

Woman in Economics

Lizzie M. Holmes

1892

Women have now entered nearly every profession and every trade that man ever followed. In the last hundred years a great change has come over both the industrial and social phases of society. The discovery of steam revolutionized the industrial world. Production and producers turned about in kaleidoscopic variance. That vague, restless rebellion against the narrow confines of her sphere, which other influences had been slowly creating in the hearts of women, was stimulated—forced into activity by the change. Simultaneously with the growth of a longing to escape from dependence and consequent bondage, came the necessity for woman's departure from home and hearthstone. The old, slow, painstaking hand labor gave way to machines run by steam; a woman or a child could guide one as easily as an able-bodied man. For a long time the man was not injured—new avenues of usefulness were opened to him.

As machinery increased and improved and it was found how easily the wants of mankind could be supplied, new wants came up and inventive genius exerted itself to meet them and to stimulate further demands; the elaborateness of a higher civilization called for a greater and better variety of productions than had ever before been in use; discoveries of new material, the opening of new markets, stimulated industry to such a degree that at first the displacing of workmen by machines tended by women and children did not produce any general bad effects. Indeed, it all seemed for good. Women had been for ages kept in a cramped, dependent, servile position under pretext of protecting her and preserving her delicacy and sweetness, and the effects of such cramping was being manifested in the development of characteristics that modern man likes to accuse the sex of—deceitfulness, vanity, emotionalism, frivolousness, etc. The sons of these little-souled women must inevitably deteriorate; if the race was really to progress it was full time that woman came up and out from the petty confines which checked her growth. Home, as ever, was the sweetest place for women, but not the only place. In all times there have been single women, fatherless daughters, unhappy wives; but of old there was no fate for them but to be the unwelcome dependents and slaves of some relative; she who had no man to look to for protection and mastership was indeed a pitiable object. Often she who had was a more pitiable one.

But when these were forced out into the busy world, they found the roads already thronged with a great army of active, disenthralled women, and the change was not so formidable. The result of this exodus of women from the homes to the fields of labor has been in many respects beneficial to the whole race. Women grown independent are not so weak and subservient; they

are not so easily influenced and do not so often marry merely because the alternative is so hard. They have grown stronger in character—more self reliant, wiser, braver, more attractive. The variety of occupations open to them has broadened their intellects, and they are developing marvellous capabilities in every department of life. Such women inspire men to greater exertions. Such women make better mothers than the mild, meek, obedient, fanatical, tricky little women who languished through life in the last century. As women grow better men must naturally excel.

But just here personal interests seemed to clash with economic needs. The very necessity which at first called woman out of her seclusion for her own good is now weaving a chain about her, and through her brother, worse than those which the old institutions placed upon her. At first she simply stepped into the easier places deserted by man when new industries were being created which demanded him. But as machines kept doubling their capacity and pouring the proceeds into the hands of a few owners instead of into the pockets of millions of workingmen, thus reducing their purchasing power, the evils of a disjointed, haphazard industrial system began to be keenly felt. Men, women and children suffered and are still suffering. Children who should spend their young lives in play and learning are withering in factories, mines and shops; their bones ache, they are always tired, they know no pleasures; they become hard, old before their time, sickly and vicious. Women have no time to make homes. They toil from early morning till late at night. They cannot be good wives and mothers. They are mere adjuncts to machines, while, alas! the husbands, fathers and brothers are tramping the streets in despairing idleness.

And so in this complication of troubles it is hard to trace the real wrong, and some are enraged against the machine, others curse the movement that ever gave women the impulse to leave the dependent seclusion of home for the drudging independence of the labor world.

Both are wrong. The human race needs all the labor saving machinery, all the appliances that genius, science and skill can conjure up for the transforming of raw material into useful and beautiful things for man's consumption. The human race needs all the wisdom, skill, fine intuitions, keen perceptions of free womanhood called into highest activity. The problem is how to use them so they will bless mankind instead of cursing it. Society is far, far behind in social and economic principles. Its scientists have studied deep into material things. But very little has been done to adjust human relations on a scientific basis. The old economists only gave us the "dismal science," which dealt with things as they were, without an effort to improve them.

Statesmen discourage investigation as likely to disturb the established "order" of things—as if there was any order. Those who undertake the study of social wrongs with a view to righting them do so at the peril of their reputation, comfort, liberty, sometimes even of their lives. It is not to be wondered at then that the industrial and social relations of man are so chaotic, so very bad, that two-thirds of the people pass their lives wishing they had never been born.

Nevertheless the existing systems will serve their time and pass away. Men will begin the study of their proper relations to one another until some way is found whereby every man, woman and child shall find an opportunity to exert all their faculties as they choose, and never to the point of exhaustion; whereby the results of labor shall accrue to the laborer, and no man shall fatten in idleness from another's toil; whereby there shall be no more kings or subjects; no masters or servants, and no starving poor in all the civilized world. — Lizzie M. Holmes, in the *Issue*.

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