On the Loom: The First Factory Women

The development of an industrial economy in the 1800s changed the definition of women's work. All women continued to work in their homes, but only those who earned money for their labor were called working women.

Working women in the 1800s were usually school-teachers, seamstresses, domestics, and factory operatives. None of these jobs provided women with status or a decent wage. Teaching was the most respectable job available to an unmarried woman who needed to earn a living. Most female schoolteachers began working while still in their teens. Those who did not marry and remained schoolteachers were doomed to a life of genteel poverty because of extremely low wages.

Throughout the 1800s household service provided employment for more women than any other occupation. Because few native-born white women were willing to do domestic work outside their own homes, it was generally new arrivals and free black women who worked as household servants. Domestics worked long hours, their pay was meager, and privacy and leisure time were practically nonexistent.

The emergence of an industrial economy created new conditions for working women. From the start of the Industrial Revolution women were needed to mass-produce the goods they had once produced for their families. Manufacturing was done both in the home and in factories. In general, married women who needed to earn wages worked at home while single women were hired to work in factories.

The most common home-manufacturing trade for women was sewing for the emerging ready-made clothing industry. In Troy, New York, the "collar and cuff capital" of the nation, hundreds of women worked at home, making these items. Troy manufacturers delivered the raw materials to women at home and later picked up the finished products.

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In the early 1800s home sewing for the ready-made clothing industry was considered "respectable" work for native-born white women. The work was considered an extension of women's traditional roles, since they had always sewn for their families. Now, doing the same kind of work on a larger scale, they could earn wages.

By the mid-1800s the nature of the home sewing industry had changed drastically; the work was done only by the poorest of native-born and immigrant women. In large cities such as New York and Chicago clothing manufacturers bought whole blocks of tenements and leased them to workers. Within these tenement sweatshops women and children labored for starvation wages.

This same pattern can be seen in the employment of single women in the textile mills of New England. In the 1820s and 1830s, after the invention of the spinning jenny and the power loom, textile mills sprang up in towns throughout New England, wherever there was a river to supply water power. Work in the mills was considered an excellent opportunity for unmarried women. There seemed to be little difference between a woman working a spinning wheel at home and a woman working a loom in a mill. The added attraction was that now women could earn money for their work. It was said that the mills would save young women from "idleness and its inseparable attendant, vice and guilt." The "golden opportunity" that the mills seemed to promise, however, proved to be illusory.

Francis Cabot Lowell, scion of an illustrious American family and a pioneer in the American textile industry, promoted the idea of female factory workers when he founded what was to become the most famous mill town in the nation. Young single women were in many ways the most likely candidates for employment by Lowell. Most of the New England men were needed on farms, and married women had families to care for. Single women who had finished school but were not yet absorbed in households of their own were available and already skilled in the work of making cloth. They could be recruited at one-third to one-half the wages demanded by men.

During the 1820s and 1830s single women from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine traveled to the mill towns to spin for work. The mill owners
demanded twelve to thirteen hours of labor a day, six days a week, and each worker had to agree to work for at least one year. There was no shortage of workers. Most of the women were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, the daughters of poor farmers, fiancées of seamen, and young widows. These women, with such “old fashioned country names” as Samantha, Leafy, and Almaretta, girls with yearnings for town culture and independence from their families, were easily convinced that both could be found in the mills.

Each woman had her own reason for entering the mills. One mill girl described the women working beside her:

One, who sits at my right hand at table is in the factory because she hates her mother-in-law. . . . The one next to her has a wealthy father, but like many of our country farmers he is very penurious, and he wishes his daughters to maintain themselves. . . . The next has a “well-off” mother, but she is very pious and will not buy her daughter so many pretty gowns and collars and ribbons . . . as she likes. . . . The next one has a horror of domestic service. The next one has left a good home because her lover, who has gone on a whaling voyage, wishes to be married when he returns, and she would like more money than her father will give her.

Most of all, the women came to earn wages. Mill owners paid $1.25 a week for the girls’ board and a flat 55 cents in salary a week, with piecework rates applied beyond a minimum. A few very fast workers managed to earn $4 a week above board, but the average wage was two dollars and change. In the 1830s that was the best salary a working woman could earn. Teaching, seamstress, and domestic work—the only other jobs available to women—paid considerably less.

Some mill workers needed wages to help support widowed mothers or “drunken, incompetent, or invalid fathers.” Others worked to “secure education for some male member of the family.” Many of the women, however, used their wages to support themselves. Harriet Robinson, a mill worker who later wrote of her experiences in Lowell, described what earnings meant to unmarried women of the time: “In most every New England home could be found an unmarried woman, sitting solitary, sometimes welcome, more often unwelcome.” From a cond-

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tion of almost pauperism, they could earn money and spend it as they pleased. . . . At last they were no longer obliged to finish out their faded lives a burden to their male relatives.”

In Lowell, Fall River, Dover, Waltham, and other mill towns operatives were at work by 5 A.M., and except for a half-hour break for breakfast and another for dinner, they kept working until sunset. Girls ten years old and younger worked this twelve- to thirteen-hour day. They were called “doffers” because they replaced used doffers or bobbins on the spinning wheels. Teenage and adult operatives worked either as spinners or as weavers.

All the mill jobs were similar to work done at home making cloth, but in the factories the labor was subdivided into many stages and was mechanized. “I never cared much for the machinery,” wrote one worker. “The buzzing and hissing and whirring of pulleys, and rollers and spindles and flyers around me often grew tiresome.” Another woman described the first time she tried to operate a power loom.

She felt afraid to touch the loom and she was almost sure she could never learn to weave; the harness puzzled and the reed perplexed her; the shuttle flew out and made a new bump on her head; and the first time she tried to spring the sateen she broke out a quarter of the threads. It seemed as if the girls all stared at her, and the overseers watched every motion, and the day appeared as long as a month had been home. . . . At last it was night. . . . There was a dull pain in her head and a sharp pain in her ankles; every bone was aching, and there was in her ears a strange noise, as of crickets, frogs, and jowhars, all mingling together.

The work was monotonous, requiring only minimal skills, but during the first years of the factory system workers were not pushed too hard. “Help was too valuable to be mistreated,” according to Harriet Robinson. The relationship between overseers and operatives was friendly. Women worked one or at most two looms, and there was time to rest at intervals.

During these early years women workers were treated to a heavy dose of paternalism. Mill owners were eager to show the public that factory labor and life in the mill towns would not damage the morals of young
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lies to return to, they could leave the mills when they were worn out or ill. “Upon any embarrassment,” wrote one Lowell company backer, “they return to their country homes and do not sink down here a helpless caste clamoring for work, starving unless employed, and hence ready for a riot.”

So long as mill girls could leave the factory, they did not think of themselves as being very different from the majority of American women, who lived on farms. But factory women were aware that they were not members of the new class of town ladies; very often they wrote about being “mistaken for ladies” when they went to church or walked about the town. Concerning this awareness, Lucy Larcom remarked, “We did not forget that we were working girls, wearing coarse aprons, and that there was some danger of our becoming drudges.”

In whatever ways they could, the early mill girls sought to guard themselves against that danger. Women who worked in the mills for four, five, or even eight years insisted that “at longest our employment was only to be temporary.” They clung to the belief that they as much as any American women had the right to be ladies. And they nurtured the hope of finding prosperous middle-class husbands who would support them in ladylike style.

Many of the early mill girls spent their hard-earned wages on fashionable clothing, so that in church no one could tell the difference between them and “the daughters of the first families of the town.” They read Godey’s Lady’s Book and quoted all the pious, romantic and domestic sentiments espoused by Sarah Hale. Their advice to men, wrote Harriet Robinson, was, “Treat every maiden with respect, for you do not know whose wife she shall be.”

Becoming a lady through marriage was one way of guarding against the “danger of becoming drudges.” The other way was through self-improvement. In the early days mill girls believed fervently in the power of religion, culture, and learning. Eager for education and determined to benefit from life in the towns, they devoted themselves to numerous self-improvement activities. They read avidly, even in the mills where books were forbidden. Lucy Larcom tore pages from her Bible, sneaked them into the mills, and read them at her loom whenever the overseer was not watching.

women. To “protect” the women, they watched over them at all times, outside the mills as well as within them. All mill girls were required to live in company-built boarding houses, each housing twelve to thirteen workers. The atmosphere within the boarding house was like that in a strict girls’ seminary. Widows who leased and managed the houses were instructed to report the names of any girls who stayed out late (after 10 o’clock at night) or complained in any way about their work or life in the mill towns. Anyone who was reported was promptly fired.

Women workers were lectured on the importance of honesty, cleanliness, frugality, and punctuality. Workers in Lowell, the show place of the textile industry, were expected to uphold the company’s reputation. They were required to sign contracts promising to demonstrate “on all occasions, both in their work and by their actions... that they are penetrated by a laudable love of temperance and virtue and animated by their moral and social obligations.” They were also required to attend church regularly. Those who did not purchase pews had their pay docked and were refused mail service at the company post office.

For the most part the first generation of mill girls complied with the rules and regulations. They came from Yankee, Puritan families and had been reared on hard work, duty, and usefulness. Before they could enter the mills, they had to convince their parents that they would not succumb to the temptations of town life such as fine clothes, dancing, or gossiping.

When the mills were new, many of the women who worked in them felt a pioneering spirit—a sense, as Harriet Robinson noted, that they were contributing to the widening of women’s sphere. They were opening the way for unmarried women to live on their own, independent of parents or husbands. Most important, these first factory women thought of their work as temporary. They hoped to stay in the mills for a few years, save money, and move on. Some wanted to continue their educations, some to find better work, others to marry.

This feeling of impermanence among mill workers was extremely beneficial to mill owners. As long as women did not think of themselves as permanently bound to the mills, they did not spend much time questioning the inequities of the factory system. As long as they had fami-
In the evenings, after twelve to thirteen hours of work, mill girls somehow found the energy to meet in groups where they studied literature and foreign languages. They flocked to lectures, making up two-thirds of the Lyceum audiences in Lowell throughout the 1830s and 1840s. On Sundays, their one free day, the girls went both to church and to church school. In 1843 Lowell had fourteen religious societies. Ten of these were Sabbath Schools, containing over five thousand teachers and students. Three-quarters of these were mill girls.

Nowhere was the theme of self-improvement more touted than in the pages of the Lowell Offering, a monthly magazine edited by two former mill operatives, which began publication in 1841. Editor Harriet Farley believed that as long as workers achieved learning and culture, they did not need to worry about conditions in the factory. The purpose of the Offering was "to provide mill girls with sweetness and light" and to prove to the world that there was "Mind Among the Spindles."

The Offering claimed to be the voice of the mill girls, but as a rule it spoke for factory owners. Some operatives did submit stories and poetry; only those that stressed virtue and gentility were printed. By the 1840s mill girls had a message to communicate which the Offering would never publish.

The mill owners viewed the early cultural and religious activities of the women, followed by the later moral voice of the Offering, as the best sort of publicity and advertising. Again and again they used the fact that their workers were exceptional to sell their goods, justify their profits, and win their campaigns in Congress for high protective tariffs. If mill workers attended lectures and wrote poetry after a long day in front of machines, did it not follow that they, the founders of this benevolent factory system, deserved the highest of praise—and the freest opportunity to expand their business as they saw fit?

Visitors to the showcase town of Lowell were usually impressed by the "neat boarding houses" and the "pretty," "healthy," "well-dressed workers." The mill girls' literary talents added frosting to the cake. When Charles Dickens visited Lowell in 1841, his most favorable impressions were of the Offering and the piano he saw in a boarding house. Later one of the mill girls noted that only a hand-ful of workers bothered to subscribe to the Offering and only a very few boarding houses had pianos.

Not all visitors to the mills were taken in by appearances. Catherine Beecher wrote a scathing critique of the factory system after she visited Lowell in 1845. The 13-hour work day, said Beecher, left eleven free hours in a mill girl's day. Eight of these were needed for sleep; that left a total of three hours for mending, sewing, shopping, recreation, social intercourse, and breathing fresh air. Beecher concluded that all the cultural activity "is probably done in hours which should have been given to sleep." She urged mill girls to rest more and attend night school less.

When Beecher took a look into the "neat" boarding houses, she discovered that girls were often sleeping six to a room, two to a bed. There was absolutely no privacy. Operatives "live in a perpetual buzz of machinery or conversation from month's end to month's end." What sort of religious devotion, asked Beecher, could girls achieve in an environment that outlawed solitude? As far as the work went, the piece-rate system "pushes girls to work as much as possible every day...everything goes under the stimulus of rivalry, ambition, and the excitement of gain."

Finally, Beecher had angry words for Dr. Elisha Bartlett, a company-hired physician who claimed that mill work was healthier for women than country living. Bartlett attempted to prove his thesis by comparing the death rate in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, with the lower death rate in Lowell. Beecher countered him with one simple fact: the death rate in Lowell was bound to be lower because the population was much younger. In reality one-third of the girls who worked in Lowell were less healthy than when they had first arrived, and if they were seriously ill, they went home to die. Beecher concluded her appraisal with an appeal to female operatives to leave the mills and become teachers.

Orestes Brownson, a transcendentalist and early foe of the factory system, agreed with Beecher that "the great mass [of mill girls] wear out their health and spirits and morals, without becoming one whit better off than when they commenced labor." Brownson, however, did not tell mill girls to become teachers. Instead, he told them to become the owners of the mills. "If would put
the plough into the hand of the owner and also the spindle and the loom... I wish you, the operatives, to be not only the operatives but the owners."

Brownson was one of a small but outspoken group of reformers who blamed the long hours and low wages of mill girls on the nature of capitalism. A few owners, explained these reformers, had gained control of the means of production and used this control, not for the welfare of workers, but for their own gain. Whenever profits fell, workers were thrown off the job or their wages were slashed, so that owners could make up the loss and guarantee themselves and their backers a substantial profit. With the profits they made in this way, capitalists extended their economic power by investing in new industry and thereby gaining control over larger and larger portions of the national economy.

In 1845 Théodore Parker, explaining the tactics of the owners of the textile industry, wrote, "The class is the controlling one... it mainly enacts the laws of this state and the nation... It buys up legislators... It can manufacture governors, senators, judges to suit its own purposes... This class owns the machinery of society... the ships, factories, shops, water privileges."

Parker was not wide of the mark. By the 1840s the Boston magnates who owned Lowell, Lawrence, Chicopee and Waltham had extended their interests far beyond the mills. With the profits they earned from the mills they bought land, founded insurance companies, controlled New England's shipping industry and most of the banks in Boston.

While the mill owners expanded their field of operation, life for workers became more difficult. New mills and shantytowns gobbled up all the open space in what had once been rural villages. Mill girls no longer looked out on green fields or trees. New mill towns, such as Lawrence, Massachusetts, were thrown up quickly and were slums from the start.

Conditions in the mills were deteriorating as well. Owners were demanding more work from each operative. Processes were speeded up, and women now had to tend three and sometimes four looms each. While new machines, such as the crank-driven loom, speeded up production, they also increased heat, lint, and noise. Whenever more efficient machinery was introduced, owners reduced the piece rate. Operatives thus produced more while earning less.

In addition, wages were cut every time market prices declined. During the national depression of 1837 prices fell. To keep their profits high, mill owners lowered piece rates paid to workers by a larger percentage than the overall decline in prices. As a result, workers suffered a cut in real wages. A similar tactic was used by industrialists every time a depression occurred, which was the case virtually every twenty years throughout the nineteenth century.

The end result for mill girls in the 1840s was that they had to tend more machines, for longer hours, at lower wages than ten years earlier. In addition, mill owners introduced the premium system by which those overseers who got the most work out of girls were rewarded with bonuses. Rules became oppressive. Grounds used by overseers to fire girls in the 1840s included "impudence," "jealousy," "disobedience to orders," "cautiousness," and "hysteria."

The most significant criticism of the factory system came not from reformers, but from the workers themselves. Even in the beginning, during the brief "golden period" of the mill towns, occasional protests erupted against long working hours, wage cuts and speed-ups. In 1828, 400 women in Dover, New Hampshire, walked off their jobs, protesting the fines they were charged for lateness. This was the first strike by women and the second recorded strike of factory workers in America (the first had been called several months earlier by children who worked in the mills of Paterson, New Jersey).

Throughout the 1830s women staged sporadic walkouts. Perhaps the most dramatic occurred in 1836, after a wage cut, when 1,500 Lowell workers marched through the town singing:

Oh isn't it a pity, such a pretty girl as I
Should be sent into a factory to pine away and die
Oh I cannot be a slave
Oh I will not be a slave
For I'm so fond of liberty
I cannot be a slave

The Lowell girls were starved into submission. Evicted from their boarding houses, with no means of support,
thirty they held out for a month and then were forced to return to the mills. Their leaders were fired and blacklisted.

Though none of these early strikes achieved any tangible gains for workers, they were significant for the labor movement. During the 1820s and 1830s workers in various trades—such as shoemaking, carpentry, mechanics and bookbinding—began to organize. When mill girls went out on strike, they introduced the idea of trade unionism into the factories.¹⁴

These early mill strikes show that women organized first as workers, not as women. Twenty years before the first women's rights convention women workers were protesting in public. "It required some courage," wrote one observer, "for Yankee 'young ladies' to brave public opinion and develop strike tactics at this early period. . . . It was felt that young women should not march about the streets, making a spectacle of themselves. . . . And yet, they were prepared to do this. . . . whether it was conventional or not."¹⁵

By the 1840s some mill girls were beginning to realize that they might be stuck in the mills for much longer than they had imagined. Many girls no longer had families to return to, as their fathers had lost their farms during the depression of 1837. At the same time, the deteriorating conditions in the factories did away with the dream of self-improvement as an escape. By the 1840s few mill girls had the money to buy church pews, let alone the energy to attend study groups in the evenings.

Harriet Farley, editor of the Offering, insisted that if mill girls would arm themselves with learning and culture, they could protect themselves from the "power of the machine." Most of the women saw this argument as a whitewash of factory conditions. But Farley refused to print the many articles stressing the need for factory improvements. Wages and hours, Farley insisted, were matters over which "workers have no control." Improvements would come in time as a result of the kindheartedness of the owners.¹⁶

At this juncture several mill girls denounced the Offering as a company mouthpiece and began publishing their own "Factory Tracts" in which they could write freely. Such papers as the Factory Girl, the Factory Girls' Album, and most especially the Voice of Industry, begun in 1845 and for a time edited and managed by Lowell workers,

marked the beginning of the American labor press. These journals encouraged mill girls to think about the inequities of the factory system. "What glorious privilege we enjoy in this boasted republican land," wrote one girl. "Here I am a healthy New England girl, quite well behaved, bestowing just half of all my hours, including Sundays, upon a company for less than two cents an hour."¹⁶ This and similar articles helped to promote a new organization among mill workers—the Female Labor Reform Association. Twelve workers in Lowell started the first association in 1845. Within six months it had five hundred members, all rallying to their motto, "Try Again."

Sarah Bagley, a weaver who had worked in the mills for eight years, was elected president. She was a highly effective leader, who played a major role in organizing women in Lowell and many other New England mill towns. When owners tried to blacklist Association members, Bagley used the Voice of Industry to trumpet her outrage.

"What! Deprive us after working thirteen hours of the poor privilege of finding fault—of saying our lot is a hard one! Turn away a girl unjustly persecuted as men have been persecuted. . . . for free expression of political opinions! We will make the name of him who dares the act sink with every wind from all points of the compass."¹⁷

Soon there were Associations in Manchester and Dover, New Hampshire, and in Fall River, Massachusetts. The groups kept in touch with each other, joined together for mass labor rallies, and resisted wage cuts and speed-ups. When the Lowell corporation ordered weavers to tend four instead of three looms, at the same time reducing the piece rate, Association members refused. They threatened to publish the names of any weavers who complied. As a result, not a single worker complied; and the mill owners were forced to rescind the order.

The Association also joined the New England Workingmen's Association to lobby for a ten-hour workday. One of the first alliances between male and female workers in the labor movement, this union began as a fairly equal one. Women mill workers attended meetings, gave speeches, and proposed resolutions. Women and men launched petition campaigns and lobbied before the Mas-
hour day. "If twelve hours labor in twenty-four will not sustain us, we can and we will work fourteen."19 Organizers in the mills were blacklisted and forced out of the industry. During the 1840s Sarah Bagley was the victim of a smear campaign designed to break her spirit and deter her followers. Mill girls continued to offer their support, but Bagley herself suffered an emotional collapse and withdrew from the mills. Without her leadership the Female Labor Reform Association soon fell apart.

Like future generations of working women, the mill girls lacked time, money, and power to sustain their association. Working women who tried to organize could not count on the support of either working men or other women.

Though working women sought alliances with working men in such groups as the New England Workingman's Association, and though they supported the struggles of men to win economic rights, men did not consider women equals in this struggle. There were a number of reasons why working men failed to support their female counterparts. Many men believed that economic justice would be achieved when they could afford to keep their daughters and wives out of the factories. The object was to rid factories of women rather than improve conditions for them. Other trade unionists were convinced that because working women were paid one-third to one-half of men's wages, they were underbidding male salaries and threatening jobs for men. The easiest solution to this imagined threat was to drive women from the trades and bar them from unions. That is exactly what happened when national unions began emerging at the time of the Civil War. Of the thirty such labor groups that existed in 1873, only two admitted women.

In reality few women posed a threat to men's jobs. Women did not work in such heavy "central" industries as railroads, steel, or mining, and jobs in factories and the manufacturing industries were sex-segregated. When employers hired women, they hired them for the least skilled jobs, which were marked "Female Only." Some working men understood the situation, but they failed to recognize the importance of organizing the lowest level of workers. Only a few far-sighted working men realized that their own success depended on "strengthening the weakest part of the labor forces, for the main strength of the capi-
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talist class consisted in the divisions existing in labor's ranks."

Unfortunately the women's rights movement was equally blind to the predicament of working women. In 1848, while the Female Labor Reform Association was dying, the women's rights movement was being born. In her Declaration of Rights and Sentiments, Elizabeth Cady Stanton spoke out for the rights of working women. Several female factory workers and women in the home manufacturing trades, such as Charlotte Woodward, attended the Seneca Falls convention. However, none of the founding feminists made contact with women workers in the mills and other industries, nor did Bagley and her followers get in touch with feminists. The interests of feminists and working women were different. Feminists wanted rights their men already had, while the central issue for working women—economic inequality—was one they shared with their men.

The myth of the comfortable and healthy life led by women who worked in the mills survived for twenty years. By the late 1840s no one believed any longer that factory work was a blessing. The population of factory workers was changing; and with that change, conditions deteriorated further.

Millions of new immigrants were beginning to arrive in America. Among them were Irish men and women driven out of their country by the catastrophic famine of 1846. The availability of poor Irish women enabled mill owners to get rid of native-born operatives, who had begun to assert themselves. Between 1845 and 1850 the population in the mills changed dramatically. In 1845, 90 percent of the mill girls were native-born, and only 7 percent were Irish. Five years later, 50 percent were Irish. In time Irish mill workers fought for improved conditions just as the Yankee operatives had, facing many of the same difficulties. Irish-American working women in other industries—such as Augusta Lewis of the typesetters and Kate Mullaney of the Troy collar and cuff workers—followed in the tradition of Sarah Bagley, becoming leaders of the women's labor movement in the decades following the Civil War.

As women's traditional work moved from the home to the factory, women moved with it. During the course of the nineteenth century women became workers in a vari-

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ety of other industries—the garment trades; food-processing plants; cigar, shoe, and glass factories; laundries, and the metal trades. Within these industries women were the most oppressed and least strongly organized group of workers. Because they were both women and workers, they had special problems and few allies.

Not until the late 1860s did male unions and middle-class women's organizations begin to acknowledge the problems faced by working women. In turn, working women, supported by women reformers and feminists, gained the strength to sustain militant organizing drives. Eventually their efforts instilled new life both into the labor and women's movements.