

Employment For Women

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The Victorians

The 19th century saw an increase in the employment of women in both domestic service and other areas such as factory and shop work. This was partly due to the growth in population in the towns and cities along with a move from agricultural work to more industrialised activities, a time acknowledged as the Industrial Revolution.

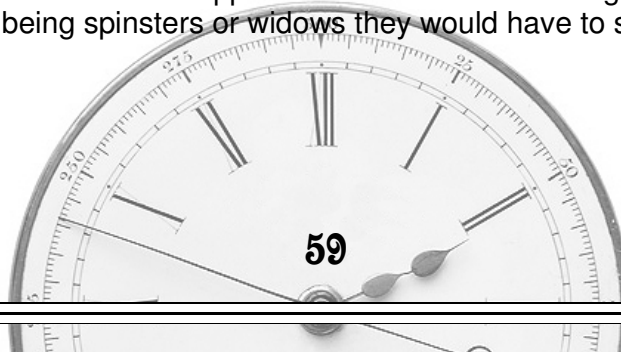
Women were employed in many areas and the type of employment that they could achieve for themselves depended a lot upon their social class and background. In Victorian society there was still a very important and rigid class system that defined the roles of men and women in society and affected every level of their daily lives.

The highest class was the Nobility and Gentry. Women from this class would not have needed to work outside the home unless they were left poor after the death of a father or husband, with any inheritance being passed down to a male heir. Women in this class were often seen as 'ladies of leisure' with many domestic servants employed to carry out all the household and domestic duties. In a wealthy house servants could often outnumber members of the family.

The next class in society was that of the Middle Class. Many women, like those of the gentry still enjoyed time to pursue leisurely pastimes. However, some middle class women might have helped with the family-run business and may have carried on with the business after the death of their husband or father. Typically their involvement would have been bookkeeping, correspondence, dealing with clients and arranging deals. Taking on the position of a teacher or governess was a popular choice for the educated women of this class who may have fallen upon hard times and therefore had the need to work outside the family.

Many middle class families would have had domestic servants to carry out the work in the house, although less in number than that of an upper class household. It was seen as a symbol and confirmation of their middle class status to have domestic servants and many families would make financial sacrifices to employ at least one maid-of-all-work.

Next came the Upper Working Class. Women working in this class would be skilled and would not be involved in any employment that required physical labour, although they would have the need to work for a wage. Similarly to some women of the middle classes, women of the upper working class may have found positions in shops or as bookkeepers, nurses or schoolteachers and governesses, many of the roles that would only have gone to those with a sound education. These women may have moved down from the upper classes after a change in their financial circumstances, or being spinsters or widows they would have to support themselves.



The last of the classes was the Lower Working Class, which included desperately poor women who's only means of supporting themselves was to take any paid, usually unskilled work they could get. The new Poor Act pronounced many women as 'able bodied' and therefore they should work hard to support themselves alongside working class men, including jobs that demanded hard physical labour.

These poorly educated women provided a cheap and controllable workforce for the factories and sweatshops with employers taking advantage of the lowered status and rights of women in the working environment. Importantly, only men had the support and backing of the workforce Unions.

Women and children were usually the lowest paid of all workers, with the male workers commanding the highest paid jobs and supervisory roles.

Some industries were thought of as more suitable to the traditional feminine skills of women and so in some parts of the country, women were sought after and exploited in employment for industries such as textiles, pottery and clothing manufacture.

Working class women found life extremely tough. They worked very long hours for a very small wage but also had the additional burden and strain of running their own home without any help, often in squalid, slum-like conditions.

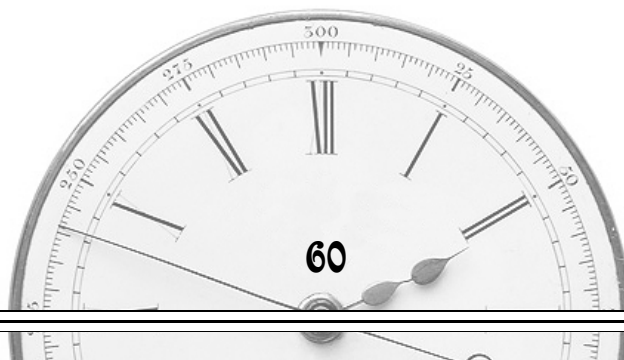
Domestic Service

By the end of the 19th century the most common work for lower working class women was Domestic Service. And although a popular choice over working in factories and industry it was still physically demanding with long hours.

The working week was 7 days and at least 12 hours a day but would often be longer. Servants would usually have some time off to go to church on Sunday. Some households also allowed their staff to take one day a month off to socialise with family and friends but the house owner could cancel this at very short notice.

The amount of wage depended on years of service and experience along with the position applied for. The starting wage for the lowest servant was around £10 to £12 a year with a rise of around £1 a year until the top wage was reached for that position.

Most houses would have a rigid set of rules explaining what was expected of all staff. Various fines would be deducted from their wages according to which rules had been broken.



Smaller households would only be able to afford one servant, usually an overworked maid-of-all-work. As her title suggests she would be responsible for all the domestic duties within the house and would work very long hours with little rest.

There was also a kind of 'class system' amongst the servants of a large household with the 'upper' servants lording it over the 'lower' servants. A hierarchal system existed starting with the House Steward and Head Housekeeper at the top, all the way down to the Scullery Maid.

A large house could employ some of the following staff:

The Steward

Who supervised the household. He would be responsible for the hiring and firing of other domestic staff, household accounts and the wages book. He would have had his own room in the house.

Housekeeper

Who supervised the female maids and could also hire and fire staff. Her main duties would be to look after the household linen, china and stores and to order fresh supplies when needed. Like the Steward she would also have her own room where she could entertain other servants of the higher ranks.

Lady's Maid

Who was employed to look after her mistress. Her main responsibilities were to make the bed and keep the room tidy, ironing, dressmaking and hairdressing. She often had a room close to the mistress.

Head Housemaid

Would assist the Housekeeper and distribute work to the other housemaids. Duties were cleaning rooms, lighting fires, answering bells and taking hot water up to rooms.

Kitchen & Scullery Maids

Worked in the kitchen, preparing for the chef to begin the day's work. Chores included lighting the fire, washing all the cutlery and china, scrubbing floors and tables.

