

Women in the Workforce - Industrial Revolution to Present

Throughout history women have maintained a consistent presence in the workforce, although it has not always been at the same level of participation, and for most of that time it has been limited to primarily “traditional” roles. Nevertheless, the details of that participation merit closer consideration.

The Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution, at least in England and Wales, was fueled in part by the economic necessity of many women, both married and single, to find paid work outside their homes. The jobs provided women with independent wages, mobility and a better standard of living, yet for the majority, the early years of the 19th century resulted in a life of hardship. As one woman of the time put it, “I have wrought in the bowels of the earth 33 years. I have been married 23 years and had nine children, six are alive and three died of typhus a few years since. Have had two dead born. Horse-work ruins the women; it crushes their haunches, bends their ankles and makes them old women at 40”. Not only were working conditions often unsanitary and the work dangerous, but women’s education suffered because of the demands of work, and their home life suffered as they were faced with work followed by the inevitable domestic chores and child care.

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Most women were employed in domestic service, textile factories, and piecework shops, but many also found jobs in the coal mines, working alongside the men - and often children -, though there were differences in the jobs they did. Seamstress positions were some of the most common positions available; as the demand for clothes grew among newly wealthy middle class women, jobs in the dress-making industry also increased, and young women coming to the cities could find work as seamstresses both in homes and in sweat shops. Work was not scarce, but the hours were long - 16-hour days were common, and during the “fashionable” season, many women were expected to work 20-24 hours per day.

The Victorian Age

The Victorian Age brought little change in the need for women to work. In England, the working class made up the vast majority of the population - at least 80 percent, if we describe class using a ‘manual’ definition. Because the wages of many unskilled and semi-skilled male workers were so low, these men could not support a family unless those wages were supplemented by the earnings of wives and children; in addition, because at least one in three women were “doomed” to a life of spinsterhood and had no one else to support them, a large proportion of women at this time, both single and married, regularly sought out paid work.

These women provided a vast reservoir of labor necessary for an immature, though expanding, economy whose fluctuations demanded larger numbers of workers at one time, and fewer at another.

The Census of 1851 was the first attempt to count occupations in any detail, though it almost certainly under-represented the numbers of women in the work force. While the numbers of factory workers may have been more or less accurate, and those of domestic servants somewhere in the ballpark, there were thousands of women in the 'sweated' trades - milliners, seamstresses, washerwomen, framework knitters, nailers, straw-plaiters, etc. - who worked in their own homes either full- or part-time, and who would have escaped the Census investigators, especially because of the fear that financial penalties might follow from a full declaration of income.

The 1851 Census gave a total of 2.8 million women and girls over the age of ten in some form of employment, out of a female population of 10.1 million, making up 30.2 per cent of the entire work force. (In 1901 they composed 29.1 per cent and in 1931 29.8 per cent, though compulsory schooling up to the age of fourteen by the latter year must be taken into account.) Domestic service was by far the largest place of employment in 1851 -- 905,000 women, not including at least 145,000 washerwomen and 55,000 charwomen.

The Glass Ceiling

Though some women in every era were able to find employment in fields traditionally considered to be "male", most were restricted in which positions they could hold to those deemed "suitable" for their sex, such as sewing, cooking, cleaning, and more recently secretarial work and teaching. And until quite recently their employment status had not fundamentally changed, despite the fact that the women's rights movement had begun in earnest in the late 1800s. This can be attributed in part to the prevailing belief that physiological differences limit women's intellectual maturity, their credibility, and their ability to be effective contributors to the advancement of human society, as well as to the low representation of women in the higher echelons of the legal establishment, and to the lack of governing bodies willing and able to enforce the few laws that have been beneficial to women.

Interestingly enough, economics, the force that drives many women into the work force in the first place, also plays a great role in the determining their status. Those not able to pursue a career or who do not earn enough to maintain an adequate standard of living are dependent on their husbands or government agencies for financial support. For those who hold a university degree and pursue a career, that degree confers no practical advantage in the job market; such women, on average, have an effective income little more than a man with comparable years of work experience who does not even hold a high school diploma. The median earning in 1991 for full-time female employees who were high school graduates but did not attend college was \$18,042, compared to \$20,944 for full-time male workers who were high school dropouts, while men with an associate's degree earned nearly the same as similarly employed women with a master's degree -- \$32,221 and \$33,122, respectively. Perhaps the greatest indication of the status of women, then, - social, legal, and economic - at any point in time, is the size of the gap in wages between men and women who perform the same job. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: 1991 median earnings for year-round, full-time workers.

All women	\$20,553	All men	\$29,421
White women	\$20,794	White men	\$30,266
Black women	\$18,720	Black men	\$22,075
Hispanic women	\$16,244	Hispanic men	\$19,771

Modern Roles

Change is always a slow and difficult process; still, women are making significant advances in the workplace, both as an overall group and within specific racial populations (see Table 2.) By 1992, the proportion of women in the civilian labor force had grown to 45 percent, and women are projected to account for nearly three-fifths of the labor force entrants between 1990 and 2005, comprising 47 percent of the total labor force by the latter date. Still, teenage women, especially blacks and Hispanics, continue to experience very high unemployment rates -- 37.2 percent and 26.4 percent, respectively, in 1992, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. At least for

Hispanics, this may be due to a higher high school dropout rate, as well as to difficulty communicating in English.

Of particular interest, the military - a traditionally male-dominated organization, has proven to be a large source of employment for women. Since 1973, when the draft ended and the All Volunteer Force began, the percentage of women among U.S. military personnel increased dramatically, from 1.6 percent in 1973 to 8.5 percent in 1980, and then to 10.8 percent in 1989. There are currently over 229,000 women serving on active duty in all branches of the military: Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard. Approximately 15 percent of these women are officers -- about the same percentage as military men overall. And although officers account for a larger proportion of total personnel in some of the services, it is only in the Marine Corps that women are less likely than men to be officers (7 vs. 10 percent).

In addition, a substantial proportion of all military women are minorities. Minority representation is larger among enlisted women (41 percent) than among women officers (19 percent), but the disparity is less than for men (31 percent of enlisted men, 11 percent of officers).

Women have also made substantial progress obtaining jobs in virtually all managerial and professional specialty occupations. For example, in 1983 they held 40 percent (9.7 million) of these high paying jobs and 47 percent (14.7 million) in 1992. Women employed in managerial and professional specialty occupations had 1992 median weekly earnings between \$357 and \$917. Yet women are still over represented in low-paying jobs, especially blacks and Hispanics. (See Table 4 and Figure 1.) Fully 44 percent of employed women work in technical, sales, and administrative support jobs -- 23.5 million women in all, and even though the wage gap between men and women is slowly closing, women earn only 75 cents for every dollar earned by men when comparing 1992 median weekly earnings of full-time workers (\$381 for women and \$505 for men). Even in positions traditionally considered "female friendly" (such as nursing and elementary education), women earn only 94.4 percent and 88.8 percent of men's wages, respectively, for these positions.

Table 2
Labor Force Participation Rates of Hispanic, White, and Black Women, Selected Years

Women	1986	1990	1991	1992	1996
All Women	55.3	57.5	57.4	57.8	59.3
Hispanic	50.1	53.0	52.3	52.6	53.4
Mexican	50.5	52.8	51.5	52.1	52.8
Puerto Rican	38.1	42.8	45.9	47.1	48.5
Cuban	56.9	55.9	52.8	50.3	53.3
White	55.1	57.5	57.4	57.8	59.1
Black	56.9	57.8	57.0	58.0	60.4

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings*, January 1987, 1992, 1993, and 1997.

Clearly, despite their efforts, women have a long way to go to achieve a full measure of equality in the workplace; even the small gains they have made over the last few years, however, must be considered significant steps toward that goal.

Table 4
Occupational Distribution of Employed Hispanic, White, and Black Women, 1996

Occupational Group	Hispanic	White	Black
	Women	Women	Women
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Management and professional specialty	17.4	31.5	22.8
Technical, sales and administrative support	38.4	41.9	38.4
Service	25.0	16.3	25.4
Precision, production, craft, and repair	2.9	2.0	2.2
Operators, fabricators, and laborers	14.3	6.9	11.0
Farming, forestry, and fishing	1.9	1.3	0.2

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings*, January 1996 and unpublished tabulations from the Current Population Survey, 1996 Annual Averages.

Figure 1: The distribution of Hispanic and non-Hispanic women in the workforce. TSAS denotes technical, sales, and administrative support positions.

