Negro Women in Our Economic Life

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# Negro Women in Our Economic Life

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201 Not even a cursory study of Negro women in our economic life, can be assumed without first considering the changing position of all women in our economic life. One hears frequently the woman of today referred to as “the new woman,” much as we write and speak of “the new Negro.” In my opinion there is no more a new woman among us than there is a new Negro. What has changed and what is changing is not the woman. The change is in her status in a rapidly developing social order. The advent of the mechanical age, historically referred to as the Industrial Revolution, roughly marks the passing of one social and economic order and the dawn of another that is still in the process of unfolding its undetermined course. Under the old social and economic order, the family was the economic unit of production.

Under these conditions the activities of women were recognized along with those of men as productive and the contribution of the wife was as valuable in the eyes of society as that of the husband. There was no difference in the economic function between men and women, in that they were jointly producers and consumers. But when, one after another, the traditional family activities were taken out of the home, the function of women in the home steadily lost its importance in production until it fell to a minimum, and emerged associated primarily with consumption. Production in the new economic order, where standards of value are money standards, became fundamentally a matter of creating a commodity or service which demands a money price. Modern industrial processes having robbed the home of every vestige of its former economic function, left in the home to be performed by the woman only those services which are as “valueless” and “priceless” as air and water but not recognized as valuable in a price economy, where standards of value are money standards.

If, then, women were to answer the challenge of the new economy and place themselves again among the producers of the world, they must change their status from that of home makers to that of industrial workers and change their activities from valueless home duties to those that resulted in the production of goods that have a price-value. The answer of women to the challenge is shown by the increase in the number of women gainfully employed from 1,321,364 in 1870, when we first had census figures in which gainfully employed persons were separated by sex, to 7,306,844 in 1920.

We are principally interested in determining the extent to which Negro women have taken their places in this price economy and the effect, if any, their presence has had on our economic life. Work for wages has always been more widespread among Negro than among white women. In 1910, 54.7% of the 3,680,536 Negro women in the United States, 10 years of age and over, were gainfully occupied while only 19.6% of the 30,769,641 white women of the same age group were gainfully employed. In 1920, 38.9% of the 4,043,763 Negro women, 10 years of age and over, were gainfully employed as compared with 16.1% of the 36,279,013 white women of the same age group. The Negro women in 1910 were, however, principally confined to agricultural pursuits, domestic and personal service. Only 67,937 Negro women, or 3.4% of the Negro women ten years of age and over gainfully employed, were among the 1,821,570 women employed in manufacture and mechanical industries; white women workers, on the other hand, during the same decade, came into the business and industrial world at a greater proportionate rate than even men. It was not until the Great War withdrew the men from industry that Negro women were found in any considerable numbers in manufacturing and mechanical industries. The 1920 Census shows that 104,983 Negro women, or 6.7% of the Negro women ten years of age and over gainfully employed, were among the 1,930,241 women employed in manufacturing and mechanical industries. This is an increase of almost 100% for Negro women in comparison to an increase of less than 1% of all women so employed.

There is no question but that this unprecedented increase in the number of Negro women in industry was due to demand for labor, because of the stress of war production and the reduction of available industrial labor supply resulting from the cessation of immigration and the withdrawal of 3,000,000 men from normal economic functions to war activities. That these women have been retained to a large degree is established by surveys made since 1920, principally in 1921, 1922, 1925, by the Women’s Bureau of the United States Department of Labor. Their survey of Negro women employed in 15 states, published in 1929, based on the study made in 1928, reports 17,134 Negro women employed in 682 establishments; an increase of nearly 1,000 over the 16,835 Negro women reported employed in the same industries in a similar survey published in 1922.

The wages of all women in industry have been 202 found to be below that of men. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the wages of Negro women, who are the marginal workers, should be not only lower than that of men employed in like pursuits, but also lower than that of white women. Any group that constitutes the marginal supply of labor will be paid less for their labor than those whose services are in constant and steady demand. Then, too, the labor turn-over among women is greater than that among men, due largely to family duties, physical handicaps, but principally to the fact that women do not consider their jobs as permanent. They have not developed a philosophy of work under which they regard the production of price demanding commodities as their life work. They are constantly expecting when the children get out of the way, or their husbands obtain better jobs, that they will then stop work. The thought of working the rest of their lives, is a foreign concept and never enters their minds. Hence, women are slow to organize in unions and men are slower to accept them. The Negro woman in addition has little if any factory training and therefore no factory sense. She must accept such opening wedges at such return as may be offered her.

Not only are the wages of Negro women lower than those of white women, but Negro women as a whole are confined to the simpler types of work, and are not engaged in highly skilled labor, although many of the occupations in which Negro women are found, require care and a number require some skill. This, too, might be expected; for the industrial history of any highly organized community will show, that as members of a new and inexperienced nationality, sex or race arrive at the doors of its industries, the occupations that open to them ordinarily are those vacated by an earlier stratum of workers who have moved on to more alluring places. All industrial workers, regardless of their racial identification, have started at the bottom of the round. The important thing is the start.

Although Negro women are not engaged as skilled, high priced workers, their presence in large numbers in industry during the past decade has had a marked effect on their status and on the economic life of the country.

To begin with, in the natural process of events in industry, the Negro women must eventually push on to more skilled, better paying jobs. Any other procedure would mean a waste of training, factory sense and accumulated knowledge which the economies of big business must recognize.

Furthermore, the opportunity for participation in industrial pursuits by Negro women means a raising of the standard of living not only of Negro families but of all American families. The addition of this labor supply aids cheaper production, which in turn means more goods can be enjoyed by a large number of people. In a more direct sense it affects the Negro family, since another wage earner is added to the family. The derogatory effects of the mother being out of the home are over balanced by the increased family income, which makes possible the securing of at least the necessities of life and perhaps a few luxuries. If her services in the home are to be rated by the man as valueless consumption, the satisfaction which comes to the woman in realizing that she is a producer makes for peace and happiness, the chief requisites in any home.

The increased leisure that is enjoyed by women who have entered the industrial and manufacturing enterprises is giving rise to an improved educational and social standard among Negro women. Not many weeks ago, I was consulted by a colored woman 62 years of age, who had fallen in an unguarded, open manhole. Upon inquiry I learned that she and her witness were operators of machines in a dress factory and that they worked from 8:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon; that on the evening of the accident they were returning from night school where they had gone for a 7:00 o’clock class to learn to be dress cutters, which would place them considerably higher up the wage scale. This is a typical example of the opportunity for economic and social advancement which the shorter hours enjoyed by industrial workers are making possible for Negro women who have industrial positions. Furthermore, the dignity of being a factory worker has resulted in Negro women thus engaged feeling a greater degree of self-respect and receiving opportunities for social intercourse and expression that as domestic servants were denied them.

The association between the various racial groups employed in a factory will prove an important factor in solving the laborer’s problems. The real seat of racial friction is between the working groups, whose resistance to change in the economic status of a competing group invariably expresses itself in what we commonly define as race, or class prejudice. Could the great mass of white workers learn from industrial experience with Negro workers, that they have a common purpose in life, the protection of their bargaining power, and that the sooner the untouched wealth of Negro labor is harnessed into this common purpose, the better can they bargain with capital; then and only then would industrial racial friction subside. Certainly the continued presence of Negro women in industry demonstrates that we have made progress toward reducing the resistance of white labor to Negro invasion of industry.

Surveying the field as a whole, we find over 100,000 Negro women employed in the manufacturing and mechanical industries of the United States in 1920, an increase of nearly 100% in the number so employed in 1910. This is a striking contrast to an increase of only 1/10 of 1% in all women so engaged during the decade. Without this additional labor supply it is doubtful that even scientific management could have carried mass production to such a degree that we should have had a period so marked in the magnitude of its productivity as to be called the “New Industrial Revolution.” Within the two decades, during which Negro women have entered industry in large numbers, production has increased at such a rapid rate that economists have been forced to change their theory of a deficit economy, based on the assumption that population would always press upon food supply, to a theory of surplus economy. While the labor of Negro women cannot be held as the efficient cause of the mass production, it is submitted 203 that without this available labor supply, at a low price, mass production in many industries would not have been undertaken.

Negro families as well as all families have profited and suffered from the effects of a surplus economy. Mass productivity has multiplied the number and variety of stimuli which play upon the individual, resulting in not only high speed consumption but diversified consumption. The result is that individual interests and standards of conduct are conceived in terms of self-satisfaction without a stabilizing sense of group-responsibility. The Negro, the furthest down in the economic scale can least of all afford to succumb to these varied economic stimuli. If he is going to profit from the increased purchasing power, which the presence of Negro women in the productive enterprises has made possible, he must lead the way in harnessing the variety of his demands to the purchase of commodities representing the fundamental and durable satisfaction of life. Only in this way, can we hope to promote the establishment of factors of stability in economic demand which will materially provide the basis of an economic balance in industry; which in turn will assure not only the continued presence of Negro women in industry, but stability of employment and constantly improving economic position for all workers.

*This article was originally presented as a paper on the occasion of the National Urban League Conference in Buffalo, New York. Dr. Alexander is Assistant City Solicitor of Philadelphia. She was graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and received her doctorate from that institution.*