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The Road to Economic Independence

Following are the primary sources utilized in this paper:

1) Unit 1-Module 4: Lowell Textile Worker (1898), Harriet Hanson Robinson.

2) Unit 2-Module 6: Declaration of Sentiments (1898), Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

3) Unit 3-Module 14: The Sexual Sell (1963), Betty Friedan.

A look back at the struggle of women throughout American history shows that they have made great strides in their fight for equal rights. Their struggle has encompassed education, suffrage and equal opportunity in the workplace. After independence, in contrast to their aspirations, women faced discrimination, violence and institutional barriers to equal participation in the society. Disadvantaged by patriarchy, women worked in the fields, fed their children, maintained the house and served their husbands. Although the Industrial Revolution provided them with an opportunity to work in factories and earn daily wages, the working conditions were far from bearable. This paper explores the working conditions faced by factory working women utilizing Harriet Hanson Robinson "Lowell Textile Workers" as a reference. It explores the Declaration of Sentiments (1848) to discover the social, political and economic factors that placed women in a disadvantaged position of economic dependence. The journey of women on the road to economic freedom shows that although many feats are achieved by women over the year, there are many reversals and constants as well, which remain posing hurdles in this journey. To substantiate this thesis, Betty Friedan’s "Sexual Sell" is utilized.

Till the 19th century, the Doctrine of Coverture prevented women from making legal decisions for themselves. Consequently, women did not have any influence in society. Freedom from these chains required significant changes. The American Industrial Revolution became the harbinger of such changes. As the revolution began to spread, the role of women in American society also expanded. Due to the increase in factories, new jobs were introduced. Since these jobs did not require any special skills, women were as much capable to do them as were men. Moreover, since women agreed to work for fewer wages than their men competitors, they became crucial employees. Consequently, women labor in factory rapidly increased from the early 1830s.

Harriet Hanson Robinson was a worker in one of the Lowell textile mills. Her letter describes the life of workers in Lowell factories (Massachusetts) as she remained an employee at one of the factories from 1832 to 1848. She explains that although American Industrialization offered women more independence, factory girls still belonged to the lowest caste of employed women. The working conditions had crushed their self-respect. They were like slaves and were beaten. Working hours spanned fourteen hours i.e. from 5 am to 7 pm. For most women, the biggest incentive for working in factories was to have some income to educate some male family member. The wages were between 50 cents to 1 dollar per week.

Robinson explains that the skills of women teachers were not in great demand. Doors of nearly all other professions including the arts, the trades, and industries were closed upon them. Till 1840, only seven types of vocations outside the home were available to women of New England. Women did not have any property rights in their fathers' inheritance. Even a widow wasn't given her share in husband's property. Women could not serve as a treasurer. The laws did not recognize her as money spenders. Women were more like relicts and appendages.

In 1836, Lowell saw one of the first strikes by women in the country. To oppose cuts in wages, women decided to either strike or turn out collectively. Mills were closed and women traveled in processions to the Chapel Hill. Incendiary speeches were delivered by the pioneers of reforms. This was unprecedented that women spoke publically in Lowell. Indeed this strike, though unsuccessful, set a precedent for the succeeding strikes and struggle.

By 1840s women constituted a sizeable percentage of the total industrial workforce. But they lacked economic liberty. Most of them had to pay their entire wage, which was already lesser than that of their men counterparts, to their husbands. This lack of economic independence had a direct bearing on their political freedom. Women neither enjoyed the right to vote nor could they run for an office. The abolitionist movement was gaining ground and women were becoming increasingly involved in it. Following the precedent of Lowell strikes and antislavery activism, some competent women activists embarked upon organizing a convention to discuss their issues. Hence, in July 1848, a women rights convention was organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and other activists in Seneca Falls, New York. The convention is hailed as the commencement of the women rights movement in America.

In order to demand equal rights for women, the Declaration of Sentiments argues along the lines of the Declaration of Independence. It states that all men and women have been created equal by the Creator, that they have been endowed by Him with rights that are inalienable. It highlights the role of the government in a setup, arguing that government is instituted by the governed for securing these rights. It went on to say that the governed people have a right to refuse allegiance to such a government that becomes destructive towards the attainment of these ends. The people can, therefore, strive to establish such a government that safeguards the rights of women in the same way it does the rights of men. Although governments should not be removed for petty causes, when the abuses and usurpations are constant, it becomes a duty to remove such a despotic government. The Declaration refers to the history of usurpations and injuries suffered by women at the hands of men. In order to prove that men have always tried to establish their absolute tyranny over women, the Declarations submits several facts to the world. It highlights how women have always been kept away from voting. She is subject to those laws which are made solely by men. Men usurp the wages of women and their right to property. The covenant of marriage in women giving up their liberty and opens doors for husbands' abuses and chastisement. If an unmarried woman is the owner of the property, her economic independence is curtailed through taxation to support a government that puts women at a very disadvantaged position. All the profitable jobs are monopolized by men. Those few jobs available to women offer small remuneration. The professions of teaching theology, law, and medicine are not open to her. All the opportunities for economic independence are closed upon her. Since women are denied education from the very beginning, they can never even acquire those skills which may help them secure better jobs. By stripping women of their confidence, women are made to willingly lead a life dependence and abject poverty.

The Declaration of Sentiments was holistic in its approach. It ended with a note that women would employ all the possible tools and measures, ranging from circulating tracts to petitioning the States and Legislatures and from using the pulpit to activating the press on their behalf. It set the agenda and tone for future conventions regarding legal equality and economic freedom. One of the tangible gains of the Convention was the passing of the Married Women's Property Act in 1848 by the state legislature of New York. At least married women were now given property rights.

Women’s struggle for economic independence continued after the Declaration of Sentiments. Many feats were achieved over the next many decades. In 1869, Arabella Mansfield became the first law graduate woman in the U.S, thereby becoming the first woman lawyer. In 1872, Victoria Claflin Woodhull emerged as the first ever female presidential candidate in America. In the same year, female federal employees worked to ensure equal pay for women. But private sector workers still suffered from pay-gap. By 1900, almost all the states of the U.S. had granted women their right to keep their wages with them and allowed them own property.

In 1963, the Equal Pay Act promised equitable wages for all citizens of the U.S., irrespective of their color, sex, religion or race. Although many economic rights had been secured, yet the hurdles facing women were so immense and the problems so complex and entrenched that even in 1963, more than a century after the Declaration of Sentiments, Betty Friedan argued in her book The Feminine Mystique how patriarchy put women at a disadvantaged position and how it still served as an obstacles in women's struggle to effectively achieve economic independence. Post-World War Two economy of the U.S. saw a surge in consumerism. Advertisements resulted in women to believe that the problems they faced in their lives could be somehow fixed through purchases of consumer products. Friedan, therefore, explained how the advertisers carefully targeted women to attract them towards specific lifestyles. Friedan argued that since women were the chief consumers, housewifery was perpetuated. Although she dismisses the notion of any specific conspiracy to oppress women, she does argue that women lives were subverted and the housewife market was exploited to make the consumer economy flourish. This exploitation resulted in many women living uncreative lives as housewives. Friedan divided the American women into three categories: the housewife, the career-oriented woman, and the balanced homemaker. The True Housewife was the type was by far the largest market for consumer products. Since the career woman represented a small minority and since it was of no benefit to the businesses, the advertisers never wanted it to become larger. Betty Friedan reflects upon her own life as a housewife and concludes that it had been a waste of time. One of the reasons she could not do a job was that she had children. Thus women's reproductive roles also become a hurdle in women's struggle to become economically independent. She tells the readers that she would spend more time outside and get a job when her children would grow older. By the mid-1950s, the Career Woman was almost replaced by consumer and less-sophisticated woman. Advertisers aimed at convincing housewives that housework was creative and fun.

The American women's journey on the road to economic independence is a long journey that includes remarkable feats and surprising reversals. Patriarchy and the traditional division of labor put women at an extremely disadvantaged position. The Industrial Revolution offered women many opportunities but, at the same time, posed many challenges as well. Although women could earn wages, their wages were lower than men. They were degraded and exploited. The pathetic conditions of factory working women were explained thoroughly by Harriet Hanson Robinson in "Lowell Textile Workers". The Declaration of Sentiments further highlighted the problems that posed hurdles to women's economic freedom. Many feats that were achieved over the years after1848, ranging from right to equal wages to enactment of harassment laws, and from right to property to opening up of many jobs. However, social barriers kept posing threats. Betty Friedan argues in the book how women remain under the clutches of patriarchy and how the traditional division of labor perpetuates women dependence on men. She explains how the reproductive role of women and their duty of child upbringing pose a challenge towards the economic independence of women. Even the advertisement agencies help perpetuate housewifery by making it seem creative and fun. Indeed the hurdles faced by women on the road to economic freedom are varied and complex. Much has been achieved and much is yet to achieve.