

Race, class, and gender in early america

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



Throughout history, much of society, more or less, accepts the structure of our industrialized labor force. One hardly takes a moment to stop and think of how it all started. The industrialization of a nation had to begin somewhere. After reading Leith Mullings article " Uneven Development: Class, Race, and Gender in the United States Before 1900", many issues that I previously hadn't considered were brought to light. The development of our nation and the structure that our workforce would take on comes right from the 19th century. The influx of immigrants to the new country brought to the fields and plantations an array of settlers, homemakers, and workers. Early European indentured servants sometimes worked in the fields along with indentured servants from Africa. Soon after it, would be mostly African American slaves providing the planters with labor. This cheap labor offered the opportunity for industrialization to take place. Due to the fact that cheap labor was so abundant our economy was able to set foothold. Yet the price the slaves paid in the long run and the outcome for the structural beginnings of a workforce began from shaky ground. During the late 19th century and early in to the 20th century the development of our economy was effected by race, class, and gender. Generally I wouldn't have looked at all three of these distinctions as crucial elements as to how our workforce is structured today. The position of the slave workers, predominantly the women slaves has caused me to revise my earlier thoughts. Our pattern in following the model of the European industrialization seems to have been a smart move. The indentured servants and then slave families of all classes have made such an important impact on the way that our workforce came to be what it is today. As the numbers of plantations and farms grew, so did the numbers

of slaves coming to and being born in America. The creation of slave families also played an important part of society. Household relationships and class differentiation determined roles to be taken on as the men worked in the fields and women raised families and took care of domesticities. The upper class white men and women were prearranged to have easier days and lighter duties than those of the middle and lower classes. The white upper class women were prone to daily duties of light housework, reading, and giving orders to their servants. It seems as though they didn't have much say in any other matters other than giving orders as to how the house should appear, the meals to be cooked and the children raised. The servants and maids to the woman of the house were the actual ones to carry out these jobs. The middle class white women were servants themselves, or wives of shopkeepers, and hired farmhands. Their duties seemed to be a bit heavier, doing more of the housework themselves and sometimes even working outside of the home. These class shifts made way for the distinction and separation of the household and the workplace. Women were accepted in the workplace only if their need and class put them in a position to do so. Now, the most significant group of women at this time to make it into the workforce is the African American women. Of course, these women had no choice in the matter. The slaves in this country were exploited as laborers as soon as they arrived. The African American women suffered not only the oppression of slavery but of sexism as well. Most slaves were treated badly, yet all of them were made to work long hours on plantations, in the houses, and in the cotton fields. The slave-owners treated them as property and acted accordingly as their masters. The women were made to work doing the

same jobs as the men. They picked cotton in the fields, split rails, and plowed fields. These conditions made it difficult to marry and raise families although some slave-owners encouraged growth of families. They did so for purposes of their own. The more children slaves had, the more hands he would own as potential workers. Some even took the slave children and sold them for profit. I can hardly imagine the grief and oppression that these mothers felt. Yet the fact that these families suffered in the fields day in and day out, it made them stronger as a people and their love and faith were sometimes all that kept them surviving. The slaves also reached out among themselves and banded together to take care of each others children, the sick friends, and elderly slaves. The slave women also faced other dangers on the plantation as some slave-owners saw them as sex objects. They were used and raped on a regular basis and many of them bore their masters children. These things bring to mind some attitudes of today where sexual harassment of women in the workplace has become a serious issue. I now hesitate to wonder if many women's issues in the workplace didn't come right from the attitudes of the patriarchal system of slavery in the 19th and early 20th century. So many of these details about women working then and now have great ties to the way slaves were used and treated in early U. S history. The exploitation of labor has not ceased to exist, just as the importance of wealth still dictates to the poor. Gender, race, and class all played a large part in shaping the structure of our workforce today. Just as slaves were oppressed and then freed, women have faced struggles and have been released of them over a great many years and large numbers of activists and speakers on women's rights. Just still like minorities have faced

racism only to rise up and fight for their own equal rights. Many lessons have been learned through the mistakes of our past. The slave period in early U. S. history served a purpose in setting up for a thriving economy, yet at a severe price for the years of hardship placed on African Americans. The hard lives of African American women who had the chance to work as equals with the male slaves grew as strong people from these times. The prohibition of these women in the workforce was never an issue for them yet the consequences they suffered would never be understood or sympathized with by the white women of any class at that time. Today I look back at this period in history as valid growth of a nation. The attitudes of the time of the white people and the African Americans, the males and the females, as well as the upper, lower, and middle classes of society can be found in many people of the 21st century. Women still have struggles in the workplace, minorities persevere with lingering racism, and societal class difference will always remain a capitalist nation.