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Women and Work: From Chattel Slavery to #MeToo

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Introduction

Working women, especially women of color and immigrant women, were at the center of every major period of economic change in the United States and made significant contributions to the labor movement. Working women not only worked side by side by men and faced the same poor working conditions, they also experienced the additional struggles of gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, and unequal pay. Yet women collectively organized to demand fair and equal treatment in the workplace, and in doing so, helped all workers in the fight for dignity and respect. This paper will survey the role of women in five distinct economic periods spanning between the nineteenth- and twenty- first century: (1) chattel slavery, (2) industrialization and the rise of American manufacturing, (3) the Great Depression, (4) “Kelly Girls” and the temp economy of the 1950s, and (5) the movement against sexual harassment from the 1960s to the present day. It will bring to life prominent women labor organizers like Sarah Bagley of the Lawrence factory workers’ strike and Genora Johnson Dollinger of the Flint auto workers’ strike as well as ordinary working women.

Women and Chattel Slavery

The history of working women in the United States must begin with the enslaved African women who played a fundamental role in building the American economy. The institution of chattel slavery – which involved the enslaving, transporting and selling of African people as slaves – established African people as the property of plantation owners rather than as persons possessing their own rights. Enslaved African women were forcefully uprooted from their communities, separated from their children and families, and denied knowledge about their cultural background. Escaping slavery was criminalized and those who were caught and returned

to slavery were often punished brutally by plantation owners. Yet, enslaved African women resisted slavery, asserted their personhood and protected their children and families.

Plantation owners would separate enslaved African mothers and their children, often taking the children away before they even turned one. Frederick Douglass, who wrote the seminal memoir on slavery, observed that the purpose of separation was to “hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother” and “to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child.”¹ Yet enslaved African women were able to preserve important family bonds by resisting separation either escaping together as a family or escaping to find and reunite with separated family members. In Baltimore, Maryland, a woman named Minta, about 23 years old, escaped with her 7-month-old son and was believed to be seeking sanctuary in a local free Black community where she could raise her son.² In Dorchester, Maryland, a woman named Nelly Keene, about 35 years old, and her husband Joe, about 50 years old, escaped together with their seven or eight children.³

Women and Industrialization

The nineteenth- and twentieth- century in America saw rapid industrialization and the rise of the American manufacturing industry. Women factory workers, many of whom were employed by textile companies that produced garments, were forced to accept low pay, long hours, and poor working conditions in order to provide for themselves and their families. Working hours averaged twelve hours a day and six days a week which left little time in the day

¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Dover, 1995), p. 1.

² J. McAllester, Ad for Runaway Minta, *American and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, March 3, 1831, Maryland Legacy of Slavery Online Database, <http://slavery2.msa.maryland.gov/pages/Search.aspx> (accessed September 18, 2018).

³ Levin Woolford, Ad for Runaway Keene George, *American and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, April 13, 1831, Maryland Legacy of Slavery Online Database, <http://slavery2.msa.maryland.gov/pages/Search.aspx> (accessed September 18, 2018).

for working women to have free time outside of work. These working conditions gave rise to the first factory strike, formation of trade unions, and the movement for a ten- to eight- hour work day, which were led by women labor organizers like Sarah Bagley.

The first factory strike to take place in America was organized by women factory workers in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1834.⁴ These working women staged a short strike or “turn-out” following an announcement that wages would be reduced in some departments by 15 percent on the 1st of March which primarily impacted working women. An 1834 article in the *Boston Transcript* observed that “one of the leaders mounted a stump and made a flaming Mary Wollstonecraft speech on the rights of women and the iniquities of the 'monied aristocracy,' which produced a powerful effect on her auditors, and they determined to 'have their way if they died for it.'”⁵ However, the strike collapsed after a few days. A second strike broke out in 1836 over the same issues which lasted longer and led to the formation of an organization called the Lowell Girls Factory Association. During the 1836 strike, the striking women sang a 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.”⁶

In the 1940s, the movement for a ten-hour work day began. Labor organizer Sarah Bagley, who herself worked as a weaver at Hamilton Mills in Lowell, was pivotal in the movement for her persuasive speeches and writings. Bagley was motivated to found the Lowell Factory Reform Association in 1844 after seeing men had their wages raised but women's wages remained stagnant. In her address “Ten Hour System and its Advocates,” Bagley wrote: “the

⁴ Joseph A. McCartin, “Emerging Factory System and Its Discontents,” PowerPoint Presentation, U.S. Working Lives, Georgetown University, September 17, 2018, slide 36.

⁵ McCartin, “Emerging Factory System and Its Discontents,” slide 34.

⁶ McCartin, “Emerging Factory System and Its Discontents,” slide 37.

[movement for a ten-hour work day] recommends itself to every patriot, and lover of his country, as a means of security against a monarchical form of Government, being introduced into the boasted land of the free.”⁷ She recognizes that “it is admitted by all, that the intelligence of our country, have made our political institutions what they are.”⁸ She asks: “Take from the masses, the opportunity of cultivation, and if causes produce their own effects, what will be the results?”⁹ Bagley argued that limiting working hours would provide workers with the necessary time to educate themselves on political issues and produce a more informed and engaged citizenry.

Women factory workers believed organizing to limit their working hours was not only their unalienable right but their civic duty as free women. Some saw their rights to organize and demand fair pay and fair working conditions as the heritage of the American Revolution. The Lowell Factory Girls Association, a trade union formed by women factory workers, adopted their own constitution fashioned after the American Constitution. The women called themselves “the daughters of freemen . . . of Republican America” and went on to claim the “unalienable right to associate and concentrate [their] power” in order to “successfully repel [the] equally base and iniquitous aggressions [of capitalists].”¹⁰

At the turn of the century, in 1909, more than 20,000 shirtwaist workers in New York City, mostly immigrant women, went on strike to demand better working conditions, shorter work hours, and fair wages. Theresa Malkiel, a socialist organizer, sought to gain public support for the strike by writing the novel *Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker* from the perspective of a shirtwaist worker who reluctantly joins the strike only to become a labor agitator. Like that of the

⁷ Sarah G. Bagley, "Ten Hour System and its Advocates," Second part, *Voice of Industry*, January 23, 1846, p. 2.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Constitution of the Lowell Factory Girls Association. September 26, 1836.

main character in Malkiel's *Diary*, working women came to realize that they possessed power in the workplace that could be exerted in their favor. "[O]ur bosses couldn't get along without us working people," Malkiel writes.¹¹ "For if they had even a hundred times as many machines, and the whole world built of factories, they couldn't deliver a single order unless the working people chose to make them up."¹² Malkiel described the tremendous lengths these working women went through to participate in the strike and be able to cast their vote on whether to form a union. She described "[g]irls with sore throats and girls with broken noses; girls with wet, torn shoes and girls without hats or coats, shivering from cold and faint from hunger."¹³ Yet they "were all on hand; their condition didn't matter a bit [because] their vote was wanted and they came."¹⁴

Women and the Great Depression

The Great Depression – which spanned the ten-year period from 1929 to 1939 – devastated the American economy, including working women and their families. Not only did working women face job insecurity and unemployment during this unprecedented economic downturn, but they continued to suffer from poor working conditions, including a lack of sufficient workplace safety regulations and access to proper medical care which put their lives and health at risk. Yet working women refused to surrender their power and instead rose up to organize led by women labor organizers like Genora Johnson Dollinger.

Due to a lack of sufficient workplace safety regulations and oversight, working women often were at risk of falling victim to serious accidents, many of which ended tragically in their deaths. In an oral history interview with Betty Davidson, who worked at a tobacco factory in

¹¹ Theresa S. Malkiel, *The Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker* (New York: ILR Press, 1990), p. 105.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Malkiel, *The Diary of a Shirtwaist Striker*, p. 154.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Durham, North Carolina, she recalled the frequency and severity of workplace injuries at her job.

¹⁵ “It is always accidents in weaving, because people are getting their hands caught in the looms, and their fingers mashed,” she recalled. “I’ve been real lucky. I’ve never had any serious trouble, except the electric shock,” she concluded.¹⁶

Women workers were also at a heightened risk of developing serious health conditions, especially those who worked with hazardous materials in factories. In an oral history interview, Blanche Scott, who worked at a tobacco production plant in Durham, North Carolina, recalled how being exposed to burley tobacco negatively impacted her health.¹⁷ “I never could stand that burley tobacco. . . It was very strong and would make you so sick,” she recalled. I got tired of working in the factory, and my health began to fail me. When I come out in the air I feel all right; when I go back to work, I feel so bad,” she concluded.¹⁸

Yet, despite the dangerous conditions they had to endure, working women found the inner strength to collectively organize and place pressure on their bosses to improve their working conditions. On December 30, 1936, auto workers in Flint, Michigan sat down and occupied their plants which led to the unionization of General Motors Corporation and eventually of the entire auto industry. Labor organizer Genora Johnson Dollinger was called “the Joan of Arc of Labor” for her role in organizing the Flint sit-down strikes of 1936.¹⁹ In an

¹⁵ Oral History Interview with Betty and Llyod Davidson, February 2 and 15, 1979, p. 3, Interview H-0019, Southern Oral History Program Collection, [<https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/H-0019/menu.html>] (accessed November 12, 2018).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Oral History Interview with Blanche Scott, July 11, 1979, p. 10, Interview H-0029, Southern Oral History Program Collection, [<https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/H-0229/menu.html>] (accessed November 12, 2018).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Genora (Johnson) Dollinger, *Striking Flint: Genora (Johnson) Dollinger Remembers the 1936-37 General Motors Sit-Down Strike, as told to Susan Rosenthal*, (Chicago, IL, Bookmarks, 1996), p. 2.

interview with fellow labor organizer Susan Rosenthal, Johnson Dollinger recalled the conditions women working in the Flint GM autoplant faced:

I'll tell you about the conditions of these young women. After the strike, a Senate investigating committee found that in one department of A.C. alone, the girls had all been forced to go to the county hospital and be treated for venereal disease traced to one foreman. Those were the conditions that young women had to accept in order to support their families. Sometimes they earned just enough to provide food for the family and they couldn't lose their jobs because nobody else in the family had a job.²⁰

At the age of 23, Dollinger Johnson founded the Women's Auxiliary of the United Auto Workers and led its military wing, the Women's Emergency Brigade, which armed themselves with clubs to defend sit-downers from GM's plant police and the Flint city police.²¹ She resisted her male counterparts who thought women had no place in the union or the strike, recalling “the men wanted to get me out of the way. You know that old ‘protect the women and children’ business. . . I told them, ‘Get away from me. I've got as many weapons as you have!’”²² Johnson continued to organize and inspire her fellow working women to join her.

Kelly Girls and the Temp Economy

The post-World War II period saw a major increase in the employment of women. In 1950, only 31% of all women were employed as wage earners. By 1970, 42% of all women were employed as wage earners.²³ However, the sectors in which women were limited. In 1970, 95% of all women worked in just four job categories that became known as “pink collar jobs.” Those categories included light manufacturing (home appliances and clothing), retail (saleswomen, checkout counters, department stores), clerical (secretaries, bookkeepers) and health and

²⁰ Johnson Dollinger, *Striking Flint*, p. 4.

²¹ Johnson Dollinger, *Striking Flint*, p. 2.

²² Johnson Dollinger, *Striking Flint*, p. 11-12.

²³ Joseph A. McCartin, “The Rights Revolution at Work,” PowerPoint Presentation, U.S. Working Lives, Georgetown University, November 11, 2018, slide 13.

education (teachers, nurses, LPNs, orderlies).²⁴ In 1960, 85% of elementary school teachers were women, yet 90% of elementary school principals were men.²⁵

No work was more gendered than temporary work. In her book “The Temp Economy,” Erin Hatton, a professor of sociology at the University of Buffalo, describes the role of the “Kelly Girls” in the development of the temp economy.²⁶ In 1946, a businessman named William Russell Kelly founded Kelly Services, a staffing company that employed temporary workers for a wide range of services. Business executives developed a strategy to market temporary jobs to middle-class white women who were full-time housewives and mothers. In 1958, the executive vice president of Kelly Girl, described what he called the “typical Kelly Girl”: “She doesn’t want full-time work, but she’s bored with strictly keeping house. Or maybe she just wants to take a job until she pays for a davenport or a new fur coat.” The image of the “Kelly Girl” – an attractive, young, white middle-class woman – was advertised in every form of media, including television, radio, magazines and billboards.²⁷

Hutton notes that the “Kelly Girl” strategy proved to be successful. By 1961, 53 percent of businesses in the United States had used temp industry services. In 1963, there were about 1,000 temp agencies employing some 400,000 workers a year and bringing in \$160 million in sales. By 1970, the industry employed 185,000 workers a day with around \$2 billion in annual sales.²⁸ With the help of the Kelly Girl strategy, industry leaders were also able to

²⁴ McCartin, “The Rights Revolution at Work,” slide 16.

²⁵ McCartin, “The Rights Revolution at Work,” slide 17.

²⁶ Erin Hatton and Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Temp Economy: From Kelly Girls to Permatemps in Postwar America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

²⁷ Hatton, *The Temp Economy*, p. 20.

²⁸ Hatton, *The Temp Economy*, p. 23.

evade mass union organizing, government regulations, and worker protections, including providing their employees with health benefits, unemployment insurance, and pensions.²⁹

Yet Hutton shows that the marketing of temp workers as bored, white middle-class housewives was not based on reality. In an early 1960s study, economist Mack Moore found that the majority of women who sought temporary jobs did so out of real economic need. Nearly three-fourths of women cited “to earn money” as the main reason for working in temporary jobs, while less than 15 percent said they worked for “relief from the boredom of housework.”³⁰

The Rights Revolution at Work

Not only were working women limited in the range of employment opportunities they were able to pursue, they were also paid significantly less for the same work as men. In 1970, the average working woman’s wage was only 53% of the average working man.³¹ This pay disparity was even worse for African-American and Latina women who earned less than both white women and men. “Equal pay for equal work” became a rallying cry for the second-wave feminist movement and the labor movement of the 1960s. The push for women’s equality in the workplace became a policy priority for the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and would produce some of the first major legislative achievements for working women.³²

After being elected in 1960, President John F. Kennedy established the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women to address women’s issues. The Commission was chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, who had been a fierce advocate for women’s rights, and was led by

²⁹ Hatton, *The Temp Economy*, p. 22.

³⁰ Hatton, *The Temp Economy*, p. 40.

³¹ McCartin, “The Rights Revolution at Work,” slide 18.

³² Carrie N. Baker, *The Women's Movement Against Sexual Harassment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 13.

women labor organizers affiliated with the Women's Trade Union League. In 1963, the Commission issued a detailed report describing widespread gender discrimination in the United States, including discrimination in employment, unequal pay, and a lack of social services such as childcare. The work of the Commission lent momentum to the movement for women's rights in the workplace.³³

In 1962, President Kennedy signed an executive order prohibiting the federal government from discriminating on the basis of sex in federal employment. The following year, Congress passed the landmark Equal Pay Act of 1963 which made it illegal to pay women less for the same work done by men. However, in practice, its impact was limited because jobs were still segregated by gender. In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which sought to swiftly outlaw discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin in education, employment, places of public accommodation and voter registration. Title VII prohibited employers from discriminating against women.³⁴ Yet, the Equal Pay Act, nor the Civil Rights Act, explicitly addressed the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace faced by working women and women had to continue to push for equality at work.

Carrie Baker, a professor in women's and gender studies at Smith College, wrote extensively on the movement to end sexual harassment against women in the workplace in her seminal work "The Women's Movement Against Sexual Harassment."³⁵ Baker identifies six pivotal cases, filed between 1971 and 1975, which laid the legal framework for sexual harassment litigation. These cases made the novel legal argument that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex in employment, includes

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Baker, *The Women's Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, p. 15.

sexual harassment. They argued that when a male employer fires a woman for refusing his sexual advances, he has discriminated against her based on sex, and therefore, has violated her rights under Title VII. What's particularly significant about these cases was that three out of the six plaintiffs were young African-American women who worked at federal agencies addressing racial discrimination and were fired or demoted by their supervisors refusing their male boss' sexual advances. These Black women understood the nuances of race and sex discrimination claims and were able to pave the way for working women to fight back against sexual harassment, especially women of color.

Hollywood and the #MeToo movement

Working women continued to struggle with sexual harassment in the workplace into the twentieth century and to the present day. Tarana Burke, an African-American social activist and community organizer, began using the phrase "Me Too" as early as 2006 to demonstrate the widespread problem of sexual assault and harassment against women, especially in the workplace.³⁶ In October 2017, Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano popularized the #MeToo hashtag on Twitter to encourage women to share their experiences of sexual assault and harassment in order to "give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem."³⁷ Her tweet was followed soon by sexual assault allegations against Harvey Weinstein of the Weinstein Company, a major Hollywood company, with over 80 women coming forward. Weinstein was subsequently fired from his company and expelled from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and

³⁶ Sandra E. Garcia, "The Woman Who Created #MeToo Long Before Hashtags," The New York Times, October 20, 2017, accessed December 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html>.

³⁷ Nadia Khomami, "#MeToo: How a Hashtag Became a Rallying Cry against Sexual Harassment," The Guardian, October 20, 2017, accessed December 20, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/20/women-worldwide-use-hashtag-metoo-against-sexual-harassment>.

Sciences.³⁸ The case against Weinstein and the #MeToo movement spread around the world and inspired working women to speak out against sexual assault and harassment by powerful men in what is now called the "Weinstein effect."³⁹ For their efforts, #MeToo activists were collectively named TIME magazine's 2017 Person of the Year.⁴⁰

Conclusion

From the enslaved African women who escaped slavery, to Sarah Bagley and the Lawrence factory workers' strike, to Alyssa Milano and the #MeToo social media campaign, to the countless unknown ordinary working women in between, working women have played a central role in the labor movement and the economic history of the United States. They struck. They formed unions. They sued. They exercised political power. They tweeted. For their efforts to ensure the dignity and respect of all workers, they should be remembered and celebrated.

³⁸ Ronan Farrow, "From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein's Accusers Tell Their Stories," The New Yorker, May 31, 2018, accessed December 20, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories>.

³⁹ Francie Diep, "Quantifying the 'Weinstein Effect' One Year Later," Pacific Standard, October 05, 2018, accessed December 20, 2018, <https://psmag.com/news/quantifying-the-weinstein-effect-one-year-later>.

⁴⁰ "TIME Person of the Year 2017: The Silence Breakers," Time, accessed December 20, 2018, <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/>.