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From Women and Economics (1898)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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Abstract

The economic status of the human female is relative to the sex-relation. The workers are females, too, specialized to economic functions solely. In studying the economic position of the sexes collectively, the difference is most marked. As a social animal, the economic status of man rests on the combined and exchanged services of vast numbers of progressively specialized individuals. The economic progress of the race, its maintenance at any period, its continued advance, involve the collective activities of all the trades, crafts, arts, manufactures, inventions, discoveries, and all the civil and military institutions that go to maintain them. The economic status of any race at any time, with its involved effect on all the constituent individuals, depends on their world-wide labors and their free exchange. Economic progress, however, is almost exclusively masculine. Man, in supporting woman, has become her economic environment.

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WOMEN AND ECONOMICS

Charlotte Perkins Gilman



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Women and Economics

A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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Women and Economics

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PROEM

In dark and early ages, through the primal forests faring,
Ere the soul came shining into prehistoric night,
Twofold man was equal; they were comrades dear and daring,
Living wild and free together in unreasoning delight.
Ere the soul was born and consciousness came slowly,
Ere the soul was born, to man and woman, too,
Ere he found the Tree of Knowledge, that awful tree and holy,
Ere he knew he felt, and knew he knew.
Then said he to Pain, "I am wise now, and I know you!
No more will I suffer while power and wisdom last!"
Then said he to Pleasure, "I am strong, and I will show you
That the will of man can seize you, aye, and hold you fast!"
Food he ate for pleasure, and wine he drank for gladness.
And woman? Ah, the woman! the crown of all delight!
His now, he knew it! He was strong to madness
In that early dawning after prehistoric night.
His, his forever! That glory sweet and tender!
ivAh, but he would love her! And she should love but him!
He would work and struggle for her, he would shelter and defend her,
She should never leave him, never, till their eyes in death were dim.
Close, close he bound her, that she should leave him never;
Weak still he kept her, lest she be strong to flee;
And the fainting flame of passion he kept alive forever
With all the arts and forces of earth and sky and sea.
And, ah, the long journey! The slow and awful ages
They have labored up together, blind and crippled, all astray!
Through what a mighty volume, with a million shameful pages,
From the freedom of the forests to the prisons of to-day!

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Food he ate for pleasure, and it slew him with diseases!
Wine he drank for gladness, and it led the way to crime!
And woman? He will hold her, he will have her when he pleases,
And he never once hath seen her since the prehistoric time!
Gone the friend and comrade of the day when life was younger,
vShe who rests and comforts, she who helps and saves.
Still he seeks her vainly, with a never-dying hunger;
Alone beneath his tyrants, alone above his slaves!
Toiler, bent and weary with the load of thine own making!
Thou who art sad and lonely, though lonely all in vain!
Who hast sought to conquer Pleasure and have her for the taking,
And found that Pleasure only was another name for Pain
Nature hath reclaimed thee, forgiving dispossession!
God hath not forgotten, though man doth still forget!
The woman-soul is rising, in despite of thy transgression
Loose her now, and trust her! She will love thee yet!
Love thee? She will love thee as only freedom knoweth!
Love thee? She will love thee while Love itself doth live!
Fear not the heart of woman! No bitterness it showeth!
The ages of her sorrow have but taught her to forgive!

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PREFACE

This book is written to offer a simple and natural explanation of one of the most common and most perplexing problems of human life, a problem which presents itself to almost every individual for practical solution, and which demands the most serious attention of the moralist, the physician, and the sociologist

To show how some of the worst evils under which we suffer, evils long supposed to be inherent and ineradicable in our natures, are but the result of certain arbitrary conditions of our own adoption, and how, by removing those conditions, we may remove the evils resultant

To point out how far we have already gone in the path of improvement, and how irresistibly the social forces of to-day are compelling us further, even without our knowledge and against our violent opposition, an advance which may be greatly quickened by our recognition and assistance.

To reach in especial the thinking women of to-day, and urge upon them a new sense, not only of their social responsibility as individuals, but of their measureless racial importance as makers of men.

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It is hoped also that the theory advanced will prove sufficiently suggestive to give rise to such further study and discussion as shall prove its error or establish its truth.

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CONTENTS

PROEM....1
PREFACE....3
I. 7
II.... 29
III. 45
IV.... 61
V. 77
VI. 99
VII. 121
VIII. 143
IX. 165
X.... 193
XI. 217
XII.... 239
XIII. 259
XIV.... 283
XV. 305

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Not woman, but the condition of woman, has always been a doorway of evil. The sexuo-economic relation has debarred her from the social activities in which, and in which alone, are developed the social virtues. She was not allowed to acquire the qualities needed in our racial advance; and, in her position of arrested development, she has maintained the virtues and the vices of the period of human evolution at which she was imprisoned. At a period of isolated economic activity,—mere animal individualism, at a period when social ties ceased with the ties of blood, woman was cut off from personal activity in social economics, and confined to the functional activities of her sex.

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