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Women have been economically important since prehistoric times, although their contributions have varied according to the structure, needs, customs, and attitudes of society. In prehistoric times, women and men participated almost equally in hunting and gathering activities to obtain food. With the development of agricultural communities, women's work revolved more around the home. They prepared food, made clothing, and cared for children, while also plowing fields, harvesting crops, and tending animals. As cities developed, some women sold or traded goods in the marketplace.

From ancient to modern times, four generalizations can be made about women's paid work. (1) Women have worked because of economic necessity; poor women in particular worked outside the home because they were unmarried or because their partners were unable to sustain the family solely through their own work. (2) Women's paid work has often been similar to their work at home. (3) Women have maintained the primary responsibility for raising children, regardless of their paid work. (4) Women have almost always been paid less than men for their work. Some major changes are now occurring in industrial nations, including the steadily increasing proportion of women in the labor force; decreasing family responsibilities (due to both smaller family size and technological innovation in the home); higher levels of education for women; and more middle- and upper-income women working for pay.

Early Women Workers

In Babylonia, about 2000 BC, women were permitted to engage in business and to work as scribes. In most ancient societies, however, upper-class women usually were limited to their homes, and working women were either plebeians or slaves used for unskilled labor. In ancient Greece, women worked outside the home as sellers of goods such as salt, figs, bread, and hemp; seamstresses; wet nurses; laundresses; cobblers; and potters. Despite the strict seclusion of women in Asia, their work patterns were similar to those of women in Greece. In India, working women crushed stones used to make roads and worked long hours weaving cloth.

Medieval Europe

Artisans working in their own homes not infrequently used the labor of their families. This custom was so prevalent during the Middle Ages, carved wood (*see* Guild) of the period, including some that otherwise excluded women, often admitted to membership the widows of guild members, providing they met professional requirements. Some early guilds barred women from membership; others accepted them on a limited basis. By the 14th century, in England and France, women were frequently accepted equally with men as tailors, barbers, carpenters, and saddlers and spurriers. Dressmaking and lace-making guilds were composed exclusively of women.

Gradually, the guilds were replaced by the putting-out system, whereby tools and materials were distributed to workers by merchants; the workers then produced articles on a piecework basis in their homes. Some of these workers were women, who were paid directly for their labor, while men with families were commonly assisted by their wives and children.

The Industrial Revolution

During the 18th and early 19th centuries, as the Industrial Revolution developed, the putting-out system slowly declined. Goods that had been produced by hand in the home were manufactured by machine in factories (*see* Factory System). Women competed more with men for some jobs, but were concentrated primarily in textile mills and clothing factories.

American Working Women

Much of colonial America was agrarian, and most women worked the land alongside men. Even after the American Revolution, many women continued to make economic contributions by farming and tending domestic animals.

By the early 19th century the factory system had spread to the U.S. The first cotton factory was built in 1814, and by 1850 some 24 percent of manufacturing workers were women. They produced clothing, shoes, cigars, and other items. In the Northeast, newly arrived immigrant women with little education or command of the English language became the permanent factory force. In the South, black women moved into factory and domestic jobs, first as slaves and later as free workers. A home-work system, similar to the putting-out system, kept many women employed in home manufacturing enterprises for meager pay.

By 1890 nearly 4 million women in the U.S. worked for pay. This represented 18 percent of the female population aged 14 and over and 17 percent of the total work force. Half the female workers were under 25 years of age, and seven out of ten were single. The majority worked in domestic service, teaching positions, and textile factories; only about 5 percent were secretaries, clerks, or salespersons.

White-collar employment

The early 1900s were marked by a striking change in the growth and composition of the white-collar work force

in the U.S. As a result of urbanization and the availability of public education, more middle-class women joined the labor force, primarily as teachers and nurses. With the growing use of the typewriter in business, women filled more than 75 percent of typist jobs by 1900. At the same time, 29 percent of telephone and telegraph workers were women. Like the majority of all women in the work force, female white-collar workers were young, single (teachers were required to quit when they married), and paid less than male workers, but they were also native-born and educated. This concentration of women in low-paying white-collar jobs has persisted throughout the 20th century.

Legislation

Two types of legislation have directly affected women workers in the U.S.: protective legislation and antidiscrimination, or equal opportunity, legislation. Protective laws were developed in the early industrial era to guard women and children from exploitation by limiting the number of hours and shifts they could work, the weights they were required to lift, and the minimum wage they could be paid. *See also* Child Labor.

Massachusetts established a commission in 1912 to determine minimum-wage schedules for women and children. In 1938 the federal government passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, setting maximum working hours and minimum wages for persons engaged in or producing goods for interstate commerce. Coverage has been extended over the years, and in 1974 it was amended to include domestic employees.

In the 1960s protective legislation for women was nullified by antidiscrimination policies. Through legislation, executive orders, and judicial decisions, equal opportunity for women in employment and education became a federal goal. This goal was first expressed in the Equal Pay Act (1963), an amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act, which prohibited wage discrimination, based on sex, in public or private employment. Current legislation applies to nonprofessional (wage and salary workers), professional, executive, and administrative employees.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964) extended the prohibition against sex discrimination to include not only wages, but also job classification, assignment, promotion, and training. A 1978 amendment required employers to treat pregnancy in the same way as any other disability. Later guidelines prohibited any form of sexual harassment on the job; in 1986 these guidelines were upheld when the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that sexual harassment of an employee violates the civil rights law. These laws are enforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Various executive orders, enforced by the Labor Department, prohibited sex discrimination by companies receiving government contracts and established guidelines for employers to take affirmative action to recruit, hire, train, and promote women. Enthusiasm for such aggressive enforcement activities diminished under the conservative administration of President Ronald Reagan.

Family responsibilities are clearly related to women's equal employment opportunities. The U.S. has no federal child-care policy, but several government programs do affect child care. Several major programs, including Head Start and the Work Incentive Program, are targeted for low-income families; during the Reagan presidency, however, these programs were squeezed by increasing federal budget pressures. A tax credit for work-related child-care expenses is claimed mainly by middle- and upper-income families.

Current Trends in the U.S.

In 1995 more than 60 million women aged 16 and over were employed, representing about 46 percent of the civilian labor force. Almost three-fifths (59 percent) of all women over 16 years of age were employed; participation rates for both black and white women approximated the overall average, but among Hispanic women the rate was only about 53 percent. About 55 percent of the working women were married with husbands present, and more than half of these women had children under 18 years of age. Working mothers with children under 6 years old more than tripled from 1960 to 1995.

Despite the increasing number of working women and more than three decades of equal opportunity legislation, women in the mid-1990s, as in 1900, were concentrated in a few types of jobs and generally earned less than men. Some 42 percent of the employed civilian women were technical, sales, or clerical workers, and 18 percent were in the low-paid service category; about 17 percent were professionals, and 13 percent were managers. Women were further segregated within certain occupations and industries: 93 percent of registered nurses, 96 percent of private household employees, 99 percent of secretary-typists, and 97 percent of receptionists were women. Statistics show that employees in clothing and textile industries, telephone communication, health services, and local education are predominantly women. Women are most likely to hold managerial positions in fields where lower-level employees have traditionally been women; for example, in 1995 women held about 80 percent of supervisory positions in medicine and health.

Still, American women today are holding paid jobs of greater diversity than ever before. In the last three decades many more women have entered the new high-technology industries; in 1995, for example, 32 percent of all chemists and 30 percent of computer scientists were women. Women are also making slow but steady progress in entering nontraditional fields such as engineering and construction work, professions such as medicine and law, and elected and appointed political positions. An increasing number of women own their own businesses (chiefly in services and retail trade) or are self-employed.

Women continue to be paid less for their labor than men. In the mid-1990s, women's median weekly earnings were about three-fourth those of men. One reason for this disparity is that a relatively small number of women hold top-level (and high-paying) jobs, even in such fields as social work, library work, and teaching, in which they greatly outnumber men. In addition, when they do the same kind of work at the same level, they are frequently paid less than men; for example, female elementary school teachers in 1995 earned about 88 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts. Women are also more likely to work part time or to be unemployed. Women in minority groups remain the lowest paid, reflecting the impact of race and sex discrimination.

In the mid-1990s about 12 percent of eligible female employees belonged to unions, representing approximately 39 percent of all labor union members. Union organization generally reflected the segregation of the marketplace; for example, about 70 percent of the members of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (see International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union) are women. Although women in blue-collar jobs are most likely to be union members, white-collar employment is currently the fastest-growing area of union organizing, as teachers, nurses, clerks, and others in both the public and private sectors try to improve their wages and working conditions. *See Trade Unions in the United States.*

Many policymakers now believe that the major problem for working women is not equal pay for equal work or equal access to jobs--although both are important--but the undervaluation of work traditionally done by women. The concept of "equal pay for comparable work" challenges current job evaluation procedures and implies added payroll expenses for employers. One estimate of the cost of sufficiently raising the aggregate pay of full-time

working women was \$150 billion a year for the civilian payroll.

Working Women in Other Nations

Despite the fact that women constitute more than one-third of the world's labor force, in general they remain concentrated in a limited number of traditional occupations, many of which do not require highly technical qualifications and most of which are low paid. According to data from the International Labor Organization, however, as countries become industrialized, more women obtain jobs in more occupations. In virtually every country for which reliable information is available, women's wages are lower than men's, but the gap has closed significantly in recent decades. In Australia, for example, women's average wages in manufacturing increased from 57 percent of men's in 1970 to 82 percent in 1990.

Western Europe and Japan

The employment pattern for women in Western Europe and Japan is similar to that in the U.S. Most of these countries have some form of equal employment or protective legislation. Collective bargaining is used more widely than in the U.S. as a means to improve women's working conditions.

Among Western nations, the Nordic countries have come closest to achieving equality in employment. In Sweden, for example, women's average hourly earnings rose from 80 to nearly 90 percent of men's earnings between 1970 and 1990. The Swedish government has accomplished major reforms of textbooks and curricula, parent education, child-care and tax policies, and marriage and divorce laws, all geared to accord women equal opportunities in the labor market while also recognizing their special needs if they are mothers. Counseling and support programs have been designed for women reentering the work force. Other European countries have studied the Swedish model and adapted it to fit their social-welfare policies. A step toward affirmative action was taken in 1997 when the high court of the European Union ruled that governments of its member countries could impose hiring and promotional preferences for women in public-sector jobs.

Japan, which has the most developed economy in the Far East, generally has retained its traditional attitudes toward working women. For example, women are expected to retire when they have children. In most countries, the higher their educational attainments, the more likely women are to work. In Japan, however, this situation is reversed; college-educated women are considered overqualified for jobs generally held by women and often leave the labor force.

Eastern Europe

Employment policies in Eastern Europe under Communism were based on a belief in both the duty and the right of women to work outside the home. In 1936 the Soviet constitution specified that no legislation should deviate from the principle of women's equality with men. The USSR and its allies established child-care, health, educational, and recreational facilities. According to estimates, in the 1970s and early '80s about 85 percent of all Soviet women between the ages of 20 and 55 were employed outside the home; in East Germany the number of employed women was as high as 80 percent. Women's participation rate in the work force, however, was lower in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Although more integrated than in the West, women in Eastern Europe were still concentrated in some traditional occupations and industries. In Bulgaria, for example, 78 percent of textile

workers, but only 25 percent of engineers, were women; in the Soviet Union, these figures were 74 and 40 percent, respectively. Although part-time employment was discouraged, statistics for East Germany and Romania suggested that, in fact, about half the married women worked only part time. Economic upheavals in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union since the late 1980s have reduced the participation of both women and men in the work force, as unemployment rates have risen.

Third World nations

Many countries of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America remain primarily poor agricultural economies. Most women work in the fields and marketplaces, but their economic contributions are generally unrecognized. As men migrate to the cities in search of increasingly important cash incomes, many rural women are left to support families alone.

The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development has defined a "basic learning package" needed for both men and women in developing nations. This package includes functional literacy, some choice of relevant vocational skills, family planning and health, child care, nutrition, sanitation, and knowledge for civic participation. Illiteracy is higher among women than among men. Even in countries where some equality has been achieved, problems such as high unemployment rates affect women adversely. In African countries, some progress is being made in widening women's work opportunities. These women still do not have equal access to education and training programs, however, especially in skills necessary to a nation-building economy. B.O.

For further information on this topic, see the Bibliography, section Working women.

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