


1901

Women in Economics

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Recommended Citation

Sherman, Elizabeth Agnes, "Women in Economics" (1901). *Student and Lippitt Prize essays*. Paper 12.
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WOMEN IN ECONOMICS.
ELIZABETH AGNES SHERMAN.
1901.

WOMEN IN ECONOMICS.

"Give us labor and the training which fits for labor! We demand this not for ourselves alone, but for the race." This is the plea which the woman of to-day makes to the world. Our age is one of discontent. Many old customs are being supplanted by the new. The laboring classes are trying to increase their power and obtain justice from their employers. All kinds of reforms abound and now even the woman rises to assert herself and obtain her rights. She realizes that the time has come when she must declare her independence, demand the right of becoming the social equal of man, and be no longer content to remain at home, to be supported by him as one who is incapable of taking care of herself.

This question of woman's position with relation to man, in the economic sense, the so-called Woman's Problem, is being more and more agitated. When the subject was new it did not meet with approval from the women themselves. They were so used to regarding man as their superior and support, that they did not think themselves capable of providing for themselves. They were content to be looked upon as the weaker sex, to be shielded and protected by the stronger, and in return for this protection, were willing to bow to their stronger will and superior know-

ledge. This feeling, however, is not shared by the woman of to-day. She feels that she must either take her place beside man as his equal economically, be a producer as well as consumer, or acknowledge herself his inferior in every sense and owe her very existence to him. What woman would not choose the former course and feel that she was an individual of importance to society?

The objection is raised, however, that woman is incapable of coping with man, that she is both physically and mentally his inferior. Women are too weak and emotional to be independent, they say, and although as quick in learning many things as man, they have not his depth of understanding and reasoning power.

Perhaps this is true to a certain extent now, but it was not true in the days of our forefathers, and it is only since the period of the world's greater prosperity that woman's labor has decreased. It is the result of increased civilization. Machinery has come to take the place of labor, woman's as well as man's; and as she has opened no way for new industries, as the old has slipped from her, she has less and less use for her faculties. This of course is an unhealthy as well as useless way to live and woman has at last come to realize that she must rescue herself from this state of dependence or injure herself and the whole race as well. For the strength of a race, as his-

tory will show, declines as prosperity decreases the duties of the woman.

To prove that woman can be man's equal, both physically and mentally, let us consider the primitive woman. Many books and articles have been written telling of the progress man has made toward higher civilization and developing industry, but few have thought it worth while to mention the patience and energy of the woman. Nevertheless if we look back to the savages, we shall see that it was the woman who did the heaviest work and planning for the tribe. It was she who planted the fields, made the houses and cooked the food; while the warriors of the tribe spent their time hunting, fishing and fighting with their neighbors. It always was the tendency for man to wander about exploring new countries, making conquests and subjugating other nations, while the woman stayed behind and kept the home and reared the children. It is the nature of woman to be much more conservative than man; and while he seeks abroad for new things, she clings to the old customs, and it is through her that they have become strengthened.

By turning again to the savage tribes we shall see that woman was the first founder of both industry and society. As it was she who did the work, it was she who needed the tools. Therefore, as she had none to begin with, she had to use her

ingenuity in fashioning them for herself as they became necessary. She learned to make clay into utensils for cooking purposes, and to prepare the hides of animals for clothing. Thus woman, by becoming Jack-at-all-trades, was the first to lay the foundations of industry and by keeping the home, she was in reality the founder of society also.

Later, when terrible wars laid waste so many nations, the woman again showed herself as brave and helpful as man. Nearly all the glory is given to him, it is true, but what could he have done without her at that critical period? Woman, by her patient industry and support did as much if not more than man. Who kept the homes, furnished the provisions, and clothing for the army, without which it must have given up? History will show that the nations which have the vigorous women are strongest, and it is also true that where women have exerted themselves and have had their share of work to do, they are healthiest and most able.

This sort of division of labor continued until the introduction of machinery. Up to that time, women had all they could do to provide for their families and keep their homes. They were never idle and when the general housework was finished, there was always the spinning and weaving to be done. This kept them always busy and there was no time for other work. But now

the modern housewife has so many machines at her disposal that a great part of the work which took so much of her time previously, is done by the machine. She no longer spins and weaves, as the material can be procured elsewhere so much more cheaply and easily. The same is true of many other things. The employment of men has been affected in the same way where hand labor has been displaced by the introduction of machinery. But men have usually been able to find employment elsewhere, as new industries have sprung up and opened opportunities to them. So it must be in the case of woman. Her place is not stationary. When she was kept busy with the responsibility of home making it was her duty to remain there. But now that those obligations have diminished she must turn to other things. Her position at the present day is the same as that of the unemployed male. His cry is "we must work or die" while hers is "we must work or become dependent upon man."

Woman can look back upon her past with pride, knowing that she has always done her duty and filled her place well, always proved herself equal to any crisis. But now that the time has come for her to take a different position in the economic world, shall she hesitate? Realizing what the consequences will be, shall she sink quietly into oblivion, as her old labors decrease, or shall she strike boldly into new fields and establish her in-

dependence in new lines of business? This question the modern woman seems to have decided for herself, as she has already made great progress in various occupations, before unknown to her sex.

The objection often to this course is, that as machinery has thrown so many out of employment, men as well as women, it is not right for her to take the places which men need and must have in order to live. This is an open question, however, and many claim that although machinery has to a great extent supplanted hand labor, enough new industries have sprung up to offset any loss of employment. However, let this be as it may, is it any reason why women should not be allowed to exercise their powers, why they should be obliged to engage in occupations which are not congenial to them? Why should not men and women take equal chances at doing work for which they are equally adapted? A girl has the same desire for some special kind of business that a boy has, and why should she not be allowed to educate herself accordingly? Domestic life is by no means congenial to all girls any more than one trade is to all men's liking. The talents and tastes of women, when allowed full scope, are as many and varied as those of men. It is certain that the progress made by women in the last few years is very great. They have entered lines of business which were up to that time entirely unknown

to them. Take, for instance, the report of Harriet Martineau after her visit to this country. She said she found at that time but seven employments open to women; namely, teaching, needlework, keeping boarders, textile industries, typesetting, bookbinding and household service. Now there are but very few occupations which women do not fill, the most noticeable being in the Army and Navy. Statistics also show that the proportion of females employed to the number of males rose from 14.68 percent in 1870 to 17.32 percent in 1890, while males decreased from 85.32 percent in 1870 to 82.78 percent in 1890. This increase in female labor is somewhat startling. As regards those employed as artists and teachers of art, we find 10.10 percent in 1870 and 48.08 percent in 1890. There has also been a great advance in bookkeepers, clerks, and saleswomen, the rise being from 8.47 percent in 1870 to 16.93 percent in 1890. These percentages, however, are not all sufficient in themselves. According to statistics, in 1870 there was only one architect and in 1890, 22 were found. Of artists and teachers of art, there was a gain of 10,398 in the same length of time. No women chemists, assayers, or metallurgists were found in 1870, while enumerators in 1890, discovered 46 engaged in those occupations. In 1870 there were but 27 clergymen and in 1890 the number had increased to 1,235. There has also been a great increase in the

number of designers, draughtsmen, engineers, surveyors, music-teachers, government employees, physicians and surgeons. Teaching, however, seems to have had the greatest attraction for women. The census shows an increase of from 84,047 in 1870 to 345,965 in 1890. The latest report of the Commissioner of Education affirms, that of the whole number of public-school teachers in the United States, 68 1/3 percent, and in some of the New England states, more than 91 percent, are women. Great advance has been made in the line of bookkeepers, clerks and copyists. The number of women engaged in this kind of work was 8,016 in 1870 while in 1890 there were 91,820. Typewriters were not known in 1870, but in 1890 there were 21,185 women engaged as stenographers and typewriters.

These figures show that women are certainly encroaching upon positions before filled by men, but it is also true that women are more desirable in many cases, especially in offices, when they are equally well trained for the work. They are thought superior in these positions, as they are so much more polite, reliable and more easily controlled. They are also quicker in getting accustomed to new positions, more careful and by far neater and more temperate. They are also considered more conscientious, and give themselves more fully to work, than men.

One important reason why it is difficult for women to compete with men in securing positions is, that they are often not properly trained in that line. They do not study onething enough to become expert. The average college education is very liberal and covers much ground but there is not enough attention paid to particular branches, fitting the young women for special positions as is the case with young men.

This was a serious difficulty in former years, but more and more is now being done towards training young women in order that they may be able to maintain themselves.

The future of the woman who seeks a business life is very bright, as already great progress has been made and one may feel safe in saying that in the future she will be fully equal to man in capability and in many cases far surpass him.