

**Title**

"Low Wages for Women," *The Independent*, 8 Nov. 1888.

I have read, within the last six days, as many earnest, carefully written papers in leading American and English magazines on the position of woman in the labor-field; if we can call that a position which is described as a desperate, hopeless struggle for a foothold. If we may believe these statements, man is in full possession of the ship Labor, steers and sails it, while the poor shipwrecked woman clutches half drowning at the gunwale,[1] trying to climb on board. The whole question is opened afresh.

These papers are written for the most part by gentlewomen of the upper class, and are full of sympathy for their underpaid sisters in every rank of labor, especially for those who have aspirations above the work by which they earn (or do not earn) their bread. Piteous tales are told us of individual shop-girls with a yearning for art who starve on three dollars a week, or with seamstresses who "delight in classical music" but who cannot find work even at the slop-shops.[2]

All of these ugly, cruel facts are as common as true. Manufacturers, whether Jew or Gentile, will not pay more than forty cents per dozen for gingham shirts as long as there are long lines of women at their doors struggling to get them to make at that price. And there are men and women in every rank, who, because they must earn their bread, are forced to put their talents or longings for art, music, or literature aside in this life as voyagers pack away the tools on shipboard which they hope to use in the good country to which they are bound.

But is sympathy what these unsuccessful women-workers need? Shall we stand and weep with the lines of hungry seamstresses waiting for the gingham shirts or inquire into the reason why they are there? Is there no better-paid work? Why is it not given to them?

Let me, too, tell a piteous story to my discouraged sisters. It is absolutely true and I think pertinent to these questions.

About twelve years ago John —, a hod-carrier,[3] lived in a snug little house in Philadelphia, with Susan, his wife, and five children. Susan was a clean, energetic, pleasant little body, who could neither read nor write and had no social ambitions, but who in her work showed one quality, which Pennsylvanians call “thorough-through.”

One day John fell from the roof of a house and was carried home dead. Susan had just money enough to bury him. Her oldest child was but eight, the youngest a baby at the breast. She was still young and pretty. She had neither craft, trade nor skill with which to provide bread for the hungry children. Surely here was a desperate case; a ready-made victim for “sweaters,”[4] or for the procurers[5] of Hell who lie in wait at every corner for such women. Susan, however, was not the stuff out of which victims are made. There was but one kind of work she could do and that the lowest. She could clean— sweep, scrub and dust— but she did that with such thoroughness and neatness that it became a fine art in her hands.

She went out with thousands of other poor widows, to “clean house” by the day. Very soon the wealthy women who employed her discovered that this one widow, out of the thousands, cleaned a house as quickly and perfectly as its owner would have done, had she been able to do it. They gradually fell into the habit, when out of town for the summer, of giving Susan full charge of their houses to prepare for their return; certain, not only that they would be thoroughly clean from garret[6] to cellar but that every drain would be flushed, every window shining, every curtain prettily draped and the most precious bit of china washed and in its place with the fracture of an atom.

After many years, Susan is still only a charwoman:[7] her one ambition has been to be the best cleaner in town. No other vague aspirations have been allowed to interfere with her steady

success. She has a corps of assistants trained by herself. Her services are bespoken months in advance, while the other thousands of unable widows wander from door to door begging work. She owns the pretty little house in which she lives; two of her sons are in trades; her daughter is cashier in a large shop.

I could tell you many such homely stories of success: of one woman who earns her living by making muffins; another, buttonholes; another, pickles. But the significant point is this: that the muffins, the pickles and the buttonholes are the best of their kind. Mothers of families complain that it is well-nigh impossible to find a quick, neat seamstress. Modistes[8] declare that there are very few competent dressmakers or fitters; every housekeeper knows how difficult it is to find a skillful, honest cook or chambermaid, who respects herself enough to be respectful. When the competent, thorough woman appears, she commands her own price in all these departments of labor.

The day for the aspiring, unable Jack of all trades is over in this country. Competition in every line of labor is so great that only the specialist who does one thing better than his fellows can succeed. Men recognize that fact. Women, as yet, do not. They too often take up any work that offers in a half-hearted way, striving, not to do it well but to find some higher work, longing for art while they sell hosiery or for Wagner while they drape a skirt.

The friends of working women, it seems to me, are taking the wrong way to give them success or higher wages.

It is not by abuse of the sweater who pays one of these women forty cents for making a dozen gingham shirts that we shall gain more money for her, but by urging her to do some work honestly and thoroughly that she may turn her back on the sweater and his gingham shirts.

PHILADELPHIA, PENN.

## **Notes**

1. Upper edge of a ship's hull.
2. Historical term for shops selling ready-made, and often cheap, clothing.
3. Laborer who carries construction supplies for bricklayers, stonemasons, etc.
4. Popular term for tailors working as subcontractors in the ready-made garment manufacturing industry, sometimes used in derogatory fashion given their association with poor working conditions and increased standardization of fashion through increasing industrialization.
5. A term that would have described a pimp or madam, one involved in overseeing sex workers.
6. Attic room, inhabitable but usually rustic, cramped, and dismal.
7. A woman hired on a part-time basis to perform odd household jobs, as opposed to a household maid.
8. A designer or merchant of fashionable women's clothing.

## **Key Word**

women's work

## **Creator**

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