

In the early 1900s, American women faced criticism for what many perceived as their growing role in the workforce.

The following is an excerpt from the conclusion of *Women in Industry*, one of Edith Abbott's most influential works, in which she responds to these criticisms and explains the developments of women's labor in American History.

Excerpted from:

Abbott, Edith. *Women in Industry: A Study in American Economic History*. D. Appleton & Co., 1910.

In a study of our economic development it becomes clear that women have been from the beginning of our history an important factor in American industry. In the early days of the factory system they were an indispensable factor. Any theory, therefore, that women are a new element in our industrial life, or that they are doing "men's work" or that they have "driven out the men," is a theory unsupported by facts . . .

A study of the five industries which employ to-day the largest numbers of women has furnished some interesting illustrations of the way in which the introduction of machinery and the establishment of the factory system have made necessary a readjustment of the work both of men and of women, and in the long run it has meant the breaking down of old customary lines of delimitation¹ between women 's work and men 's work.

In the cotton manufacture and in the clothing trades, it was found that occupations such as spinning, weaving, and sewing, which historically had been pretty exclusively women's work in this country, are to-day not only shared with men but are in process of being taken over by men. On the other hand, printing and shoemaking are examples of skilled trades which may be said on the whole to have belonged to men in the colonial period, but which are now employing large numbers of women. Printing required very little physical strength, and women, therefore, became printers long before they entered the shoemaker's trade, which was too heavy to be carried on by women until a system of division of labor made it possible to give them lighter portions of the work. Cigarmaking, although it is an industry which has no history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, has been carried on at different times both by men and by women, and furnishes an interesting example of the way in which work that was done originally by women but later taken over by men, may come to be women's work again.

In the cotton industry and in the clothing trades, therefore, men are doing work which for the most part was once done by women. In the printing trade and in the

¹ a boundary or barrier

manufacture of boots and shoes, women are doing the work which would a century ago have been done by men. It should, however, be noted as a point of interest, that to-day the men's share in the two women's industries is much greater than the share of women in the two men's industries . . . It would appear, therefore, that men have gained more than women by this readjustment of work. But it may be again repeated that in all of these five industries, women have been employed for more than a hundred years, and it is now too late to look upon them as entering a new field of employment in which they have no right. It should be especially emphasized, too, that during all of these years, women not only were industrially employed in large numbers, but that they were liberally encouraged by the public opinion of an earlier day to enter these occupations.

Throughout the colonial period, and for more than half a century after the establishment of our Republic, the attitude not only of the statesman but of the public moralist² was that of rigid insistence on the gainful employment of women, either in the home, or as the household industries grew decreasingly profitable, away from it. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries court orders directed that the women of the various towns should be kept employed, and Puritan ministers warned them of the dangers of idle living. Spinning schools were founded to assist women in earning their own maintenance; and when the first cotton factories were established, they were welcomed as a means of enriching the country by women's labor. The same confident approval of every means of providing gainful occupations for women, particularly poor women, is to be found in the discussion which centered about the policy of encouraging and protecting our infant industries after the present government had been established.

Looking back at the change in the domestic economy of the household which was being wrought³ at this time, we see the carding, spinning, weaving, dyeing—the old historic occupations of women in the home, being taken away from them; a great demand for hands to police the new machines; and the women quietly following their work from the home to the factory. This was not only the natural thing for them to do but it was demanded of them by the public opinion of their day, and there was no voice lifted then to remind them that woman's proper place was at home . . .

² someone who is vocal about the morals of others

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