

Cordery, Stacy. "Women in Industrial America", *The Gilded Age: Essays on the Origins of Modern America*, edited by Charles Calhoun, 111-137. Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1996.

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Following the Civil War and Reconstruction an industrial revolution swept over the United States creating what became the Gilded Age. While the exact time frame is debatable, it is generally agreed upon that the Gilded era in United States history represented a chain of social, cultural, and economic changes to society. With the advancement of technological innovations, the birth of an industrial economy formed. Mass urbanization and modernization completely altered the social and economic landscape for the America populous. In this era the United States economic production while massive, was concentrated in private enterprise. This allowed for the growth of a capitalist business class that became the dominant force in America. The Gilded Age was a time when social class was no simple construct, but the inequalities of class were tangible facts of life. A new upper class society that emerged was lavish in lifestyle and sensational in nature. The extravagance of the upper class was in stark contrast to the turbulent nature of the working class lifestyle. Despite or because of the stratified nature of this era, women did see social, economic, and cultural changes. While not as drastic as the progressive Era in fighting for women's right, the Gilded Age was the precursor to these events in many ways. The National women's Suffrage Association (NWSA) and the American Women Suffrage Association (AWSA) both fought for women right and helped to introduce women into the political sphere through association with social organizations (Cordery, 1996, 126). While the latent function of women in the work force dented the cultural preconceptions regarding femininity and the "cult of domesticity". With this in mind, the question being asked is how did the Gilded Age and industrial growth alter the traditional economic roles of women and how is this experience different based upon social class? In her article the author addresses the drastic changes that occurred to women in Industrial America.

The Gilded Age allowed some women to break out of their traditional "proper sphere", many joining reform efforts and a few entering in professional fields (Cordery, 1996, 111). Women did see an increase in college education in this era, but these women were generally stigmatized. A common belief of scientist of the time was that women's brains were too small for education. Because of these stigmas and others, it was nearly impossible for women in the Gilded Age to be a wife, mother, and have an occupation. Of all women with doctoral degrees between 1877-1924 75% remained single, allowing them to break free from the "cult of domesticity" (Cordery, 1996, 133). Women's occupation expanded outside traditional norms, allowing women to work in fields they were once prohibited from. Women experience growth in fields such as medicine seeing 9,000 female physicians, while only 1,500 in law (Cordery, 1996, 134). While education opened up and the amount of occupations women were cultural eligible had widened, many were still relatively limited.

The jobs most women in the workforce were generally limited to mills and factories dealing with low skill orientated tedious labor for long hours and low pay. The average cost of living for a

self-supporting female of the time was \$5.51 per week while the pay was only \$5.68 a week (Cordery, 1996, 129). With such a low pay compared to their cost of living, women lived on almost nothing. This was not a place for careers, as the workers were little more than wage slaves. The working conditions in these areas was also deplorable, as the Gilded Age lacked those pesky job stifling “regulations” Republicans are always complaining about. As the author points out these jobs were not drastic departures from the traditional gender roles of females, but were extensions of women’s work at home (Cordery, 1996, 132). This observation can also be applied to our modern society in what is referred to as “pink collar” occupations. While women are seen in larger numbers in the work force, they are disproportionately located in traditional female orientated occupations.

While women were greatly limited to gender specific occupations, their overall presence in the workforce still grew during the Gilded Age. The percentage of women that worked outside of the home increased during the Gilded Age, from 15 percent in 1870 to 21 percent in 1900. Women also changed from 14% of the total workforce in 1870 to 16% in 1890 (Cordery, 1996, 122). Yet these advancements were largely based on the social location and setting an individual occupies. Work in factories was done by women not because the “cult of domesticity” had decreased, but due to economic circumstances. A large majority of the women in working in factories were poor immigrants and their families. Issues such as race and ethnicity also still largely played a role in acceptance into the workforce and what kinds of jobs were socially acceptable (Cordery, 1996, 131). With this in mind we see native born white women rarely worked in factories but less physically demanding jobs in “clerical, teaching and sales” (Cordery, 1996, 133). This difference in gender roles regarding occupation is a clear example of the disparity in social class.

While not mentioned by the author, it can be inferred that women of the upper class had a greatly different experience than those of the middle and working class. With their lavish lifestyle Upper class women had very specialized skills, spending money and being attractive. This left them at a disadvantage in actual job skills in comparison to the limited growth observed in the workforce. Women of the Upper class did not see these advancements in independence found in their counterparts. Women of the upper class were taught to be dependent and materialistic, two traits that did not help upper class women. While the number of women in the work force was limited, it still altered the traditional mindset of the weakness of femininity. In considering the culminating importance of the changes in the Gilded Age for women the author points out that The Progressive era idea of strong, educated, independent women, the “new woman”, could easily be considered a legacy of this time of great social and cultural change (Cordery, 1996, 137).

While this article serves as an excellent overview of the evolution of women in the social and cultural field in the Gilded Age, it is also useful in showing how society changes. Social change is slow and gradual, but from time to time technological advancements can alter cultural norms. The changes spurred on by industrial growth forced apart traditional norms regarding femininity with the inclusion of a greatly altered social setting. The growth of urban living and a connected United States allowed for the general expansion of association, independence, and education

necessary for women to break loose of the “cult of domesticity”. The Gilded Age developments shows that change in a social system can be a gradual process that requires the altering of culture through the empowerment of a social minority, in this case women.