4. Would you describe your working conditions as good or bad? Explain.

5. Was/is there a union in your plant? If so, were/are you active in it? Why or why not? ❑

Bibliography

Blewett, Mary H. "I Am Doomed to Disappointment: The Diaries of a Beverly, Massachusetts, Shoebinder, Sarah E. Trask, 1849-1851." *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 117, no. 3 (July 1981): 192-210.

——. *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry, 1780-1910.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Brown, Kathleen. *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Clark, Christopher. *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Cronon, William. *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West.* New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991.

Kessler-Harris, Alice. *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

"Legislative Investigations in Massachusetts." In *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society.* Vol. 8. Edited by John R. Commons, et al., 133-51. Cleveland, OH: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1910.

"Letters of Mary Paul, 1845-1848." In *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860.* Edited by Thomas Dublin, 97-130. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981.

Tentler, Leslie Woodcock. *Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957: A Statistical Abstract Supplement.* Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1960.

Woloch, Nancy. *Women and the American Experience.* New York: A. A. Knopf, 1984.

Vagel Keller is a Ph.D. candidate in history and policy at Carnegie Mellon University. He serves as historical consultant for several groups concerned with redeveloping abandoned industrial sites in the northeastern United States. His Ph.D. dissertation will focus on the environmental effects of rural industries during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.