Manuscript: Women at Work in the 90's

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The progress of a movement in any given period is best measured by answering two questions.

1) What does the period do with the inheritance from its predecessor? Does it waste it? Or does it select and preserve what was best in it for further development?

2) What fresh creative forces if any does it loosen? What new implements does it devise?

Apply these questions to the working life of women in the last decade of the 19th Century and each will return exciting answers.

Begin with the number of women at work. At the opening of the decade there were some four million women in the ranks of what the census calls, "gainful occupation." At the end of the decade there were five million three hundred thousand, a gain of something over one percent in the whole number of persons of both sexes at work in the country.

The most significant feature of this increase, however, is the push of women upward into management and ownership. In domestic and personal service classes the number of women in holding positions as owners and managers of hotel and boarding
houses were by nearly a third in this decade. Restaurant keepers had doubled. That is, in this great and important class of food service there was a remarkable growth in the numbers who directed and often owned establishments.

The same significant trend took place in trade and finance. Here the number employed were considerably more than doubled. This numerical increase was due largely to the coming into general use of various new aids to business efficiency and celerity, including the typewriter, the fountain pen, the addressograph, the filing case, the card catalogue. These inventions had sold themselves to business by the early 1900's, and women were called on in increasing numbers to operate the new devices. They proved so expert, grasped so quickly the needs of office technique and often so improved upon it by their own ingenuity that they were taken on in larger and larger numbers. Soon their usefulness was recognized by advancement charging them with larger responsibility. The confidential secretary appeared. Before 1900 we had in Wall Street the phenomenon of a private secretary drawing a salary of $10,000 a year.

It was but a step from the confidential position where a woman had made herself essential into the ranks of the directorate. As

While in 1890 there were but two hundred and seventeen women officers in banks and companies, in ten years later there were twelve hundred and seventeen. And it is doubtful if the census
enumerators caught them all.

The woman proved she had something to contribute to a business. She had made herself so useful by her peculiar self-developed technique that in increasing numbers of cases she was given larger and larger responsibility.

It was in the professions and the arts that the greatest proportional change in numbers came in this period. Here in contrast to the one percent of increase in more numbers of women earning their living there was an increase of twenty five percent. In certain categories the percent was still larger. In journalism, for instance, there were two and a half times as many women at the end of the period than at the opening — four times as many lawyers — twice as many women in government service.

The largest professional group was educational teachers, professors. The important thing here was the trend towards increased responsibility. The woman was proving a good administrator, was being called on in larger and larger numbers to direct and superintend. Before the end of the '90's there were over two hundred county school superintendents in the country, twelve city superintendents. In two states — Colorado and Wyoming — women filled the position of state superintendent.

This increase in the number of women fitted for administrative positions reflected the enlarged educational opportunities with which the period opened, as well as the rapid increase through these years. Before the '90's all but
three or four of the state colleges were coeducational, that what
is the state offered a man it offered a woman. The number of
high grade women's colleges increased. If Harvard and Columbia
refused to open their doors to women both arranged for annexe
where the women heard lectures from members of the faculty.

By 1888 eighty percent of the colleges, universities and
professional schools admitted women. Many of the distinguis-
ed women today in positions of authority received their academic
training in this decade. Preeminent among them is Dean Gildersleeve,
President of Barnard College where she graduated in 1889; Mary
Simkhovitch, head of that important institution Greenwich
House, New York City, of Redcliffe; Mary Kingsbury, the social
economist for so many years at Bryn Mawr. Miss Kingsbury
graduated from Leland Stanford University in 1899.

That is, this decade prepared many of our ablest women
for advanced work in their chosen fields; gave them their first
impetus and direction in their climb to the top.

In this movement upward were a number of organizations
of women which sought to improve women's opportunity. After
graduating in the United States Mary Simkhovitch received a
scholarship from the Women's Industrial and Educational Union
giving her a year at the University of Berlin.

Among the important woman organizations the '90's
received from its predecessor and largely developed was the
Federation of Women's Clubs - the National Council of Women.
These organizations were friends of the colleges and the vocational schools, pushing every measure for broadening the field of occupation for women and increasing opportunities for training and education.

These organizations did no little to encourage the cooperative movement brought over from the preceding decade, relieving the housekeeper of her heaviest tasks. They urged her to buy her bread, to send out her laundry. Housekeeping like clothing was becoming "ready made," rejoiced the growing groups of reformers of the traditions and practices of the home.

Women generally now behind the efforts to improve the conditions of women in industry. The greatest number, gainfully occupied women were found in this field. There was an increase of something like three hundred thousand in the period. You found them in every manufacturing and mechanical pursuit; the largest number in the manufacturing of women's wear—dressmakers, milliners, seamstresses. The trend to responsible administrative positions came out interestingly in this department. As a woman frequently becoming a foreman, rising to the head of an establishment, this trend can be traced in various other manufacturing trades—the women who stayed long been becoming a foreman or an inspector.
This woman in industry, her wages, hours, conditions, opportunity for advancement, was particularly interest of her sisters, the greatest, creative force loosened by women in the 1860's, this was in the field of social science.

The leader in this movement was Jane Addams who at the beginning of the decade established in Chicago the first social settlement, known as Hull House. From the time of its establishment it proved a driving force for social betterment. Its significance led to a quick multiplication of settlements in the cities from one end of the country to the other. By 1895 over fifty had been formed. At the close of the decade there were probably a hundred of these scattered over the country, this work largely carried on by young women.

The necessity of a better understanding of the economic and social life of the country, as well as the conflicting philosophies in this field were sharply dividing the people, caused a demand for better instructors for women by women. A fine group began their preparation for the field in this decade, some of them still at work.

The business activities of women in these various fields did much to break down the class feeling dividing women. Rich and poor were thrown together in the national organizations of women in the work of the settlements in educational institutions, common interests and common efforts broke down prejudices and minimized castes.