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For Better or For Worse? The Dual Economic Impact of the Industrial Revolution on Women

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the economic impact of the Industrial Revolution on the lives of working-class and middle-class women. It describes pre-industrial society, where family members laboured together to earn a living in a system known as the family economy. Industrialization disrupted this way of living by moving production from the household into factories. The family wage economy, where individual members laboured for wages to contribute to a common fund, soon replaced the family economy. This paper examines how industrialization changed the lives of women in Britain, France, and the US and finds that the impacts were often divergent. While factory work subjected working-class women to exploitative conditions, low pay, and exclusion from unions, it also provided them with greater independence from the family. In the middle class, the rise of the Cult of Domesticity granted women authority in the domestic sphere and offered new opportunities for female solidarity, but also reinforced restrictive gender norms. This paper argues that the short-term impacts of the Industrial Revolution, both the beneficial and the harmful, catalyzed long-term social change by awakening women's feminine consciousness.

Keywords: *Economics; Feminism; Industrial Revolution; Mechanization; Gender Wage Gap; Cult of Domesticity; Separation of Spheres; Class Division*

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INTRODUCTION

The Industrial Revolution was a period of major change. Economies once focused on agriculture and handicrafts transformed into ones dominated by manufacturing and machines. This process was more than a shift in how goods were made; its impacts touched on nearly every aspect of life. The Industrial Revolution had many social implications, such as urbanization, class divisions, and new labour relations. For women, industrialization had dual impacts. While the rise of waged labour granted some women independence from family controls, it also confined other women to the household through the ideology of domesticity. Thus raising the question: on balance, did the benefits of industrialization for women outweigh the harms?

Relying on personal accounts and factory records, many historians and economists have produced valuable scholarship illustrating how industrialization changed women's lives. These works, however, tend to be case-specific and fragmented. What is missing is a holistic evaluation of the benefits and harms of industrialization to women. Such an analysis is important for a more integrated understanding of gender and economic history, as well as situating the Industrial Revolution in the broader context of women's history.

Through an analysis of Britain, France, and the United States—leading industrial nations at the time—this essay explores the complex impacts of the Industrial Revolution on women. It first assesses the impact of working-class women entering waged labour, then evaluates how the Cult of Domesticity changed the lives of middle-class women, and finally argues that the dual short-term impacts, even the harms, ultimately catalyzed positive long-term social change.

PRE-INDUSTRIAL FOUNDATION: THE FAMILY ECONOMY

In pre-industrial society, the vast majority of people lived in rural areas and worked in agriculture, which employed about 65 percent of all English people in 1750 (Cipolla, 1976, p. 74). During this time, the household was the center around which both daily life and labour were organized. As historians Louise Tilly and Joan Scott explain in their 1989 book, *Women, Work, and Family*, which documents the history of women's labour in England and France, the interdependence of work and residence constituted a "family economy" (Tilly & Scott, 2016, p. 12). The labour needs of the household defined the work roles of men, women, and children, and their combined effort, in turn, fed the family. In this system, women's roles were dictated by their husbands and fathers.

Within this framework, women on larger and wealthier farms supported their husbands in managing the household. Historian Ivy Pinchbeck, in her book *Women Workers in the Industrial Revolution* investigating the employment of women in agriculture, cites an account by a Mr. Marshall from Norfolk in 1782, who mentions that a large occupier of £17,000 a year was able to manage without a steward because his wife helped

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keep his accounts (Pinchbeck, 1985, p. 8). These households had the assistance of workers known as servants in husbandry, men and women who worked as agricultural labourers on other farms. For smaller holdings with less assistance, women were more actively engaged in manual labour, especially outdoor work. Published in *The Farmer's Magazine* in 1801, an English farmer speaks of the small occupier's "necessity of turning out his wife or daughter to drive the plough in the depth of winter" (Pinchbeck, 1985, p. 9).

The Agricultural Revolution—marked by the invention of new tools and improvements of old ones, such as the plough, seed drill, and threshing machines—disrupted this way of rural life (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024). These advancements, which greatly increased output and productivity, created a need for enclosures to boost agricultural efficiency. Enclosure was the process of closing common lands (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013). Previously, land was divided into numerous scattered strips held by individual tenants, and grazing was often communal. By 1750, however, land ownership was concentrated in the hands of a limited class of very large landlords (Hobsbawm, 1968, p. 15).

Enclosures caused many to become dispossessed of their farmland. Some became agricultural labourers, working for wages on the large farms, while others began working in cottage industries to provide income for their families. In the cottage industry system, merchants would provide raw cotton to households, where primarily women wove it into finished cloth in their own homes. The merchants would then pick up the woven cloth and market it in towns or villages (Tilly & Scott, 2016, p. 14).

The cottage industry, however, was slow, and investors demanded faster production, which prompted the development of technologies and machinery that produced cloth in more efficient ways. The spinning jenny and the water frame reduced the time needed to spin yarn and weave cloth. The spinning jenny, invented by James Hargreaves in the 1760s, allowed a weaver to spin more than one thread at a time. The water frame, patented by Richard Arkwright in 1769, used waterpower to drive the spinning wheel (Lewis, 2023). The water frame was more efficient than a single person's labour, and this mechanization doomed the household textile cottage industry. With that, the Industrial Revolution began with the transition from hand production to machine manufacturing in the textile industry.

WORKING-CLASS WOMEN AND WAGE LABOR

Production moved from the home to factories that could accommodate these new, bulky machines, and new employment opportunities were created as a result. As historian Maxine Berg observed, "When we talk of industry in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, we are talking of a largely female work-force" (Berg, 1993, p. 29). These roles were primarily filled by women, who had experience with spinning yarn and weaving cloth in the cottage industry.

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The start of the Industrial Revolution had important implications for the family household. A twentieth-century observer described the family wage economy among the poor of London in 1908 as a “joint family,” where the composition of the household no longer was dictated by a need for household laborers, as in the family economy, but by a need for cash (Tilly & Scott, 2016, p. 105). In place of the family economy from the previous era rose the family wage economy, where the wages of family members formed a common fund which paid for expenses and supported the group.

In this industrial context, girls enjoyed greater independence from the family. Factory work was often located far from home, whereas before industrialization, family members worked in close proximity to one another. Additionally, girls earned individual wages and often lived in cities rather than small village communities. As Tilly and Scott write, “Rural girls no longer used their work as a means of gaining resources which would enable them to become farm wives. Instead, they became permanent urban residents.” They provide an example of Jeanne Bouvier. Born on a farm, she began working in a factory as a child and eventually migrated to Paris, where she secured a position as a seamstress and established an independent life (Tilly & Scott, 2016, pp. 119-120). Bouvier’s life illustrates the shift from rural family labour to urban industrial independence for many working-class women in the 19th century.

Even if a working girl remained at home, her relationship with her family changed. As a wage earner, she learned about money and what it could buy. She contributed her wages to the family fund, and could claim some measure of influence over the allocation of family resources (Tilly & Scott, 2016, p. 117). This freedom is evident through their increased autonomy in choosing husbands. Even though occupational endogamy remained high, parental sponsorship of marriage declined and a bride and groom were more likely to meet at work (Tilly & Scott, 2016, pp. 124-125). In this new system, women began to realize their agency as they gained more control over their lives.

This wage and independence, however, came at a steep cost, as many women endured harsh and dangerous working conditions. A member of the British Parliament offered this observation in 1838:

Amongst other things I saw a cotton mill—a sight that froze my blood. The place was full of women, young, all of them, some large with child, and obliged to stand twelve hours each day. Their hours are from five in the morning to seven in the evening, two hours of that being for rest, so that they stand twelve clear hours. The heat was excessive in some of the rooms, the stink pestiferous, and in all an atmosphere of cotton flue. I nearly fainted. The young women were all pale, sallow, thin, yet generally fairly grown, all with bare feet—a strange sight to English eyes (Neff, 1929, p. 42).

Such descriptions reflect the gruelling realities that many working-class women endured under the factory system, where firms operated with strong incentives to minimize costs and maximize output. Moreover,

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women were also paid lower wages than men, often earning only one-third to one-half of that of their male counterparts (Tilly & Scott, 2016, p. 31). Mass urban migration meant that there was an abundant supply of unskilled female labour. As a result, employers faced little competitive pressure to improve working conditions or wages.

Furthermore, the unions that championed workers' rights for men often worsened the workplace for women. Economic historian Joyce Burnette, in her book *Gender, Work and Wages in Industrial Revolution Britain*, explains that labour unions were often male-dominated and excluded women. She provides an example of cotton spinners in Glasgow, where women were excluded from the highly paid occupation of cotton spinning because the male cotton spinners' union was effective in excluding them. Doing so reduced the supply of labour and increased the equilibrium wage of cotton spinners (Burnette, 2008, p. 3).

The Industrial Revolution gave women something they never had before: their own wages. For the first time, they could be more independent from their families and had a greater say in the household. These opportunities, however, came at an expense. Women worked in horrible conditions for meagre pay and were barred from better-paying jobs by male-dominated unions. The Industrial Revolution, then, had dual impacts on working-class women.

MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN AND THE CULT OF DOMESTICITY

A culture focused on the purchase and enjoyment of goods emerged during the Industrial Revolution. As historian Neil McKendrick writes in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth Century England*, "The consumer revolution was the necessary analogue to the industrial revolution, the necessary convulsion on the demand side of the equation to match the convulsion on the supply side" (McKendrick et al., 1984, p. 9). The increase in the supply of goods made possible through technological innovations was met by a society that had more capacity to spend than ever before. Especially the middle class, whose members now had disposable income, money that could be spent on nonessential goods. The result was an explosion in consumer activity, especially among the lower classes, who had not been major consumers before. The lower classes were particularly interested in becoming consumers because English society at the time was highly hierarchical. Many people were eager to move up the social ladder and sought to do so by imitating the lifestyles and spending habits of those above them (Forster, 1767, p. 41).

This new kind of demand was termed "conspicuous consumption" by economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen in 1899, describing how people buy and use certain goods as a means of demonstrating wealth and social status. Veblen explains that this form of consumption was seen through "the consumption of food, clothing, dwelling, and furniture by the lady and the rest of the domestic establishment" (Veblen, 1912, pp.

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68-69). This concept found a direct cultural expression in the Cult of Domesticity, also known as the Cult of True Womanhood, which emerged during the Industrial Revolution.

The Cult of Domesticity was centred on the concept of separate spheres. Men were supposed to earn money to support their families in the public sphere, and women were expected to manage the household in the private sphere (Boardman, 2000, p. 150). In the canon of domesticity, the home was contrasted against the restless and competitive world. While women inhabited the “shady green lanes of domestic life,” where they found “pure enjoyment and hallowed sympathies” in their “peaceful offices,” men were “toil-worn” by “troubled scenes of life.” (Cott, 2021, p. 67). Therefore, it became essential for a woman to make the home her husband’s haven from the harsh modern world. The domestic woman, as Boardman notes, was central to a middle-class articulation of class power (Boardman, 2000, p. 151). If a wife stayed at home, it was seen as an indication that her husband was capable of being the family’s sole provider.

The household was the woman’s sphere, so it was her role to manage the household and raise the children. Domesticity was often portrayed in women’s magazines, which were important in shaping women-centred discourse and representing femininity. “Our Mothers. A Tale of Working-Day Life,” an article from household magazine *The Ladies’ Treasury*, tells the story of Fanny Birnie and Maria Bond, who grow up to be representations of virtue and indolence, respectively. The reason is that they were raised by mothers with different domestic habits. Maria’s mother had poor domestic training and was overly indulgent. Fanny’s mother, conversely, was well-organized and made the home a refuge from the public life outside (“Our Mothers,” 1863, pp. 10-13). This excerpt highlights the considerable influence that women had in the household.

Beyond managing daily life, women were also responsible for household finances. Most husbands handed over the majority of their weekly wages to their wives, keeping only a small amount of “pocket money” for personal use. This portion was often referred to as the wife’s “wage” and treated as her domain; husbands took little interest in how it was spent (Ross, 1983, p. 7). Women were responsible for budgeting and provisioning the vast majority of household expenditures, which marks a departure from the pre-industrial era when men dominated nearly all aspects of household authority. The home transformed from a site of male control into one where women exercised real, if limited, power.

Furthermore, the separation between the public and private spheres created a space for women to form strong networks of friendship. Most neighbourhood-based self-help efforts were initiated and sustained by women. A woman street seller in the early 1900s recalled that ties of female friendship were also intertwined with practical assistance (Ross, 1983, p. 7). Journalist George Sims, for example, described meeting a woman in a South London neighbourhood who took care of two children who belonged to a widowed neighbour who was recently imprisoned. The woman explained that she intended to care for the children until their mother was released (Ross, 1983, p. 12). Such examples illustrate the female solidarity that flourished during this time.

This limitation of female friendship to the private sphere reveals that the Cult of Domesticity was ultimately deeply confining. As stated bluntly by a Mrs. Sandford in the 19th century, “A really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can, but she is conscious of inferiority, and therefore grateful for support” (Welter, 1966, p. 159). The imprisonment of women by the Cult of Domesticity was illustrated by feminist writer Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, where she described “the problem that has no name”—a dissatisfaction among housewives who, despite fulfilling the domestic ideal, felt unfulfilled. “As she made the beds, shopped for groceries ... lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—‘Is this all?’” (Friedan, 1963, p. 15). This excerpt highlights the discontent of women with a cultural ideal that equated their purpose solely with homemaking.

Like industrial labour, the ideology of domesticity had dual impacts: it granted them authority and inspired female solidarity, but reinforced gender inequality. The rise of the Cult of Domesticity granted middle-class women decision-making power in the domestic sphere. Additionally, women formed support networks within their communities, gaining early forms of leadership within socially acceptable boundaries. Contrarily, this ideal enforced rigid gender roles and tied a woman’s worth to her role as a wife and a mother.

RESISTANCE AND LONG-TERM CHANGE

The Industrial Revolution profoundly changed women’s lives. In the short term, some impacts, such as increased financial freedom, were beneficial, while others, such as the restrictive ideal of domesticity, were detrimental. This essay will argue that the immediate effects of industrialization—even the harms—laid the groundwork for social change in the long term, ultimately bringing the benefits of industrialization to outweigh the harms.

Industrialization uprooted traditional rural life, and urban migration introduced working-class women to a world beyond the household. Crucially, even though factory labour exposed women to exploitation and inequality, they were not passive victims of these injustices. In Lowell, Massachusetts, for example, former mill worker Sarah G. Bagley founded the Lowell Female Labour Reform Association (LFLRA) after noticing that while there was a men’s union, there was no union representing the working women. The LFLRA was one of the first labour organizations for women in the US. Bagley led the LFLRA to protest against the poor working conditions, specifically advocating for a ten-hour workday. The LFLRA submitted a mass petition signed by 2,000 women to the Massachusetts Legislature, and then another in 1846 with 4,000 signatures after the initial petition was unsuccessful (Hubbard, 2015, pp. 57–75). Struggles in factories often brought working women together to pursue collective action in resistance against unfairness.

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Importantly, the Industrial Revolution amplified gender inequality that had been embedded in society long before this period in new and visible ways. In pre-society, women were primarily responsible for domestic work. Under the cottage system, they were engaged in home textile and other manual work under the command of their fathers and husbands. During the time of the Industrial Revolution, instead of being bound together as one unit—the family—women began to recognize themselves as independent beings. Women earned independent wages, which became an essential resource for their families. While they certainly had limitations in their lives, they began to realize their self-worth from their increased responsibility and ability to navigate their families. Moreover, factory-based production and waged labour made divisions more explicit: men were paid more for the same work, and women were excluded from skilled trades.

Furthermore, the separation of spheres as a result of the Cult of Domesticity created a socially acceptable space for female friendship. Within the private sphere, women developed networks of cooperation and care, ultimately creating a community for female solidarity. The rise of female friendship allowed women to voice their discontent with the Cult of Domesticity with each other, leading them to realize that others shared their unhappiness. In pre-industrial society, by contrast, a woman's social circle was limited to her family, and she had no opportunities to form these bonds. Friendships and support systems were crucial in fostering early feminine consciousness and, eventually, collective action. The Seneca Falls Convention in New York in 1848, for instance, was a major outcome of this solidarity. This pivotal event marked the beginning of an organized women's rights movement in the United States (Johnston, 2024). The grievances voiced at the event included political exclusion, economic dependency, and the desire for autonomy, which reflected the frustrations of women confined by the Cult of Domesticity. As historian Nancy Cott writes in *The Bonds of Womanhood*, “‘the bonds of womanhood’ bound women together even as they bound them down” (Cott, 2021, p. 1). The system that sought to isolate women inadvertently laid the groundwork for their collective resistance.

Women had always been troubled by what Friedan called “a problem that had no name.” The Industrial Revolution became a turning point that helped give that problem a name. The challenges brought by the Industrial Revolution, such as unequal pay and the separation of spheres, were amplifications of a gender inequality that had long existed in societies. The Industrial Revolution made injustices more apparent, and, therefore, more open to critique and resistance. Coupled with the emergence of new female networks, these conditions laid the foundations for early feminine consciousness and collective action. Through assessing the broader historical impact, it becomes clear that the benefits outweigh the harms.

CONCLUSION

The Industrial Revolution presented both opportunities and challenges for women. For working-class women, the shift from household labour to factory work opened doors to independent wages and urban life at the expense of gruelling conditions, low wages, and social marginalization. For middle-class women, the Cult of

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Domesticity granted authority within the home and created female networks of support, but at the cost of reinforcing a rigid separation between public and private spheres that limited women to the household. In both cases, industrialization amplified long-standing gender inequalities. Combined with increased female solidarity as a result of shared challenges and a socially acceptable space to forge female friendship, industrialization propelled women towards social change.

As political philosopher and writer Mary Wollstonecraft put it, “I do not wish women to have power over men; but over themselves” (Brain, 2024). In this way, the Industrial Revolution was an important turning point that helped women recognize their autonomy and fight for it.

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