

of the family. The exigencies of factory life are inconsistent with the position of a good mother, a good wife, or the maker of a home. Save in extreme circumstances, no increase of the family wage can balance these losses, whose values stand upon a higher qualitative level.

Still it must be remembered that the employment of women and girls in factories is *no essential part of the factory system*. It is a feature of the present administration of this system, but it might be eliminated. I am inclined to think that the perfected society of the New Jerusalem will find higher and finer work for women to do than tending machinery. And I hope that the progress of the ages will steadily lift from their shoulders the heavier burdens of physical toil.

VIEWPOINT 4

"It is not intended to argue that every woman should leave the home and go into business, but only that those who wish to do so shall have the opportunity."

Society Is Not Harmed by Women's Working Outside the Home

Ida Husted Harper (1851–1931)

One change the industrial revolution brought upon American society in the late nineteenth century was an increase in the number of women working outside the home. In 1900 the number of women entering the workforce reached five million, a number roughly triple that of 1870. Women in the workforce had diverse occupations and backgrounds. They included college-educated journalists and social workers, high-school-educated stenographers and office workers, and immigrant laborers in sweatshops and factories. Some Americans warned that the employment of women harmed society by undermining traditional gender roles. Others welcomed the employment of women as a positive step away from restrictive traditions.

The following defense of working women is taken from a 1901 article in *Independent* magazine by Ida Husted Harper. An author, journalist, and social reformer, Harper was editor of the *New York Sunday Sun* and *Harper's Bazaar* and author of *The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony*. This article was written partly in response to an earlier *Independent* article on working women by music critic Henry T. Finck. Although she agrees that mothers of young children should not work outside the home, Harper argues that the entrance of women into the workforce has been a positive development and that women of all economic classes should have the opportunity to pursue careers in business.

from Ida Husted Harper, "Women Ought to Work," *Independent*, May 16, 1901.

The moment we accept the theory that women must enter wage-earning occupations only when compelled to do so by poverty, that moment we degrade labor and lower the status of all women who are engaged in it. This theory prevailed throughout past ages, and it placed a stigma upon working women which is only beginning to be removed by the present generation. As long as a woman advertised her dire necessity by going outside the home to work, she could not avoid a feeling of humiliation and the placing of a barrier between herself and her more favored sisters. The fact that only a few insignificant employments with the most meager wages were permitted added still further to the disgrace of her position.

When, however, in the rapid evolution of the last third of a century, practically all occupations were thrown open and into these poured women of education and social standing belonging to families of ample means, the barriers at once began to fall and the stigma to fade out of sight. The great organizations of women which have been formed during this period freely admit wage earners; all meet on common ground; and frequently, by reason of their superior ability, women engaged in business are elected to the offices. There never was a time when there was such fraternity between women of the leisure and the working classes. To destroy this by barring out from remunerative vocations all except those who must earn their daily bread or become paupers would be a calamity, and this long backward step never will be taken. . . .

Those who insist that all the women of the family should confine their labors to the household wholly ignore the vital fact that most of its duties have been carried outside. They note with regret that "while a century ago there were no women in our factories, now 45 percent of their employees are women," but omit to state that far more than 45 percent of the work now done in factories has been taken directly away from the women of the household. They have not left their legitimate work; they simply have followed it from the home to the factory.

The change is continually made that the entrance of women into the industrial world has lowered men's wages to a ruinous degree. As a matter of fact, there are very few departments of work where men are not receiving higher wages now than ever before. If, however, these were placed at the same figure as before women entered into competition, and the 4 million women now engaged in breadwinning employments were withdrawn and set down in the home, the results would be most disastrous. From necessity they would constitute a vast body of consumers depending upon an inadequate body of producers. It would mean a

life of idleness and privation for women, of added labor and sacrifice for men, a situation equally undesirable for both.

Nothing could more effectually destroy the stimulus to exertion in the girls of the high schools and colleges than the knowledge that all progress was to stop on commencement day, that it was to be the end instead of the beginning, that because their fathers were able to support them therefore they must make no use of this education. It is in the households of such that usually there is the least demand for domestic service on their part, as paid servants supply all that is necessary.

Shall these highly trained girls be restricted to the narrow round of social life? Shall they be directed to church, or charity, or reform work, for which they may have neither taste nor capacity? Shall they be forbidden any kind of business because they will take the bread out of the mouth of some poor woman? Why, then, such commendation when the *son* of a Vanderbilt, a Rockefeller, or a Morgan enters actively into business pursuits? Shall only those girls with the good luck to be poor have the chance to develop their talents? How shall the world ever know the capabilities of woman if she is to be restricted rigidly to one line of action, except when starvation stares her in the face?

Those girls who have the advantage of a home are not wholly responsible for the low wages of the clerks, factory hands, etc. If all such would withdraw from the market it still would be flooded with those capable only of the simplest kind of cheap labor. There is no such thing as a "family standard" or an "individual standard" of wages. It is gauged only by the service performed. A certain price is paid for a certain kind of work. No employer ever asks a man if he has a family, and, if so, pays him more, or if he is unmarried, pays him less. If there were a "family standard," vast numbers of wage-earning women should be paid by it, for they also are supporting others. Women do not "offer themselves cheaply" to employers; they do not underbid; they take all they possibly can get. If they held out for more they would get nothing. Men cannot hope to raise their own wages by driving out this competing element—it has come to stay. They must make common cause with it and both advance together.

Work and Marriage

If the ranks of bachelors were recruited only from the wage-earning classes, there might be some force in the charge that by lowering wages women made it impossible for men to marry. But the proportion of bachelors is equally as large among the well-to-do and wealthy classes. If the percent of marriage is decreasing, one of the most conspicuous causes is that women themselves are not so anxious to marry as they used to be. This is not on account

of any change in the nature of woman, but only because with freedom of industrial opportunity has come that greatest of blessings, freedom of choice in marriage.

Under the old regime the poor girl married because she was obliged to be taken care of; the rich girl because her life was without aim or occupation and was considered by herself and everybody else a failure until she secured a husband. The necessity was practically the same in both cases. Now the one is enabled to take care of herself, and the other is permitted to follow whatever pursuit she finds most congenial; and, while each expects to marry, each intends to wait until the husband comes whom she can love, respect, and honor until death doth part. Under no other condition should any woman wed.

Minnesota Historical Society



By 1900 women comprised 17 percent of the American workforce. Many were employed in factories such as the one pictured.

Marriage should bear the same relation to her life that it does to a man's. She should fit herself to be a useful and agreeable member of society; she should select a vocation—the management of the household, a profession, philanthropy, stenography, factory work—whatever she is best adapted for, and follow it cheerfully and conscientiously. When an offer of marriage comes, she should balance it carefully against the work she has chosen, and if it bring down the scale, as it never will fail to do when the right man makes it, she should accept it with pride and happiness. Under these circumstances the husband may feel infinitely

more honored than if he had been made a choice between two evils—merely preferred to wage earning or an idle, useless existence in a home which had become wearisome. Nothing could be more democratizing than the injunction to women to “regard their employment as a necessary evil to be cured in as many cases as possible by marriage.” It is a sorry compliment to a man to be taken like a dose of medicine.

As a rule, husband and wife should found a home to be supported by the joint labor of both—his without, hers within—each considered of the same value and the proceeds belonging equally to both. Where there are young children, it is most unfortunate for the mother to be compelled to work outside the home. It is even more deplorable for these children themselves to be employed in the mills and factories. There is no difference of opinion on these two points, and a civilization must be striven for which will make such sacrifices unnecessary.

There is not, there never has been, an effort “to create a sentiment that home is no place for a girl.” A good home is the one place above all others for a girl, as it is for a boy. It is her rest, her haven, her protection, but this does not necessarily imply that she must not engage in any work outside its limits. Nevertheless, it is a far stretch of the imagination to assume that all girls “leave the refining atmosphere of a home where they might cultivate the graces” to go into ill-smelling, disease-breeding shops and factories. Very few who are employed in such places have homes of refinement, or even of comfort and decency, and oftentimes the factories and stores are far more cheerful and hygienic than the so-called homes they leave. Women among the poor must work if they would live honestly, and the drudgery of factory and shop is no harder than that of the wash tub, the scrubbing brush, and the needle; but seldom does the statistician or sociologist devote his time and sympathy to the victims of the heavy and never-ending household tasks....

Suitable Employments for Women

It is wholly impracticable to draw a dividing line between the employments which are suitable and those which are unsuitable for women. They have just as much right as men have to decide this question for themselves. Their decision may impose some loss upon man, but this will be compensated by the gain to woman. Nobody can decide just where moral or physical risks are involved....

The countless thousands who have listened to the eloquence of a [Frances] Willard or an [Susan B.] Anthony, and have seen the great reforms they have accomplished, would take issue with him who would characterize them as “stump speakers, misguided

and unseemly," or would name theirs as a calling which makes women "bold, fierce, muscular, and brawny in body or mind." It is a mistaken kindness which would doom a woman to inhale the poisonous fumes of "artificial flower making," or to bend her back over a sewing machine, or to depend on the poor rewards of the artist's pencil, rather than engage in some employment which will develop "muscle."

It is no new thing, however, for men to insist that women shall remain physically soft and inactive because it pleases their own aesthetic taste. This was the constant refrain of the Rousseaus and Voltaire of a century ago. In that book of advice which the good old English Dr. Gregory left as a *Legacy to My Daughters*, toward the close of the 18th century, he said: "Should you be so unfortunate as to possess a robust constitution by nature, simulate such sickly delicacy as is necessary to keep up the proper female charm." The Dr. Gregorys of today have advanced a step beyond "sickly delicacy," but they implore women to "show their gratitude to men for relieving them of the heavy work by becoming more and more unmistakably and delightfully feminine." There is simply a difference in expression, but none in the sentiment behind it.

The progressive portion of mankind, however, is beginning to forget sex occasionally and regard woman as a human being entitled to the same opportunity for healthy physical development as man; and, from the kindergarten to the university, girls now are receiving thorough, scientific training in athletics. The time is past when women can be frightened by an appeal not to become "muscular and brawny," and if it is not objectionable for them to become so by college athletics and outdoor exercise, it certainly is not wrong for them to develop their muscles by work. If, for the good of the world, it should become necessary to decide between "vegetables and flowers, the ox and the antelope," the flowers and the antelope would have to go. But the world needs all of them. It demands men and women of muscle in some departments, and men and women of mind in others. Even in marriage it would be a great sacrifice to hand over to certain classes of men women "whose strength lies in beauty and gentleness."

Neither can women be frightened at the warning that by engaging in occupations outside the home they decrease their chances of marrying. Whatever brings men and women into close association promotes marriage, which is largely the result of proximity. Those who remain in the seclusion of home find no rivals so dangerous as those who in various outside employments have an opportunity to meet the men, and whom they continually see marrying not only their fellow workmen but frequently their employers. The latter, in all kinds of business, declare that the great-

est objection to employing women is that they marry after a few years' service.

It is not intended to argue that every woman should leave the home and go into business, but only that those who wish to do so shall have the opportunity, and that men shall no longer monopolize the gainful occupations. The pleasure of earning money and of enjoying financial independence is just as sweet to a woman as to a man. If men would look upon the household service performed by the women of their family as a wage-earning occupation, entitled to a fixed remuneration, there would be infinitely less desire on their part to engage in outside work. When, however, they receive only board and lodging and must ask for every dollar required for clothes and other necessities, they naturally gaze with longing eyes into more fruitful fields of labor. When men cannot afford to pay their daughters or sisters a fixed sum, then at once the argument falls to the ground that "by studying domestic economy women save as much money at home as they can earn in outside occupations."

It may be that in selecting a wife "men want a girl who has not rubbed off the peach bloom of innocence by exposure to a rough world," but it is not permitted all girls to stay at home and take care of their peach bloom. Those women who make it the object of life to cultivate "refined allurements and soft blandishments to render themselves desirable to future husbands" are not many degrees removed from their sisters who practise the same arts upon the street with a less permanent object. It is no longer practicable to shut women up within four walls to preserve their virtue, and, instead of demanding a return to that medieval custom, it is the duty of society to recognize the new order and, through individual effort, public sentiment, and law, to improve the conditions which surround wage-earning women; to invest them with every right and privilege possessed by workmen; and in every possible way help them develop strength of character to resist temptation and to fix a higher standard not only for themselves but also for the men with whom they come in contact.