



## LOW WAGES FOR WOMEN

**T**HE history of women in industry has been darkened by the low wages they have been paid. In an industrial system where the profits of the manufacturer depend on low production costs, the temptation has been to pay the lowest wages for which it is possible to obtain workers. Because there have been many thousands more women ready and eager to work than there have been jobs available, the woman worker has accepted jobs at almost any wage rather than be unemployed. This competition has been made keener and her bargaining power has been made weaker by the fact that the work she has been given to do could be done equally well by thousands of other untrained women.

Moreover, when woman first went into factories to work she was still thought of as part of a family group whose main support came from the men of the household—father, husband, or brother. Her wages were looked upon as extra

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spending money, not as earnings on which she had to depend for her support. This idea still prevails with many employers and has had much to do with keeping women's wages at a low level.

Whatever excuse there may have been for this idea in the past, today the wages of most women are as necessary as the wages of most men. If the woman worker is single, she is likely to have not only herself but other people to support—aged parents, young sisters or brothers. As sons leave home more than daughters do, it falls to the daughters to take over the financial responsibility of the family.

If a married woman is working in a factory, a laundry, or a restaurant kitchen, one may be pretty sure that her husband or sons are unemployed, or their wages are too low to properly shelter, feed, and clothe the family. The earnings of unskilled laboring men in general are not large enough to support a family at the American level of health and decency, and the earnings of skilled laborers are so reduced by unemployment and part time that they, too, fall below a decent family standard of living.

The married woman has always played an important part in feeding and clothing the family. In the old days, by caring for a large household by the old hand methods and raising children, she not only was kept busy from sunrise to sunset but she made an indispensable contribution to the economic life of the family.

Today many women still do some manufacturing within their homes—canning and preserving, baking, making clothing and house furnishings. But for many others a system that has taken their work from the home demands that they make their contribution by working for wages. More and more married women are being forced into the ranks of wage earners. In 1890 only 13.9 percent of all women workers were

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married, but by 1930 this proportion had risen to 28.9 percent, though marriage had increased only slightly in the general population.

A hundred years ago it was estimated that women's wages in every branch of business averaged less than 37½ cents a day, and at that time a day's work averaged 12 or more hours. Men's earnings were about four times as much as women's. As late as 1863 women in New York had weekly wages of only \$2, while their hours ranged from 11 to 16 a day. In 1932 the best available State figures, those of New York and Illinois, showed women's average weekly earnings in manufacturing to be \$13.75 and \$12.15, respectively. The National Industrial Conference Board gives an even lower estimate of the average weekly wage of women throughout the country—\$11.72.

Naturally, the course of women's wages fluctuates, rising in times of prosperity and falling in times of depression. Figures show that the actual money wages of women have risen as the century has progressed, but the cost of living has done the same thing. Some idea of what the wages of today mean in the lives of working women may be had by comparing the New York average wage of \$13.75 with the estimate of the lowest amount at which a girl in New York City could get board and lodging only. This estimate was made by the State Department of Labor and was based on the barest and most meager standards. Adjusted to the 1932 cost-of-living figures, the amount required for board and lodging would be \$11.63, leaving the average working girl in New York the pitifully small sum of \$2.12 a week for clothing, car fare, laundry, recreation, and all other expenses. Other figures have shown conclusively that throughout the Nation hundreds of thousands of working women are paid far below what it costs to live decently and happily.

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Women's wages lag far behind those of men. For the years from 1922 to 1932 figures from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics show that women's average earnings in 9 important woman-employing industries were only from 45 to 84 percent as much as men's. In over three fourths of the cases women's earnings were less than 70 percent of men's.

In New York women's wages in manufacturing were only 54 percent of men's in 1932; in Illinois they were only 58 percent. Although the difference between men's and women's wages is largely due to women's work being unskilled, even when they work at the same jobs women as a rule receive less pay than men.

That there are many thousands more women anxious to work than there are jobs open for them to fill has been an important factor in keeping women's wages down. When the factory gate shows crowds of women seeking work, those employed are forced by competition to accept low wages.

The exploitation of women who have done industrial home work has been especially appalling. In squalid tenement homes that are badly heated and lighted, women driven by family need, and having little or no industrial experience, make or finish garments, string tags, card buttons, hooks and eyes, or safety pins, make garters, knit or embroider, and work on cheap jewelry, lamp shades, flowers, powder puffs, paper boxes and bags, carpet rags, and toys for distressingly low wages. While 14 States have laws that limit the evils of industrial home work, the practice has increased with the general breaking down of employment standards in the recent years of depression. More and more employers, unable or unwilling to meet the overhead expenses necessary in operating a factory, are giving the work out to be done in homes at shockingly low wages.

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To the hardships of the industrial home worker have been added the hardships of the girls and women who work in the sweatshops of our clothing trades. These shops, frequently working on contract for larger firms and competing unfairly with the many employers who treat their workers justly, evade labor laws or "run away" to small communities where regulations are less strict or do not exist. The \$2.98, \$3.98, and \$4.98 dresses that fill store windows today are due to the fact that poverty is forcing large numbers of girls to work for inhumanly long hours and at starvation wages rather than have no work at all.

The terrible consequences of hundreds of thousands of women struggling along on wages that are too low to support them in health or even decency cannot be disputed. The privation and suffering endured by them and their dependents are serious enough, but other grave consequences follow. It is impossible for men to obtain high wages for work that can be done more cheaply by women, and because they are competitors in the labor market women's low wages tend to drag down those of men. As industry becomes more and more machine tending, and skilled jobs become fewer, the wage level of the mass of workers is likely to adjust itself to the low level set for women.

Low wages, moreover, are disastrous to the industrial system itself. As long as the workers, who largely make up the buying power of the Nation, are not paid sufficient wages to buy back the goods they produce, our industrial system based on production for profit cannot operate successfully.