

WOMEN'S WORK IS NEVER DONE



A DRAMATIC READING *on the history of
working women in America*

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This dramatic reading was written for a women's conference held in Boston in April, 1972. Attended by over 300 women, the conference focused on women's oppression at the workplace. Those of us working in women's studies who helped organize for this conference put this reading together in order to share what we had been learning about the history of working women in the United States.

Only after we performed it and got a very enthusiastic response did we realize that we had hit upon an effective way of presenting historical material to a large audience. Most of the quotes were taken from secondary sources but some were made up to give a voice to women in our history whose thoughts and feelings were never recorded. This is but a small contribution for the formidable task of re-creating a past for ourselves.

The history of working women has usually been neglected in academic articles or papers presented at scholars' conferences. But we don't have to be academics to understand changes in women's roles, as well as those aspects of our condition which seem not to change from generation to generation. The language of working women has always been simple and direct--they knew what they were talking about. If only their outcries, achievements and dreams had been consistently recorded!

We hope our effort will inspire others working in women's studies to develop materials for popular presentations, not just for students and teachers. Women's studies is significant only when it can contribute to the education of all women (and men) by creating more comprehension of women's condition and therefore more solidarity in acting to change it.

Hard Times/CPS



"Women's Work Is Never Done" can be performed in parks, meetings, theaters, classrooms, offices, and factories. Spread it around; even better, write your own skit about the history of women in your region or community. This narration could also be illustrated with slides and/or music.

The reading is very simple to perform. Some suggestions on how to approach it:

1) The four women who are going to read it (Narrator, 1, 2, and 3) should each read it to themselves and then select a part. Think of the consciousness of the women and men who are quoted--arrogant or paternal chauvinism, a narrowminded upper class outlook, righteous anger, desperation, or tired resignation. Try to get into each of these attitudes and imagine how the speaker would speak. Some of the most outrageous statements can be read with a heavy irony.

2) Practice it once together, standing rather than sitting, and using whatever gestures and dramatics you can muster. When performing, go right straight through it, even if someone stumbles over a word. Think to look up at the audience some when you are reading; at least hold the script up high. There shouldn't be any pauses between speakers except where indicated; otherwise it drags. The reading can go a fairly rapid pace, provided the words are distinctly said. Parts 1, 2, and 3 can be more animated than the narrator. N carries most of the narration, though not all of it. It takes about 30 minutes to perform.



Women's Work Is Never Done



N Sojourner Truth, born a slave, was a leader in the abolitionist and women's rights movements in this country:

1 "That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mudpuddles, or gives me the best place! And ain't I a woman? . . .

N The U.S. Secretary of Labor wrote in 1920:

2 "We are safeguarding the mothers of tomorrow. All will agree that women in industry would not exist in an ideal scheme . . .

1 "Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man--when I could get it--and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? . . .



2 "Women have a higher duty and a higher sphere of life. Eve was the companion and helpmate of Adam and in every way his social equal. . . .

1 "I have borne thirteen children and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus hear me! And ain't I a woman?"

2 "But it was for Adam to protect Eve and provide for their posterity. I personally prefer to see a woman guiding the destiny of the nation--in the home."

N In colonial times women were brought to this country because they could work. Their presence transformed camps into settlements..



3 "Sure, I picked my wife because she was large and strong . . . same way I selected my oxen. Look at her!"

N Women sold themselves to men who paid their passage across the Atlantic to the new settlements. As indentured servants, they were obliged to work for their masters for seven years.

2 Of all women used by the founders of this country, those most exploited for their labor were black slaves:

3 "Negroes for Sale: A Negro woman, 24 years of age, and her two children, one eight and the other three years old. Said Negroes will be sold separately or together, as desired. The woman is a good seamstress. She will be sold low for cash or exchanged for groceries. For terms, apply to Matthew Bliss & Co."

1 "But now I entered on my 15th year, a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import . . . I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. If I went out for a breath of fresh air, after a day of toil, his footsteps dogged me. If I knelt by my mother's grave, his dark shadow fell on me even there. The light heart which nature had given me became heavy with sad forebodings."

N *Field work, domestic work, the work of breeding another generation of slaves--this was the work of the black slave woman.*

- PAUSE -

2 Early America was an undeveloped country; people lived off the products of the land. Nearly half of all American women still lived on farms in 1890.

3 "In the early years, when her home was a dugout with roof and front wall made of squares of prairie sod, she worked side by side with her husband, planting, harvesting, building, fighting grasshoppers and prairie fires, doing whatever needed to be done. Later as more settlers moved in, as the farm prospered in good years, and as her sons grew older, the heavy field work was taken over by men. But this did not make the woman's work much easier, for the presence of male fieldworkers brought a great increase in the work of processing and cooking food, making clothes, and keeping house."

2 "Many farm tasks remained in our hands. These included the entire care of the kitchen garden and much of the work caring for cattle, pigs, and poultry--herding cows to pasture and back, hauling well water, feeding hens, pigs and calves, milking, churning, and doctoring.





2 Most of what we needed for housekeeping we had to provide for ourselves. We made brooms, mattresses, and floor mats from straw and corn husks; soap from lye and tallow; lye, from stove ashes."

N Women's work also provided much of the cash for developing the farm. The income brought in by daughters who were not too proud to work as domestics in the nearest town or even as maid hands on neighboring farms was indispensable.

3 Perhaps a quarter of a million women ran farms on their own.

1 "Agnes and Cristen were hired out to help pay off the mortgage on mother's farm. Mother called it the 'burden.' At first Cristen could only take care of babies and wash dishes, but as she grew in stature her work grew with her. The first year they hired out, Agnes and Cristen received 25 cents a week, still later 50 cents a week and finally \$1.25 a week. Even if they worked all summer or all winter they were seldom paid until after threshing.



N Farm work was so hard that American families were constantly on the move westward looking for better opportunities. An 80-year old pioneer woman remembers:

2 "Sitting alone I have relived every moment since we came here in a covered wagon on June, 1874. Pain, suffering, and privations surrounded me until I couldn't sleep at all. The nights were awful for the wind howled and I heard strange noises upstairs. . . ."

- PAUSE -

N The steam engine, the spinning jenny, and the power loom gave American factory production its start toward the end of the 18th century. The new factories and mills in New England called women out of their homes to seek a living. The principle of machine tools which turned out interchangeable parts gave rise to other occupations which called for more and more women.

1 Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, hailed factory employment for women because it made development of the new system possible without taking men from the fields. As he saw it:

- 3 "In the cotton mill invented in England within the last 20 years, all the different processes for spinning cotton are performed by means of machines which are put in motion by water and attended chiefly by women and children. They require a smaller number of persons, on the whole, than are required in the ordinary mode of spinning. And it is an advantage of great moment that the operations of this mill continue with convenience, during the night as well as through the day."

N What was the life of the Lowell mill girl in the 1830's? They were all required to live in company boarding houses, and one of the strict rules was that doors were locked every evening at ten o'clock. Employment in the Lowell group of factories was a socially respectable occupation for a New England girl. Still, the women were paid pitifully low wages, about one-fourth of what men earned in the specialized jobs at the mills.

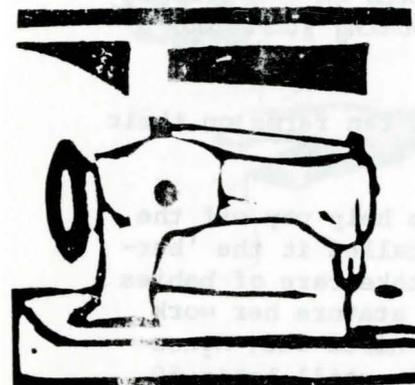
2 As soon as the Lowell mill owners recognized that women needed jobs, they cut back wages and enforced speed-ups.

1 The 1880's and 1890's were periods of huge and rapid industrial growth. Cheap labor was needed to feed these giant enterprises and trusts. In the decade after 1880 immigration from the impoverished European countries topped 5 million. Women workers were in rising demand, always for the lowest paying jobs.

3 The work that had formerly attracted women from the New England farm, and had given them some independence, now became a nightmare for the immigrant women and men forced into the sweatshops of the new industrial cities.

2 "Fall River, Massachusetts, gave me another view of what the Industrial Revolution had done to women. In the cotton mills whole families worked together, mostly the same tasks and always the same hours. All worked, but when the whistles blew and the toilers poured out of the mills and hurried to their homes, what happened? The women of the mills went on working. They cooked and served meals, washed dishes, cleaned the house, tucked the children into bed, and after that sewed, mended, or did a family washing."

N In the garment industry in New York, Chicago, and other major cities, piece work done in the home was more likely to be a way of surviving than a matter of earning little comforts. Lucia Machiarulo was one of thousands of immigrant wives who worked for clothing manufacturers in the tenements of New York's Lower East Side:





1 "During the Depression which began in 1893, my husband worked irregularly as a day laborer, but most of the family's income was earned by sewing buttons and seams on trousers. I and my 15-year old daughter worked 18 hours a day, sharing the sewing, housekeeping, and the care of four younger children. When there was plenty of work, when the baby was well, and when my husband helped with the needle because he had no other job, we sometimes earned as much as \$5.50 a week."

N In the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in New York City in 1911, 143 women died inside the blazing building or leapt to their deaths on the pavement below. The bosses had locked one of the doors; the other was blocked by fire. The building was a firetrap.

N But women fought back to change these conditions. Rose Schneiderman, a garment worker who organized women in the garment industry cried bitterly:

2 "This is not the first time girls have been burned alive in this city. Every week I learn of the untimely death of one of my sister workers. Every year thousands of us are maimed. The life of men and women is so cheap and property is so sacred."



3 "There are so many of us for one job it matters little if 143 of us are burned to death. Every time the workers come out in the only way they know to protest against conditions which are unbearable, the strong hand of the law is allowed to press down heavily on us . . . I know from my experience it is up to the working people to save themselves by a strong working-class movement."

1 Strikes became widespread as the women and men protested the terrible conditions and low wages in industrial work.

N In 1912, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the mills were closed down by strikers for two months. Half the strikers were women. They took an active role in the strike and on the picket line from the beginning.

N So frequent had been the police attacks on the picket line, that the women conceived of an idea. A group of pregnant women strikers suggested that they head the picket line:

1 "You let the women go first. They won't attack us women with big bellies."

N Next morning the police attacked the line. They would not allow the women to escape, reported an eyewitness. Two women had miscarriages.



N During the strike, a group of Italian women caught a policeman alone on a bridge:



2 "They took his gun, club and star and were in the act of removing his pants, intending to throw him over the bridge into the river, when the cavalry charged the women and rescued the captive. Many of the women were hailed into court where Judge Mahoney found the women guilty and sentenced them to a term in jail, after giving them a lecture in an impressive voice explaining that the body of a policeman was sacred."

N Nearby Harvard University allowed students credits for their midterms examinations if they agreed to serve in the militia against the strikers.



3 "Insolent, well-fed Harvard men," the New York Call reported, "parade up and down, their rifles loaded . . . their bayonets glittering."

N The 25,000 workers at Lawrence won the strike for wage increases and improved conditions. Big Bill Haywood of the IWW said: "The women won the strike."

3 In the same year of the Lawrence strike, 93,000 unmarried immigrant girls between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one came to the "land of opportunity." A New York social worker wrote:



1 "The only hope of a continued supply of servants comes from the immigrant class. This is especially true for general housework, for only the less desirable girls and new arrivals will go willingly into this work, which is less skilled than that of the waitress, maid, and cook, is heavier work, and not so well paid. This supply is especially desirable from the standpoint of the employer. Although the immigrant so frequently lacks training, she is strong, asks few privileges, is content with lower wages and long hours, and has no consciousness of a social stigma attaching to her work."

2 So-called "labor intelligence offices" in New York alone sent some 10,000 immigrant women a year into prostitution. They had agents who induced girls to come over here from abroad upon the most extravagant promises; they pre-paid their passage, and entered into collusion with boarding-houses to supply them with girls.

1 In 1850 in New York City there was one prostitute for every 50 males in the population



You don't have to smile if you don't want to

N Ladies Home Journal, 1898, "They Who Never Were Brides":

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN



3 "In every woman's heart is implanted the love of home. . . . The instincts of domesticity, of wifehood, and motherhood are fundamental and eternal in the normal woman. The abiding principles that underlie life cannot be altered. Nature is more potent than all the clamor of the shrieking sisterhood."

N The women's rights movement of the 19th century attacked the notion that a woman's place was in the home with the children, protected and secure. The myth of the upper-class lady was oppressive to middle-class and working women alike. It was oppressive to middle-class women because it denied them the right to find meaningful work in business or the professions. It set working women outside the definition of a "lady" and of course the work she did was not considered a "lady-like pursuit."

1 An early response to women working off the farm and outside of the home for wages appeared in the Ladies Almanac of 1859:

2 "But how is it with the majority of young women? They turn their backs on domestic duties and know nothing of domestic joys. As soon as they can get away from their mother's care they rush into shops, factories, and trades. It has got to be that full 4/5 of our young women don't know enough about the kitchen even to make a cup of coffee, or to cook a beef-steak or to broil a mackerel. . . . Instead of home duties, they are fierce after accomplishments; not thinking or knowing that what they call accomplishments become defects unless they are associated with home graces, which most adorn a woman."

N Only in times of national emergency were women allowed, even encouraged, to enter new occupations.

N Wars helped to break people's traditional habit of mind about the proper work for women. By their very disruption of the society they compelled people to look afresh of old habits and attitudes.

3 During the Civil War, for example, young women assumed new roles in the economy as workers in metal and munitions factories, as clerks in the expanded bureaucracy in Washington and as nurses in war hospitals.

N As usual, the male capitalists invented theories about the nature of women to justify what was really only a matter of temporary economic necessity.

3 "One of the most important jobs that women do, and one in which they have proved themselves superior, is inspection. . . . Perhaps it is because women are lovers of detail that they are so efficient in inspection work."



military

- 1 "The use of women power is not to create new occupations for them but merely to use their skill during this emergency."
- 2 "Our experiences have shown that the majority of women are most successful at small precision machine work, and that they are more attentive to a repetitive job than a man is. On the other hand, we have found that women, generally speaking, are not as inventive as men."



political situation

- 1 "Because airplanes are constructed of so many delicately balanced parts, womens' smaller, more deft hands have become a vital asset to their construction."
- 3 "If you are handy with an eyebrow tweezer, you probably would enjoy making or mounting lamp filaments, or wrapping miles of insulating tape in spirals around complex interior parts of electrical apparatus of various kinds."
- 2 Of course, after each war, when industry no longer needed womens' labor a woman's role as homemaker was glorified.



building maintenance

- N *Wartime is the most blatant historical example of the way in which women are used as a surplus labor force. In fact, womens' roles in the work force are always plagued by this status. Hire them when you need them; fire them when you don't.*
- 2 Today, when government statistics list the unemployed, they don't include all women who would like to work, or Third World people who can't find work.
- 3 When people talk about workers, or the working class, or labor unions, you think MEN, yet 42% of American women work. Most of them work at jobs which are not unionized.



medicine

N 1966 median wage scale for full-time workers, U.S. Department of Labor:

1	White males	\$7164 per year
2	Non-white males	\$4528 per year
3	White women	\$4152 per year
N	Non-white women	\$2341 per year



religion

- 1 "I have never been a lazy woman. I have worked through every one of my twelve pregnancies. Sometimes I worked two jobs. Once I worked from eight in the morning to five-thirty in the afternoon at a dry cleaners and from seven-thirty to three-thirty as a barmaid. I got off work at two-thirty one morning and had my baby at three-thirty."

- 3 Another thing in my office is that it is practically all white. Out of 70 women, there are only 6 or 7 black women--and they get the lowest paid jobs. I think they get \$1.60 an hour, which is the minimum wage according to the law. I am the only Mexican woman there. I found out a few days after I started working there that when they hired me they thought I was an Indian from India. They discovered I was Mexican when I spoke Spanish over the phone to a Mexican customer. It was all over the office inside a few hours; people walked up to me and said, "I didn't know you were Mexican."

- 2 "I was at a discussion several weeks ago where the question was raised of white women fighting for higher pay, because even black men were getting higher wages than white women. Being a black woman, it made me angry to have it put that way, because it sounded as though white women should make MORE than black men. Black men do hard, hard work. There is something wrong with that whole way of thinking."

- 1 "I do clerical work in the office of a large firm. It is really bad there for women. For one thing, we have no union, there is no job security and no benefits to speak of at all. Although the 70 or so women in the office have no union, the men who work in the plant--in the same building--are the Teamsters. It seems to be good for them because the bosses are really afraid of the union."

- 2 "You know those childrens' toys advertised on TV? For the most part those toys are produced by women workers who are paid \$1.70 an hour. Most of the work force is black. All of the foremen are males and most are white. The number of black foremen is growing but they push us harder than the white ones. Each assembly line has a woman supervisor on it who was under the foreman. Her job was usually an easy one and her pay higher than the other workers. These women were also the shop stewards. The very people whose role was to carry out the bosses orders were the same ones who were also supposed to represent the workers. As you can see there was an immediate conflict of interest. On one occasion I asked the shop steward to see the union contract. 'I will tell you what you want to know,' she said. She maintained that the contract was too difficult. I would not be able to understand it. When I persisted in asking she said I was trying to make trouble."

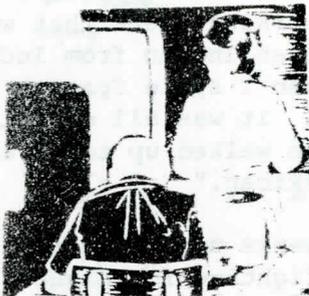
- 3 "My mother worked most days in the week and was very tired when she came home. I wonder how she kept from teaching us hate when the social worker came around. She was a nasty woman with a pinched face who said, 'We have



off our backs



reason to suspect you are working Miss Gregory, and you can be sure I am going to check on you. We don't stand for welfare cheaters.'



N Women and men in need of public assistance are now required to either register for work at departments of employment or participate in the Work Incentive Program (WIN). This means that mothers on welfare have to work at low wages to support their children; they're working but still on welfare.

1 At the same time, the Nixon administration vetoed a child care bill which proposed free child care centers for families earning less than \$4000 a year.

3 A welfare recipient should receive the same salary as other workers for doing the same job.

N Sojourner Truth, speaking at a womens' rights convention in the 19th century said:

1 "I am over eighty years old; it is about time for me to be going. I have been forty years a slave and forty years free, and would be here forty years more to have equal rights for all. I suppose I am kept here because something remains for me to do; I suppose I am yet to help to break the chain."

ALL A woman's work is never done,
Womens' work has just begun.



Ideas and Quotations used in this reading are mostly from the following:

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