

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

FRANCES PERKINS, Secretary

WOMEN'S BUREAU
MARY ANDERSON, Director

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The
NEGRO WOMAN WORKER

BY

JEAN COLLIER BROWN



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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR,
WOMEN'S BUREAU,
Washington, October 3, 1938.

MADAM: I have the honor to transmit to you a report that brings together what seem to be the most significant of the very limited data on the Negro woman worker. There is a constant demand for material on this important subject.

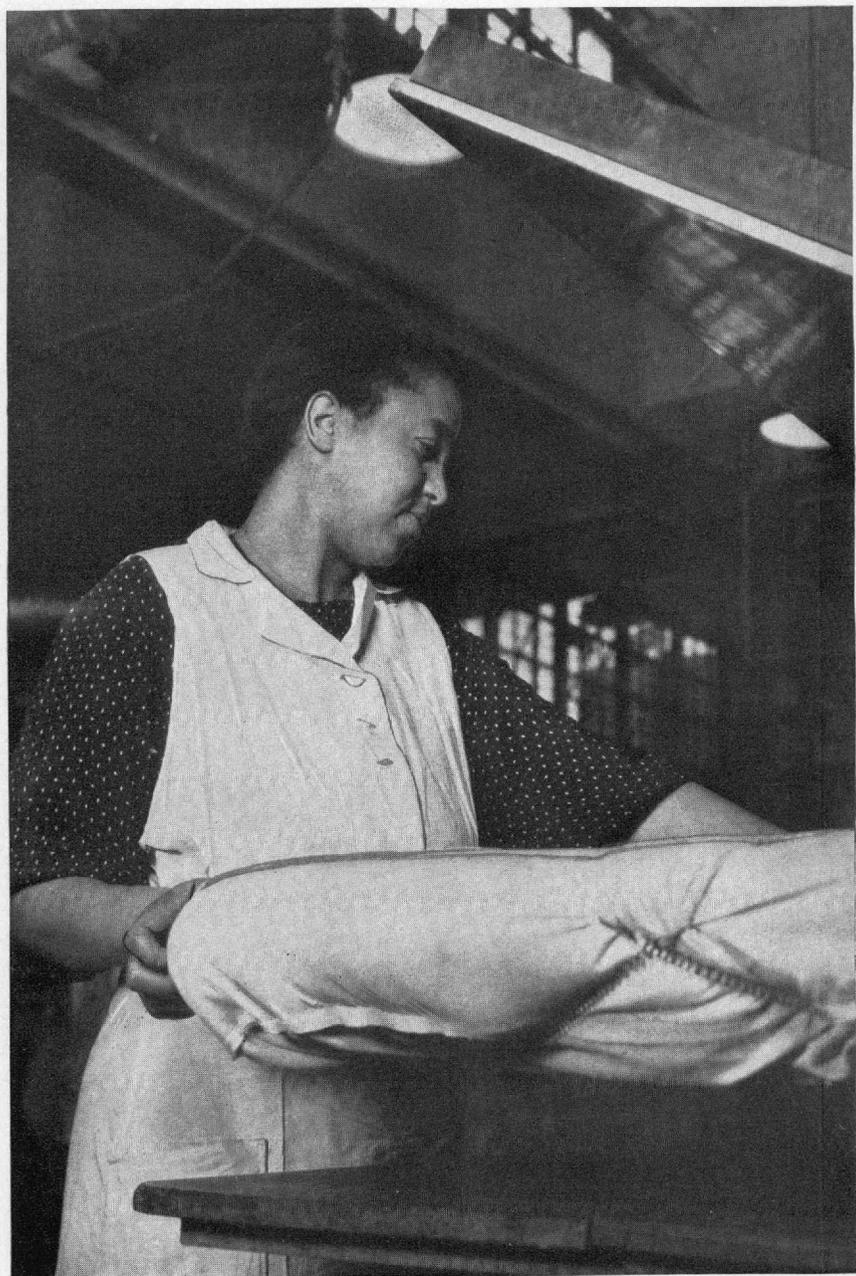
The study is the work of Jean Collier Brown, of the division of public information.

Respectfully submitted.

MARY ANDERSON, *Director.*

HON. FRANCES PERKINS,
Secretary of Labor.

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THE NEGRO WOMAN WORKER

INTRODUCTION

One in every six women workers in America is a Negro, according to the latest census figures—those of 1930. In all, nearly 2,000,000 Negro women were classed as gainful workers at that time. How many of these women now have jobs and how many are unemployed; where the employed women are working; how much they earn, and how their wages compare with those of white women workers: these are questions that have a direct bearing on the economic problems of today.

Though women in general have been discriminated against and exploited through limitation of their opportunities for employment, through long hours, low wages, and harmful working conditions, such hardships have fallen upon Negro women with double harshness. As the members of a new and inexperienced group arrive at the doors of industry, the jobs that open up to them ordinarily are those vacated by other workers who move on to more highly paid occupations. Negro women have formed such a new and inexperienced group in wage employment. To their lot, therefore, have fallen the more menial jobs, the lower paid, the more hazardous—in general, the least agreeable and desirable. And one of the tragedies of the depression was the realization that the unsteady foothold Negro women had attained in even these jobs was lost when great numbers of unemployed workers from other fields clamored for employment.

Not very much is actually known about the economic position of Negro women today. The depression caused serious employment displacements that cannot be measured accurately. However, certain work problems of Negro women are outstanding and may be discussed with some measure of authority. To that end it may be well to discuss what is known concerning the general occupational position of Negro women; and further, something of each major occupational group as to numbers of workers, employment opportunities, hours, wages, and working conditions, and any other factors that may be of special importance.

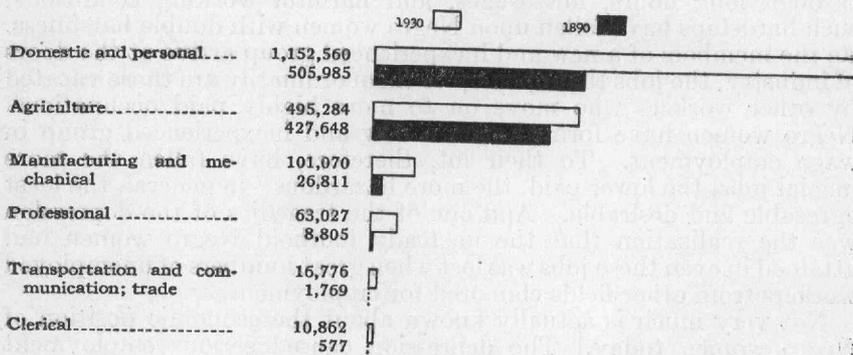
OCCUPATIONAL STATUS

On the whole, most women, white or Negro, work for their living just as do men, not because they want to but because they must. The reason larger proportions of Negro than of white women work lies largely in the low scale of earnings of Negro men. In their pre-Civil War status it was the ability of Negro women to work that governed their market value. At the close of the Civil War a large proportion of all Negro women—married as well as single—were forced to engage in breadwinning activities. In 1930, at the time of the latest census,

it was found still true that a larger proportion of Negro women than of white women were gainfully occupied. Practically 2 in 5 Negro women, in contrast to 1 in 5 white women, work for their living.

In pre-Civil War days the employment of the Negro woman was almost completely restricted to two fields where work is largely unskilled and heavy—agriculture and domestic service. Agriculture utilized the large majority of workers. In 1930 about 9 in every 10 Negro women still were engaged in farm work or in domestic and personal service, with more than two-thirds of them in domestic and personal service. The major occupational shift for Negro women has been, therefore, within these two large fields of employment. What occupational progress Negro women have made has been for the most part in connection with their entrance into the better paid, better standardized occupations in domestic and personal service. In addition, increases have been shown in the last 20 years in the professions and in clerical work. From 1910 to 1930 there was an increase of 33,000 Negro women in manufacturing, though a small decrease took place between 1920 and 1930.

OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF NEGRO WOMEN, 1890 AND 1930



DOMESTIC AND PERSONAL SERVICE

Numbers employed.

In 1930, the date of the latest Nation-wide census, 3 in 5 Negro women workers reported their usual occupation as in domestic and personal service. Included in this broad classification were more than 600,000 domestic employees in private homes; over 250,000 laundresses not in laundries; 50,000 laundry and cleaning and dyeing workers; about 18,000 housekeepers and stewards, and practically the same number of waitresses; 16,000 untrained nurses and midwives; almost 13,000 hairdressers and manicurists; more than 11,000 charwomen and cleaners; and over 4,000 elevator tenders. The number of Negro women in domestic and personal service in 1930—1,150,000—represented a gain of nearly 50 percent from 1920 to 1930. Negro women in household employment increased by 81 percent.

Unemployment.

Today, 8 years after that census, though there are no complete statistics on unemployment for the whole country, it is certain that the plight of Negro domestics since the beginning of the depression has been an exceedingly serious one. Certain scattered data such as follow are indicative of the situation as a whole.

In a comprehensive study of employment and unemployment in Louisville, Ky., conducted by the State Department of Labor in the spring of 1933, it was found that a little over one-half of the Negro women, in contrast to less than three-tenths of the white women, were without jobs. More than three-fourths of the Negro women wage earners in the survey depended on domestic and personal service for their livelihood, but the depression had thrown 56 percent of these out of work.

In a survey by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration of persons on relief in 40 urban centers as of May 1, 1934, over two-thirds of the approximately 150,000 women who described their usual occupations in terms of servants and allied workers were Negro. For 23 northern and midwestern cities the difference in number between white and Negro women in this classification was not so great—54,000 Negro women as against 37,000 white women; but in the 17 southern cities covered in the F. E. R. A. report there were only 5,000 white women, as against 52,000 Negro women, classed as servants and allied workers.

Household service.

So much for the unemployment of Negro domestic labor. But what about the working conditions of various types of domestic and personal service workers? The largest group, and the one concerning which there is the least definite information as to employment standards, is that of household workers.

From common knowledge, and according to the few recent scattered studies that are available, low wages and long hours are characteristic of household service. In a survey of household employment in Lynchburg, Va., in the spring of 1937, the typical wage of the group covered—largely Negro workers—was \$5 or \$6 a week. Two cases were reported at \$1.50 and one at \$10, and there was one report of payment in the form of a house "on the lot" rent-free, and one of payment made only in clothing. The typical hours were 72 a week. There were 16 reports of 80 to 90 hours and there was 1 report of a week of 91 hours.

A compilation of household employment data for the South in 1934, in which some 26 Y. W. C. A. local associations cooperated, showed that the average weekly wage for Negro workers was \$6.17 and the average workweek was 66 hours.

During the period of the National Recovery Administration a survey of household employment in 33 northern counties in Mississippi, conducted by the Joint Committee on National Recovery, showed that wages of Negro domestics usually amounted to less than \$2 a week.

An informal investigation of household employment was made in the spring of 1937 by a Washington, D. C., committee representing women's organizations, by inquiries of both private and public employment agencies. The study showed that the general minimum weekly

wage at which workers were placed was \$5, and the average was from \$7 to \$10. The chief demands were for mothers' helpers at the \$5 wage, and for general workers. The large majority of applicants were Negro women. Inadequate living and working conditions on the job were reported for many households. In a number of homes no bathing facilities were provided for the workers; too often the bed was found to consist of a cot in the living room or furnace room. Long hours and heavy work were characteristic of many jobs and the difficulty of managing children constituted another problem.

Laundresses and laundry operatives.

The census makes a distinction between women laundresses who are self employed, working in their own or their employers' homes, and operatives employed in commercial laundries. In 1930 there still were about 270,000 Negro women laundresses not in laundries, despite the rapid rise of power laundries in the decade from 1920 to 1930. There were nearly 50,000 Negro women laundry operatives.

Though employment conditions generally are better standardized and more favorable for women in commercial laundries than in private homes, the direct influence of home laundry work on the hour and wage standards set by the commercial laundry can be seen clearly. In a study of laundries by the Women's Bureau in 1935, Bureau agents were told again and again that commercial laundries, especially in the South, were having a terrific struggle to compete with Negro washwomen. The following comments made by laundry employers, employment office officials, and other informed persons illustrate the conditions at that time:

Since the depression, servants are required to do laundry as well as maid work; most of them get only \$3 a week on the average.

Greatest competition is colored washwomen. Will take a 30-pound bundle for a dollar. Some of them do a week's washing for 50 cents.

The washwoman charges only 60 to 75 percent of what the laundry charges for the same size bundle.

The manager knew of a number of washwomen who were glad to get a day's work for carfare, lunch, and an old dress.

Data of much interest concerning employment conditions of Negro women in laundries are found in the Women's Bureau laundry study. Conducted during the N. R. A. period, the study shows a relation between code rates and actual conditions, and indicates what amounted to a race differential in the minimum wages set, as follows: Minimum-wage rates set by the N. R. A. laundry code for a 40-hour week ranged from 14 cents to 30 cents an hour, depending on geographical section and size of city within the section. In the nine southern States, for whose entire area the weekly minimum was set at \$5.60, three-fourths of the women laundry workers were Negroes, according to the 1930 census. On the other hand, in 10 States for which the highest minimum was set, 4 in the far West and the others in New England, less than 4 percent of the women laundry workers were Negroes.

Wage data in the study showed average weekly earnings considerably higher in the North than in the South. The average for all men employees—productive labor, office employees, routemen, and other labor—ranged from \$27.63 a week in Boston to \$16.44 in Savannah.

For all women employees the range was from \$13.38 in Boston to \$5.79 in Charleston.

For white and Negro women on productive work weekly earnings were just about comparable in Atlantic City—\$7.99 for the white and \$7.64 for the Negro women. Negro women in Chicago had the highest average weekly earnings of any such city group covered by the study, \$9.83, but the earnings of the white women averaged \$11.14.

Wages of women workers in the South were distressingly low for both white and Negro workers on productive work. The widest differences in average weekly wages was in Memphis, where white women received \$9.21 for an average week's work while Negro women found but \$5.57 in an average pay envelope. In Jacksonville the earnings were \$8.43 for white women and \$5.01 for Negro women; in Charlotte they were \$8.47 for white and \$5.25 for Negro; in Greenville they were respectively \$7.84 and \$5.45; in Savannah, \$7.62 and \$5.32. In no southern city covered by the Women's Bureau in the laundry study did the average earnings of Negro women reach the exceedingly low minimum of \$5.60 set by the N. R. A. laundry code.

Hotels and restaurants.

Many Negro women have found work in one or another of the branches of public housekeeping, as cooks, waitresses, chambermaids, cafeteria counter girls, and so forth. In 1930, the census reported more than 86,000 Negro women in such occupations. Though hours tend to be shorter and better standardized in public than in private housekeeping, the workweek of the woman in a hotel or restaurant is likely to be much longer than that of the woman in factory, store, or laundry.

Negro women in hotels and restaurants were included in a Women's Bureau survey of the wages and hours of Tennessee women in the winter of 1935-36. In the hotel industry in Tennessee more jobs are open to Negro than to white employees, so the data in the study are of special interest.

In the lodging departments of hotels most of the jobs open to women are those of chambermaids, cleaners, and linen-room attendants. The first two were filled by Negro women and the last by white women. Average week's earnings for Negro chambermaids and general cleaners were \$5.65, the most common rate of pay for this work being about \$25 a month. About two-fifths of the employees in the lodging departments were given a noon meal or their meals and lodging. For the few hotels with laundries the average week's earnings of the women laundry workers—chiefly Negroes—were only \$4.60.

In hotel kitchens Negro women generally were found doing vegetable or pantry work, most of the cooks being men. Meals allowed on duty augmented somewhat the low average week's earnings of \$5.50. For the smaller group of white women doing somewhat similar work the week's earnings averaged about \$8. Very few Negro waitresses were found in hotel dining rooms.

While the wage scale for women in the kitchens of restaurants not in hotels was somewhat higher than of those in hotels, the average earnings of Negro women in such kitchens were but \$8.55. Over 80 percent of the Negro women, many of whom served as the chief cook of the restaurant, had earnings below \$10.

Beauty shops.

A relatively new occupation for Negro women workers is that of beauty service. That this occupation is developing rapidly for Negro women is common knowledge, but this fact is proved by the census, which shows that while in 1910 there were only about 3,800 Negro women workers in such employment, in 1930 the number was $3\frac{1}{2}$ times as large, or about 13,000.

Some indication of employment conditions for Negro women in beauty shops may be gained from a Women's Bureau study of such establishments in the winter of 1933-34. In the four cities covered by the survey, 390 white shops employing some 1,300 women, and 75 Negro shops employing 150 women, were covered. Most of the Negro women were serving the needs of their own race, but a few were at work in white beauty shops or barber shops.

Though beauty-shop employment is sometimes considered to offer desirable vocational opportunities for Negro girls and women, earnings reported to Women's Bureau agents were low. The average weekly wage was only \$8, or about three-fifths of that of the white women in the industry. Almost two-thirds of the women received less than \$10 a week and only about 1 in 16 earned as much as \$15. Hours were very long. Three of every five Negro women reported had a schedule longer than 48 hours. More than two-thirds of these women had worked, or been ready for service, more than 54 hours in the week. Closing hours were later and the spread of hours was longer than in the white shops.

AGRICULTURE

Long as may be the hours of the Negro domestic worker, low as may be her earnings and those of the Negro woman in laundry, hotel, or restaurant, in general the economic status of these workers is much more favorable than that of the Negro woman agricultural laborer. For this woman worker there are few aspects of her working life over which she has any real control. Crop conditions, markets, and prices; the employment status of her family, whether as owners, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, or wage workers; the necessity of accepting field work as one of a family group rather than on an individual basis; lack of educational facilities, particularly in the rural South, which would enable her to equip herself for other employment if it were available—these are some of the factors that materially affect her living.

Numbers employed.

In 1930, agriculture absorbed the services of the second largest group of Negro women—about half a million. Roughly seven in eight of these women—about one-fourth of whom were wage workers and three-fifths unpaid family workers—were in the seven southern States of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas. Cotton is, of course, the major crop in these States, and it is on cotton that Negro labor is so largely employed.

Typical employment conditions.

A marked trend from tenant farmer to the lower status of sharecropper is shown for Negro labor in the South from 1920 to 1935 by United States Department of Agriculture reports—a trend not shared to the same extent by the white agricultural group. Though many stories have appeared recently in periodicals and the press concerning

the near-desperate plight of some of these workers, little information is available to define the problem with any exactitude. A brief but vivid description of the Southern sharecropper-system was given by a Negro woman sharecropper at a national economic conference sponsored by the Joint Committee on National Recovery, from which the following is quoted:

And clothing isn't in it. Since they stopped using fertilizer the clothes are very scanty, because we could take fertilizer sacks and make aprons and dresses for the little children. But since they are not using fertilizer very much you just can't hide their nakedness through the winter. Sometimes you find in some of the houses that the little children are barefooted, and the children in some of the houses couldn't go to school in the winter because they did not have clothes to go in. And some of them haven't even got houses to stay in as good as lots of common barns. And some families of 12 or 14 live in houses with maybe one room and kitchen, with maybe three beds where 10 or 12 are sleeping in the three beds, and the kitchen is so open that you can just pass by and look through and see them all sitting in there, and not even have a flue for the stove pipe to go in, and the stove is setting out in the floor. And maybe they have two joints of a stove-pipe, and maybe one piece of elbow, and when you start a fire you will get smoke all over the house until it gets started burning good, and you have to stay outside until it starts burning good because it smokes you out. Families have to put up with all kinds of things like that.

Though data on Negro agricultural workers are difficult to secure, a survey of agricultural labor conditions in Concordia Parish, La., issued by the United States Department of Agriculture in October 1937, throws some light on the status of these workers in a rich cotton section. Both men and women cotton pickers were interviewed by Government agents. Wages were found to be unbelievably low, year's earnings for agricultural work averaging only \$41.67 for women, \$120.19 for men. The average income for a whole year, including earnings of dependents, relief (both work and direct), and nonagricultural earnings, was only \$62.36 for the women; for men it reached \$177.53. None of the women who did only farm work had more than 150 days of employment, and most of them had less than 90 days in the year.

After stating that more than half of the Negro women interviewed had less than a fifth-grade education, this Department of Agriculture report concludes by outlining in general the economic status of Negro cotton labor:

In summary, the basis of the labor supply on the plantations of Concordia Parish is this uneducated and racially distinct group of people. Both men and women work in the fields. The combination of low wage rates and intermittent employment means meager annual earnings. Many of the workers, though not employed full time, live in shacks on the plantation the year round; others come from nearby villages or come across the river from Natchez, Miss. Social contact is primarily within the group itself with little or no outside association. Concordia Parish presents a picture of the evolution of the old plantation with its slave labor emerging as a unit operated with cropper or wage labor. The position of its laboring class has not changed materially from that of earlier times.

The future of southern agriculture and the Negro worker.

Disheartening as are the present circumstances of Negro agricultural workers in the South, the future seems to hold even more serious threats to their economic security. An article in the Monthly Labor Review for July 1937, by N. A. Tolles of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, discusses among other topics the relocation of displaced farm tenants:

The greatest potential source of future migration in the United States is to be found among the tenant farmers of the southeastern Cotton Belt. The

thousands of former tenants now to be found seeking casual jobs in Florida may be only the forerunners of much greater numbers of both white and Negro migrants.

Tenancy in the Old South is the successor to the slave system. Both institutions were, in different ways, devices for holding on the land, on a subsistence basis, sufficient labor to meet the maximum seasonal requirements of agriculture. As a result, the Southeast is now drenched with labor and is therefore especially vulnerable to all forces which may cause the displacement of workers. The depression, followed by the crop-restriction program, has already forced some displacement of tenants. Much greater displacements may be caused in the near future as a result of technical developments. If the mechanical cotton picker is perfected, most of the demand for tenants and wage workers in the eastern Cotton Belt may be eliminated. But apart from the cotton picker, the spread of improved methods already in use is likely to cause considerable displacement. Mechanical equipment and the use of check-row planting are capable of eliminating much of the labor requirement for cotton raising, except in the picking season. It is questionable whether the landowner of the Old South will continue to provide subsistence the year round for workers who are needed only during a brief season. To compete with the rapidly developing areas of the West and of foreign countries, the plantation of the Old South may be forced to adopt its competitors' method of hiring workers only during the season when their labor is required. In that case a large fraction of the 1,000,000 tenants of the old Cotton Belt may be converted into constant migrants from job to job or displaced from agriculture altogether.

MANUFACTURING AND MECHANICAL INDUSTRIES

The industries the census classifies as "manufacturing and mechanical" rank third in giving jobs to Negro women; the number so employed was 101,000 in 1930. The situation with regard to employment opportunities for Negro women in this group of industries differed widely from that of the domestic and personal service occupations in the 10 years between 1920 and 1930. While thousands of new workers found jobs as domestic employees, laundry operatives, or beauty-shop attendants, there was actually a small decrease in the total number of Negro women employed by industry.

Why this decrease took place cannot be explained. One possible cause is that in 1920 there still were many Negro women employed in the jobs they had taken on during the war-time period of labor scarcity, and that by 1930 most of these jobs would have reverted to white men or women. Another explanation concerns the tremendous technological changes in industry, which have been focused largely on the elimination of low-skilled jobs, the jobs on which the majority of Negro women are employed.

Numbers employed.

The tobacco industries employed more than 18,000 Negro women in 1930. Next in rank as employers of Negro women were the clothing industries, with 16,000; food and allied products, with 11,000; textiles, with 6,000; lumber and furniture, with 3,200; iron and steel, with 1,600; and paper, printing, and allied industries, with 1,400. Miscellaneous manufacturing accounted for an additional 10,000 Negro women, and dressmakers not in factories for 20,000.

General characteristics of factory employment for Negro women.

In a compilation by the Women's Bureau of data on Negro women in industry from reports for 15 States secured over a number of years, it was shown that large numbers of these workers were employed in sweeping and cleaning of various kinds. Others worked at tasks that might be classed as general labor. This would include most of the

work done in glass factories; in textiles, with the exception of hosiery; in the wood industry; in tobacco rehandling; in meat packing, in which a third of the women reported worked with casings and chitterlings; the washing of cans or dishes in bakeries, canneries, and food establishments; peeling or pitting fruit; cleaning and pressing clothing, done by over half the women reported in clothing establishments; sorting rags in rag and paper factories; and picking out nut meats. Though in some instances Negro women were found in considerable numbers to be operating machines of various kinds, many of these involved only simple operations or repetitive movements, though some required dexterity or a degree of skill. A few Negro women were in supervisory posts or in other positions involving more or less responsibility.

Though current information concerning the work status of Negro women in industry is scattered and not comprehensive, brief summaries from various reports may serve to outline certain economic problems such women must meet.

Tobacco stemmeries.

In 1934 the Women's Bureau made an investigation of the current pay rolls of the stemmery departments in three branches of the tobacco-manufacturing industry in Virginia and North Carolina. An overwhelming majority of the stemmeries' employees were found to be women, largely Negro women, whose work consists of removing the stem from the leaf and of getting the tobacco ready for the various processes of manufacture.

Weekly earnings were very low. Of all employees included, one-tenth earned less than \$5 for the week, not far from half earned less than \$10, and about 87 percent received less than \$12. Over four-fifths of the employees covered by the survey worked full-time hours.

That many workers in the tobacco plants have failed to earn a livelihood and required supplementary aid from relief agencies was evident from the firms' pay-roll data and facts from the emergency relief agencies. In a tobacco manufacturing center the emergency relief administration reported in one month that slightly more than 10 percent of its case load was experienced tobacco-factory workers. In another city over one-sixth of the cases in one month, and over one-seventh in another month, were families in which one or more members were tobacco workers. In one city, roughly two-thirds of the families were receiving full relief, and relief of tobacco workers in this city was averaging a few thousand dollars a month.

In regard to the ability of the industry to pay a living wage, the Women's Bureau report stated:

Labor cost is comparatively such a small part of the total production costs that the wage levels could be raised without making an appreciable difference to the industry. One stemmery, with 2,000 employees showing an average weekly wage of \$10.82, had produced during the week over 3,000,000 pounds of strips, or enough tobacco for a billion cigarettes. The cost of labor operations was less than a penny a pound of prepared tobacco, or less than a mill per package of 20 cigarettes.

Negro women in Tennessee factories.

Not far from 1,000 Negro women in factories were included by the Women's Bureau in its State-wide study of women in Tennessee industries in the winter of 1935-36. In the middle Tennessee area the average week's earnings for the 361 women covered were \$7.30.

Most of the women were employed in tobacco plants and warehouses on jobs such as stemming, stripping, and hanging tobacco leaf.

One large hosiery mill employed women on boarding—that is, pulling damp stockings over heated forms to shape and press them, an operation usually done by men and boys.

Negro women formed a larger proportion (18 percent) of all women employed in manufacturing in the western area of the State, especially in Memphis, than elsewhere. They were working as operatives in one or more establishments in the shelling of nuts; in work on cotton and burlap bags, especially the rehandling of bags; in various jobs in wood-working, caning chairs, and making fruit boxes and baskets; in packing cosmetics and other pharmaceutical products; and in making paper boxes for cosmetics. The average weekly earnings of Negro women in this section were the exceedingly low amount of \$4.50. Women worked 4 or 5 days a week picking nut meats for earnings of \$2.55. Year's earnings were reported for 62 Negro women in Tennessee factories. For this group the average for the year was only \$345.

Negro women in Chicago factories.

An informal survey by a branch of the Chicago Y. W. C. A. of a relatively small number of Negro women industrial workers in the spring of 1936 provided material of interest. Describing the cotton-garment industry as one of the more important industries employing Negroes, the report states that usually the work is power-machine operating on a straight piece-work basis. During the N. R. A. the minimum rate for experienced workers was \$13 a week. Of nine girls experienced in this field, five showed earnings of less than \$10 after the N. R. A. ceased to function. One earned less than \$5. Other summarized statements from the report follow:

Another industry in which many Negro girls have had experience is that of dates and nuts. Though employed for only a very short season of the year, earnings are notoriously low. Of 17 applicants who worked in this industry since the N. R. A., all specified their earnings to be less than \$10 a week. Six of them were earning between \$5 and \$7.50. Two of them made less than \$5. Though hours of work were not reported, it is known that the industry works full time during the busy season, during which all these girls were employed.

Another industry that employs chiefly Negro workers is the used burlap bag industry. Reports of workers indicate that wages are somewhat higher, or between \$10 and \$12.50. This is an industry with disagreeable and hazardous conditions. The presence of dust and lint in the air, unless carefully controlled, is a well-known hazard, and the material is disagreeable to handle and hard on the hands.

Of 91 girls who had factory experience since May 1935, half earned less than \$10 a week, and of the industries represented the lowest paid was the date and nut industry, with an average of \$6.72 a week. These figures present a glaring contrast to the general average of \$14.97 a week for women workers in Chicago factories in 1935, compiled by the division of statistics and research of the Illinois Department of Labor.

Another study by the same Y. W. C. A. was concerned with employment possibilities of Negro women workers in the Chicago needle trades. The investigation showed that Negro workers were chiefly employed in the cotton goods lines, generally somewhat less skilled. Of the 48 firms about which information was secured, only 13 employed any Negro workers. All but two made house dresses and aprons. Even within this industry, opportunities were distinctly limited. Several of the firms employed Negroes only on pressing, a job that requires unusual strength and endurance, on the ground that "the

Negro can stand heat better than a white girl." Comparatively few concerns had both white and Negro workers on power-machine work. The few that did employ many Negro workers employed virtually no white workers.

NEGRO WOMEN AS WHITE-COLLAR WORKERS

Numbers employed.

In 1910 there were only about 30,000 Negro women in professional service; in 1920 there were almost 40,000; in 1930 there were 63,000. These figures represent an increase of more than 100 percent from 1910 to 1930. Clerical workers within the ranks of gainfully employed Negro women numbered only 3,000 in 1910; in 1920 there were 8,000 such workers; and in 1930 there were 11,000. More than 7,000 Negro women worked in stores in 1910; in 1920 this group had increased to 11,500; and in 1930 the total was 14,500.

In all, Negro women in what may be termed "white-collar occupations"—in transportation and communication, trade, public service, professional service, and clerical occupations—totaled but 91,600 in 1930, or only about 5 percent of the Negro women gainfully occupied. On the other hand, native white women in the same occupations totaled 4,330,000 in the same year, or 56 percent of all gainfully occupied white women of native birth.

Reasons for small numbers of Negro white-collar workers.

Naturally there are many reasons for this disparity in the proportions of Negro and white workers in the better paid, more highly skilled, occupational fields. Educational facilities for Negro workers are notoriously inadequate in some sections of the United States. Negroes have had a relatively short span of years in which to demonstrate their ability in certain fields requiring training and skill. But there is an additional reason of much significance, which is clearly suggested in a recent publication of the Works Progress Administration of Georgia, a State which contains only slightly less than a tenth of all the Negroes in the United States, entitled "Occupational Characteristics of White-Collar and Skilled Negro Workers."

The shift downward in the present [the shift from white-collar to skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled positions] was caused by the depression. White-collar occupations among Negroes depend, for the most part, upon the Negroes themselves. The doctors in the main have only Negro patients; Negro lawyers have Negro clients; and Negro teachers must teach in Negro schools. Negro business has a limited market, as it is confined to the Negro group. During a period of retrenchment, certain phases of white-collar work continue while others disappear. Negro businesses with no reserve disappear during periods of depression, and the clerks, stenographers, and messenger boys hired must find other occupations. Generally, there is nothing else but to go to lower occupational levels.

With the great bulk of Negro workers, men and women, receiving wages that permit of only the barest subsistence—as has been shown by the data for various occupational groups in the present report—the reasons for the limitations of Negro white-collar opportunities become plain. Unless Negro workers have adequate purchasing power, they are unable to secure needed professional services; to buy from Negro stores; to attend Negro theaters and other places of amusement; to protect themselves through insurance agencies and the like. Increased

white-collar employment among Negro workers inevitably will follow a rise in the economic status of all Negro wage earners.

Negro white-collar workers in Atlanta.

The Georgia Works Progress Administration report, to which reference has been made, contains interesting data concerning Negroes—both men and women—in white-collar jobs, including those of the professions, in Atlanta. This survey, conducted from January to July 1936, covered nearly 5,000 persons. Of 1,500 Negro women white-collar and skilled workers in Atlanta, just half reported their usual occupation as professional in character and nearly one-fourth as clerical. With regard to their jobs at the time the survey was made, however, only 38 percent were employed in the professions and about 19 percent in clerical work. Over a fifth of all the women were unemployed.

The average monthly income for just over 3,300 white-collar and skilled workers in this Atlanta study was \$60. The professional workers had the highest income (\$72.75), the skilled workers followed (\$70), and the clerical workers ranked lowest (\$63).

Negro professional women.

Teachers accounted for nearly three-fourths of Negro professional women in 1930, and trained nurses for nearly one-tenth. In addition, at least 1,000 Negro women were employed as actresses, as college presidents and professors, and as musicians and teachers of music.

Information on the salaries paid to Negro teachers is available in a report prepared by the Office of Education of the United States Department of the Interior issued in 1934. Salaries of rural teachers in 17 States and the District of Columbia averaged \$945 for white teachers and \$388 for Negro teachers. For teachers in junior and senior high schools in 17 States and the District of Columbia, salaries averaged \$1,479 for the white and \$926 for the Negro teachers.

Additional information on salaries paid Negro rural teachers in a number of States is available in a 1937 report of the National Education Association. The lowest annual salary for Negro rural teachers was \$150 in Mississippi, where white teachers received an average salary of \$458, more than three times as high. The highest Negro average for rural teachers was \$812 in Maryland, in which State white teachers averaged \$1,474.

Negro women as clerical workers.

A survey of office workers in seven cities was conducted by the Women's Bureau during 1931 and the early part of 1932. In two of these cities—Atlanta and Chicago—an effort was made to secure information for Negro women employed in the types of office covered. The two races were not employed together in any office visited, but five insurance companies and one publisher in Chicago, and two insurance offices in Atlanta, all controlled and managed by Negro ownership, were found to employ Negroes. In both cities several banks and other types of office employing Negroes were visited, but they had only from one to three women, all combined being too few to form a representative group.

In the 6 Chicago offices 101 Negro women, 90 in insurance and 11 in publishing, were included. Their average monthly salary in insur-

ance was \$80, as compared to \$94 for the white women in insurance. In Atlanta insurance offices the average monthly salary for Negro women was \$55, in contrast to \$94 for white women. In Chicago about one-third of the Negro women (including 11 in publishing), and in Atlanta about seven-eighths, were on salaries of less than \$75 a month. Four-fifths in Chicago and 98 percent in Atlanta were on salaries of less than \$100.

One fact of special interest in this study was that the amount of general schooling and the attendance at business schools were higher for the Negro women than for the study as a whole. In Chicago 50 of the 100 women with education reported had completed high school and 34 had some advanced training. In Atlanta 16 of 56 were high-school graduates and 23 had had some advanced training.

Negro women in retail trade.

Though no information is at hand showing wages or working conditions of Negro women in stores, an article in the November 1937 issue of the Monthly Labor Review on "The Negro in Retail Trade" may serve to indicate something of the present status of employment opportunities in this field. The report states that—

Negro proprietors in 1935 were operating 23,490 retail stores in the United States—a decrease of 2,211 stores as compared with 1929. The reduction in the number of such stores in the South was 2,936. In the North and West, however, they increased respectively by 490 and 235.

In 1929 the pay rolls of these stores totaled \$8,528,000; in 1935, \$5,021,000, a drop of 41.1 percent. For the same years the total value of sales was respectively \$101,146,000 and \$48,987,000—a decline of 51.6 percent. Within this period, 1929 to 1935, the number of retail stores operated by proprietors of all racial groups expanded by 110,803, although the chain-store units decreased by 19,828, pay rolls dwindled 30.2 percent, and the aggregate value of all sales declined 32.5 percent.

MEASURES FOR IMPROVING THE ECONOMIC STATUS OF NEGRO WOMEN WORKERS

The public must pay heavily for the substandard working and living conditions of many thousands of Negro women workers. When people have no jobs or their wages are too low for adequate support, they still must have food, shelter, and clothing. The presence on relief rolls in 1935—the last date for which there is accurate information—of one in every four Negro women workers, and the fact that two-fifths of these unemployed women were the economic heads of families, constitute a situation that is of grave import to the citizens who must support these women and their families.

Experience has shown further that low living standards are costly in that they breed crime and disease, which affect all citizens. Workers desperate for jobs are the prey of unscrupulous employers, who by using cheap labor are able to undercut employers willing to pay fair wages. At times such workers are available as strikebreakers. When a significant proportion of the population is forced to live at a substandard economic level, all classes—farmers, factory workers, merchants, professional men—are deprived of the benefits resulting from adequate purchasing power in the hands of those who would spend if they could.

Because of the relation of the problems of Negro women to those of other community groups, it may be helpful to discuss certain measures

for improving the economic status of Negro women that seem most practicable and realistic at the present time.

Social and labor legislation.

In general, woman labor has benefited markedly from social and labor legislation during recent years. State hour and minimum-wage laws, workmen's compensation provisions, the joint Federal and State social security program, have served to make more secure and satisfactory woman's economic status.

Unfortunately, Negro women workers have by no means shared equally with white women in the benefits of these provisions. Workers in agriculture and domestic service, largely because of the difficulty of labor-law administration, have been exempted from the coverage of most of the laws; and it has been shown that the great majority of Negro women workers are to be found within these two occupational fields.

Take minimum-wage laws, for example. Such laws to date have been enacted by 25 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. In general, minimum-wage legislation has been designed for several purposes: To set a bottom limit below which wage rates cannot fall; to assure to women wages adequate to meet the cost of a healthful standard of living; to end sweatshops and cutthroat competition among employers; to relieve the community of supplementing low wages by public and private relief; and to establish on the part of workers the purchasing power that is necessary to bring about and maintain industrial recovery.

However, rough estimates made in the Women's Bureau indicate that only about 1 in 10 of all Negro women workers are covered potentially by minimum-wage legislation, though about one-fourth of all such workers are to be found in States having minimum-wage laws. Of all women, Negro and white, roughly 4,000,000, or well over one-third of all employed women, are covered by such laws. It is evident that minimum-wage laws thus far have not been an important factor in raising the wages of the bulk of Negro women workers.

On the other hand, one aspect of minimum-wage administration during recent months has been of considerable benefit to large numbers of Negro women. When the States with newly enacted laws have begun to issue individual wage orders covering specific occupations, almost universally they have covered first the service industries where many Negro women are employed. Laundries, hotels and restaurants, and beauty shops have been among the first industries for which wage rates have been set.

Improvement in educational and training facilities.

In addition to general schooling, specialized training in an occupational field at some stage of the education process is desirable for all young Americans. It is also very useful for older workers who have not had such opportunities at an earlier period. The worker with no special training whatsoever is at a serious disadvantage in seeking employment in an age that is rapidly becoming more highly specialized.

The present demand for skilled domestic workers, so much greater than the supply, points to an urgent need for better training facilities for such workers. In the spring of 1937, in the neighborhood of 400,000 applicants describing themselves as domestic employees were registered in the active files of the United States Employment Service

though a survey conducted by the Employment Service as of January 1, 1937, had indicated that at least 500 cities were facing a shortage of trained household workers, and possible placement in these cities over a year might reach nearly half a million.

An important contribution to household training has been made by the Works Progress Administration in many centers throughout the country. For example, during the year 1936, training projects for domestics were conducted in 184 centers. Of 3,629 persons receiving certificates as domestic trainees, 3,491 were placed through the facilities of the many offices of the United States Employment Service. Other agencies, public and private, offer training facilities for household workers, though the combined efforts of all these groups fall far short of taking care of the existing needs in this regard. Schools are badly needed also for vocational training in other lines, such as beauty culture, millinery, and power-machine operating.

Trade-union organization.

Recent developments in American trade-unionism have been significant in relation to Negro workers. For instance, one of the most important union contracts affecting women workers in American trade-union history was negotiated in August 1937 between the United Laundry Workers Local 300 of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and a large New York City firm which is in the towel and uniform supply laundry business. The agreement covers drivers and also about 8,000 inside workers, by far the greatest proportion of whom are women. Among the important provisions in the contract are the following: A limitation of hours for women to 45 a week; a minimum wage for inside employees of \$15.75 for a 45-hour week, with a guaranteed minimum of \$15 a week for 11 months; a raise in wage rates of at least 10 percent, with a minimum raise of \$2 unless a greater raise is required to bring the weekly earnings up to \$15.75; a week's vacation and 3 days' sick leave with pay for each worker after 1 year's service; and 7 fixed holidays with pay. An additional provision of particular interest which is made a condition of the continuation of the agreement is to the effect that "the union shall make all reasonable, customary, and usual attempts authorized by law to procure contracts with the said competitors of the employer within a reasonable time from the date thereof."

The success of the laundry workers' union in New York City that negotiated this agreement for a section of its membership is attested by a recently estimated membership of 30,000 persons, men and women and white and Negro. While the union has obtained a guaranteed annual wage in the linen-supply division only, union contracts with other firms regularize many important aspects of employment.

But it is far simpler to talk about the economic problems of Negro women workers and to suggest possible remedies than it is to take definite action toward their solution. These problems have taken deep root in the social and economic structure during past decades, and only untiring effort on the part of Negroes themselves, aided by the Nation's socially minded citizens, will succeed in eradicating them.

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