THE ECONOMIC STATUS OF
NEGRO WOMEN, AN INDEX TO THE
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February 5, 1934
Baltimore Urban League
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I have been asked to talk to you about the Economic Status of the Negro Women. While I shall chiefly confine my remarks to this subject, I am quite certain you will immediately realize that a picture of the economic status of our women, is an index of our entire economic life. The hackneyed but nevertheless trite saying that a race can rise no higher than its women, applies to the economic status of a race as well as its moral and intellectual standing. So that a nation of women that forms, as do our women, the marginal workers in a pitifully small number of industries and the bulk of the domestic servants necessarily indicates the reduced economic status of the entire race.

The 1930 Census Reports show that almost 40%, 438.9% to be exact, of the Negro women over 10 years of age in the United States are gainfully employed. This is more than twice the number of foreign-born white women and almost twice the number of native-born white women in the same group. What does this indicate? Clearly widespread unemployment of Negro men and the fact that the wages of Negro men are so low that 4 out of every 10 women must go out to work in order to support the home. I do not believe that the most race loving ones of us will attribute the larger number of Negro women gainfully employed to an exceptional love for work. It is clearly necessity. But what a sad commentary on the economic status of our race, is the fact that 40% of our women over 10 years of age are gainfully employed.

Further reference to the 1930 Census Reports will give facts still more shocking as regards the economic status of our women. Over 60% (62.6%) of the Negro women gainfully employed are in domestic and personal service -- to express it plainly, they are household servants. This may largely be accounted for by the migration during the war of Southern Negroes to industrial centers, where previously there had been a shortage of servant labor. With the influx of thousands of Negro women came the opportunity for the middle class white woman to obtain a servant. The white servant class had gone into factories and the door stood wide open to the kitchen and the laundry. The large number of Negro women in domestic service may also be accounted for by the loss of marginal jobs held by colored women in industry during the war. They were the last units of labor to be added and as it became unproductive to work the factories at full pace, they were the first fired. When we realize that the aver-
age wage paid domestic servants is $4.00 per week, then we have a more exact and much more dismal picture of the economic status of our women and our race. Think of it: 62% of the Negro women gainfully employed (and remember that 1/3 of our women over 10 years of age are at work) are servants employed at an average weekly wage of $4.00. No wonder the insurance has lapsed, the furniture has been seized by the installment house when but $50.00 balance was due on a $500.00 obligation, the children are undernourished, irritable and unmanageable, and Johnnie has been committed to a reformatory. What other results could be expected.

But there are still other facts which we can find in our census reports, the mention of which alone will create in your minds disheartening impression of our economic status. The second largest group of Negro women gainfully employed is to be found in agriculture, where 26.3% of those employed are confined. Slightly less than 1/3 of our women who are at work are still employed in the ancient art of crop raising. I say ancient, advisedly, because the modern farm, equipped with labor saving devices, does not employ women workers. It is on the old farm, that sows, works and reaps with the cheapest of cheap labor that we still find barefoot Negro women hoeing, planting and picking the crops. Their's is not even an existence; it is a fight for the survival of the strongest against the ravages of a single diet, floods and fever -- with their only bulwark the strength which God breathed into their bodies.

I have no regrets to express over the fact that our women work. All women, in all generations and races have worked. Before the industrial revolution, the women spun the cloth, made the clothes, cured the meat -- in the home. When they entered the factories it was merely a transplanting of the place of operation from the home to the factory, and a reduction of the number of operations as a result of division of labor. But, when I tell you that only 5.5% of the Negro women gainfully employed are engaged in manufacturing, mechanical and industrial pursuits, then realizing that over 2/3 are servants and almost 1/3 are farm hands, you must join with me in lamenting not that our women are employed but that they are so unproductively employed.

Furthermore, not even the 5.5% engaged in industry are employed in any technical, well paid activities of the factories. A report of Negro Women in Industry, published by the Women's Bureau of the United States, Department of Labor, gives us the most complete recent study made on the subject. Negro women in industry are principally found in Tobacco, Food, Textile and Wood Factories, the largest numbers being in the tobacco factories. They will not be seen running the machines that fill the cigarette paper, or packing the finished product. No, they are sweeping and cleaning, and those who have any contact with the tobacco are re-handling the waste. Tobacco dust permeates the air, and many of
the women have chronic coughs, notwithstanding the cloths they usually keep over their mouths. Their hair is filled with the tobacco dust, which cuts it off and makes it more unmanageable than ever.

The women in the food industries are equally engaged in the lowest divisions of labor. The Department of Labor Study states that 1/3 of the women in the meat packing industries are handling casings and chitterlings. So too we find them washing cans and dishes in bakeries; filling and fitting fruits in canneries; pressing clothes in cleaning factories; sorting the rags in paper factories; packing nut meats in nut factories; mending and catching broken stitches by hand in hosiery and yard-goods factories; pulling bastings or buttoning shirts for packing in clothing plants. A negligible number are engaged in tasks requiring any degree of skill.

Moreover, of the few Negro women engaged in industry, the vast majority are piece workers. The earnings of the industrial workers are higher than the domestic worker, but just as meagre in dollars and cents when we consider the factor worker must buy every morsel she eats. In only 2 of 11 states from which wage data of Negro women workers in industry was available was the median of the week's earnings, i.e., 1/2 of the women earning more and 1/2 less than -- as high as $9.00. In 4 of these states the median was below $6.00 for the week's work. The hours of labor are as long as the wages are short for the Negro women in industry. Only 13.6 of those included in the Department of Labor Study worked less than 8 hours -- over 60% worked from 9 to 12 hours per day.

If then we evaluate the return from the Negro women employed in industry in terms of their working conditions we must conclude that she too, receives, like her sister, the farm hand, or the servant, a meagre existence. What she enjoys over them in freedom and contact with the world, she loses in poor health resulting from the unsanitary process in which she works and the strain resulting from piece work and competition with machines.

The fact that Negro women are principally engaged in the two great occupational groups which have suffered severely from the depression, agriculture and domestic service, has led to a larger number of unemployed among colored than white workers and has therefore forced Negro workers to appear in disproportionate numbers among seekers of relief. Negro women engaged so largely in household service have either lost their positions or been reduced to wages ranging from promises to $1.00, $2.00 and $3.00 per week. When the effects of depression hit the family, the first retrenchment is made in the number of servants and the amount paid to them -- this being a kind of work in which more easily and quickly than in almost any other an employer can re-
With Negro women gainfully employed in such large numbers, their unemployment is at once reflected in the family income. Since the family income of Negro families largely determines their standard of living, the unemployment of the Negro woman at once becomes an index of the economic status of the race. Consequently, with general unemployment today among Negro women the Negro family is under a great strain and in immediate danger of its serious disorganization. The father, unemployed for 2 to 3 years, has lost hope. He finds shelter in a home for destitute men. The city places the children, whom juvenile delinquency has not already sent to institutions, in homes. The mother takes a job sleeping in and doing all the housework for her board and lodging. This is not an exaggerated picture but one that is occurring daily, with the loss of the income by the large mass of Negro women who have been the background of the Negro family life.

The mercantilists of the 17th and 18th centuries craved large population. This was not based upon an infatuation for mere numbers. The mercantilist considered people as factors of production, as potential sources of wealth, when and only when they were employed. We in America have lived to learn that our vast population is not of itself a sign of well being but that a well employed, large population is a source of wealth. The problem facing Negroes in America is to see that their unemploy- ed receive a proper share of the New Deal opportunities. With 62% of our employed women in domestic service we must see that a Code is established for their protection. With the mass of our women engaged in this kind of work, where hours are endless, the wages the lowest of any known group, it becomes of prime importance that we immediately propose and promote a code that will amply protect the domestic worker. Otherwise we can not hope to maintain our homes, which are fast being broken up because of the low wages paid our women; nor can we hope to find ourselves in any better position at the end of the depression.

Think of the ridiculous position occupied by the Negro servant. Her employer, we will say is a bank clerk. His salary and hours of work are protected by a code which was scientifically established by members of the Brain Trust. They determined in arriving at the proper salary to be paid the bank clerk the average cost of food in the given locality, the fair rental values, the cost of a proper amount of insurance protection. They made allowances for recreation and leisure, so as to induce spending. These learned gentlemen decided that a minimum of $45.00 per week is necessary for a fair standard of living for our Negro servant's bank clerk employer. Then they suddenly realize that his wife must have a maid or else she can not leave the children at home in the evening, when the money provided for leisure and
recreation is to be spent. So they add the large sum of $5.00 for a maid, and fix the minimum salary for the bank clerk at $50.00. I ask you, does not the maid have to carry insurance? Does she too not require recreation and leisure? Is she not also entitled to a place she may call home and some food when she goes there? Five Dollars per week is ample to supply her needs -- say the experts.

I am reminded in this regard of the needs recently stated by an applicant for divorce in Los Angeles -- the cause of action being the excessive cruelty of the male of the species. The libellant requested $1651.00 monthly alimony: $200.00 for entertainment; $100.00 for food; dresses, $500.00; rent, $400.00; automobile, $100.00; chauffeur, $100.00; miscellaneous, $100.00 and, finally, maid, $40.00 a month. Arthur Brisbane remarked concerning this case, that: "the maid must be amazed at her own moderation. She is a little lady, seen through democratic eyes, she has two arms, two legs and one body to be dressed, likes entertainment, and all this she must get for $40.00 a month, as against $1651.00 for the other little lady. This would puzzle the angels or Stalin. In the next incarnation the maid must get herself a cruel American husband."

I fear that the real root of our trouble is that too many of us are willing to wait for the next world and are not willing to expend the energy necessary to make this world a decent place in which to live. Never did a better opportunity present itself than today, when legislation to protect the masses is being generally enacted. If we do not advocate or present legislation that particularly benefits our masses, we can not blame others, or hope to share the results of a liberalism in government.

Not only must we place on the statute books legislation that is of special benefit to the Negro worker but we must with equal force and zeal see that the Negro worker receives his or her full share of all relief legislation. Never since Reconstruction has there existed such a favorable chance for the federal government to influence the condition of the Negro masses. By scrupulously fair administration of all types, of direct and indirect federal aid -- in farm relief, public works program and subsidized relief, the principle of equitable distribution can for the first time be enforced for Negro labor in America. But unless the Negro's claims are definitely, persistently and forcibly brought before the governmental bodies there is real danger that not only will he be overlooked or neglected but that the reorganization of industry will have him in a worse position than prior to the depression. That this is the case is readily seen from the effort to force out of industry Negro workers who must be paid wages equal to that paid white workers. Unless strong and immediate steps are taken to keep Negro workers, thus forced out, in industry we are likely to
find the doors permanently closed when the depression is over.

Recently in Philadelphia, the Wawa Dairies, a small and comparatively recently organized corporation, offered milk routes to Negro drivers who could obtain 200 customers. Negroes who previously purchased from the two leading dairies gave their orders to the Wawa Dairies' Negro drivers. As a result these Negro drivers are now on the streets of Philadelphia for the first time in the history of that city. A volume of Negro business has been lost by Supplee-Wills-Jones and Abbotts Dairies, the largest and oldest distributors of milk in the city of Philadelphia. The Negro employees of these companies, totaling approximately 200 workers at an average weekly wage of $20.00, have been threatened with the loss of their positions. The three Negro drivers of Wawa Dairies probably earn collectively $50.00 per week. The discharge of all Negro employees in the two large dairies will put out of work 200 men and will result in the loss of $4000.00 weekly to the race. Neither group would lose its place, if we had proper federal protection for such emergencies, which are becoming more and more frequent. It is not too much to expect or demand, in an era of liberal legislation for the protection of labor, when freedom to contract as protected by the 14th Amendment (Lockner vs New York, 198 U. S. 45) and the sanctity of contracts is abrogated (Minnesota B. & L. Assn. vs Brandel) we are more than stupid not to promote a statute that will protect Negro labor from discharges which are racial reprisals.

Fortunately we have in the Urban League of America, organizations equipped by training and accumulated experience, to protect, advance, promote and develop our economic position. I have often remarked that while we have many organizations working effectively to protect our rights, the Urban Leagues are the only organizations attacking cause and not seeking to remove effect, after the damage is done. The vision of Eugene Kinckle Jones, who almost 25 years ago began work in New York City as a pioneer social worker, has with the aid of his associates produced a force that is striking at the root of all our ills -- our economic dependence. It is to the Urban Leagues that we must look, it is on their leaders that we must depend for leadership in obtaining our full share of the New Deal.

No matter how far reaching is the vision of the League nor how perfected their plan of action, the success of their action is dependent upon the financial and moral support which you who are here tonight give your League and the National Urban League. You, who have largely attained whatever degree of economic independence you enjoy because of the support of the masses, for whose economic status the League has been constantly working. When these masses of our people are unemployed as they are today, neither doctors nor lawyers can collect fees. Municipal and federal employees face payless pay days, for landlords who can not collect rent can not pay taxes. The entire economic life collapses when the masses are
unemployed. Then it is not only the duty of those of us who have accumulated savings from the labors of the masses but it is necessary for the very existence of these persons that we should render every possible support to an organization that is working to put the Negro masses back into the line of wage earners, that we may not be subjected to greater poverty after the depression because we have permitted ourselves to be left out of the economic reorganization plans but that the vast numbers of Negro workers when productively employed may bring economic independence to the race and economic security to the nation.