1993

An Historical Analysis of African American Women's Experience in the United States Labor Market

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AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE IN THE UNITED STATES LABOR MARKET

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science

BY

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M.S., Morgan State University, 1978
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1993
Wright State University
I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY
Valerie Martin Malloy ENTITLED An Historical Analysis of African
American Women's Experience in the United States Labor Market BE
ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
Master of Science.

Faculty Supervisor

Director, M.S. in Social and
Applied Economics
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[Hypothesis: African American women workers' disadvantaged position in the labor market, relative to white men and males in general, can be traced to their historical experiences under slavery and the age labor force.]

This paper will discuss the history of African American women workers in the United States. Slavery will be examined to show that the economic hardships it caused for this group has far reaching influences upon today's economic picture. Human capital and segmented market theories will be discussed to determine how African American women workers are progressing in the wage labor force as we move toward the next century.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The hypothesis of this study is African American women's disadvantaged position in the labor market, relative to white women and males in general, can be traced to their unique historical experiences under slavery and the wage labor force.

Record numbers of women are entering the labor force today as education and employment opportunities increase. African American women workers, however, have made limited economic gains relative to their white counterparts. This research provides an updated picture of the economic progress of the African American working woman.

African American women have always been an integral part of the nation's economy since the first Africans came to North America well over three hundred years ago. A review of that participation from colonial times to the present, discussed in chapter 3, will underscore their contribution. However, our historical analysis will highlight the fact that their participation and contributions have rarely been rewarded. Today, African American women workers have the lowest average income and highest unemployment rates compared to white workers.

Chapter 4 will discuss the discriminations of race, gender, and class against African American women and how they economically disadvantage the group in the labor market. We will examine African American women's income, occupation, and educational status and compare
them to white women and men in general to understand that this group is indeed economically disadvantaged. Chapter 5 will discuss a survey of the current literature concerning African American women's status in the labor market and factors influencing their status. Chapter 6 offers recommendations concerning African American women's work and how their economic status may possibly be improved.
CHAPTER 2

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Workforce 2000\(^1\), a labor market study initiated by the United States Department of Labor, reveals that by the year 2000, 29 percent of all new entrants into the work force will be minorities with twice their share of the current workload. The majority of these workers will be African American women. (See Table 1.) By the turn of the century, there will be twice as many African American women in the work force as African American men. Thus, it is extremely crucial to study the economic conditions of the African American female, since she has always been an active participant in the labor force and will continue to be a major part of the future labor force. (See Figure 1.)

Table 1

Nonwhites are a Growing Share of the Work Force (in millions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1970</th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working Age Population (16+)</td>
<td>137.1</td>
<td>184.1</td>
<td>213.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite Share</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor Force</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>115.5</td>
<td>140.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite Share</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor Force Increase (over previous period)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite Share</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1
Most New Entrants to the Labor Force Will Be Nonwhite, Female or Immigrants

Source: Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei, Race, Gender, and Work (Boston: South End Press, 1981)
By almost every economic measure, the African American female suffers greater disadvantages than her white counterpart. A lack of quality education, on-the-job training, and a long history of racism and segregation into undesirable occupations have taken their toll on African American women’s economic status.

It is the hypothesis of this study that the economic gains of professional African American have fallen short of those attained by white women and men. This relative lack of progress can only be understood within the historical context of the African American experience.

Despite the legacy of slavery and years of economic oppression, African American women did make progress during the 1970s. Anti-discrimination legislation and rapid job growth enabled large numbers of African American to enter white collar jobs. (See Table 2.) Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. This act also created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to enforce the law. As a result, African American Women began to make economic gains. By 1970, employment in the primary sector had risen to over 11 percent. This was up from a decade earlier when African American women held only 7 percent of these jobs. During the 1970s, jobs opened up in the manufacturing sector employing 19 percent of all African American women in the labor force. Affirmative Action programs helped to lower the racial barriers to employment in the federal, state, and local governments. Over one-third of African American women held these jobs as compared to one-fifth of white women.
Table 2  
Occupational Distribution of African American Workers, 1900--1980  
(in percent)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1930</th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>1970</th>
<th>1980</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Household Service</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service (not Private Household)</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional &amp; Technical</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial, Administrative, &amp; Official</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES: Totals do not always sum to 100 because of rounding. Manufacturing includes craft and transportation workers; agriculture includes mining, fishing, and forestry; managerial, administrative, & official includes some self-employment, and excludes farm managers. African American includes Latinos classified as Black except in 1980.


With these new opportunities, African American women left domestic work for higher paying jobs, primarily in the government. In 1960, 39 percent of African American women worked in private households; by 1970, that figure fell to 18 percent, and by 1980, it was only 5 percent. Simultaneously, the median income of African American women rose from 55
percent of white women's income in 1956 to 91 percent of their income by
1974.\textsuperscript{2}

By the early 1980s, this growth began to stall; and, as the United States' economy entered a period of recession, many companies began to look for ways to cut costs, raise profits, and become more competitive in the world markets. This included moving production overseas in search of cheaper labor, lower taxes, and fewer safety and environmental regulations. The manufacturing jobs that moved overseas were the type that employed African Americans such as the jobs found in the automobile and steel industries. Plant closings in Detroit and Chicago devastated the African American economy since so many men and women were employed in these work places. Unemployment rose between 1981 and 1985; in fact, five percent of African American men and six percent of African American women lost their jobs due to the plant closings.\textsuperscript{3} Moreover, during the period between 1953 and 1978, fifteen hundred retail stores left the central cities and moved to the suburbs leaving more African Americans unemployed. Whites followed the jobs by moving to the suburbs; racism, in many cases, prevented African Americans from finding homes in the areas that had the jobs. In 1980, fifty-eight percent of the African American population lived in central cities. Over half of the white population lived in the suburbs compared to only 23 percent of African Americans.\textsuperscript{4} Again, in the early eighties African American unemployment rates soared; almost one-third of all African American workers were unemployed.\textsuperscript{5} When the recession finally eased during the mid-eighties, unemployment remained extremely high for African Americans.\textsuperscript{6} In
particular in 1982, the unemployment ratio of African American women to white women, aged 16 and over, was 2.1 to 1. (See Table 3.)

Table 3

Unemployment Rates by Race-Ethnicity,
Gender and Age
(1972-1988)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black  White</td>
<td>B/W</td>
<td>Black  White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 and Over</td>
<td>11.8 5.9 2.0</td>
<td>9.3 4.5 2.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-19</td>
<td>40.5 14.2 2.9</td>
<td>31.7 14.2 2.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 and Over</td>
<td>14.8 8.6 1.7</td>
<td>14.8 7.2 2.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-19</td>
<td>41.0 17.4 2.4</td>
<td>39.5 18.3 2.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 and Over</td>
<td>17.6 8.3 2.1</td>
<td>20.1 8.8 2.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-19</td>
<td>47.1 19.0 2.5</td>
<td>48.9 21.7 2.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 and Over</td>
<td>11.7 4.7 2.5</td>
<td>11.7 4.7 2.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-19</td>
<td>32.0 12.3 2.6</td>
<td>32.8 13.9 2.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER 3
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN
IN THE ECONOMIC SECTOR

African American women’s problems of racism, sexism, and classism are firmly rooted in their history in the United States. Slavery was an oppression that has been difficult to overcome in almost every aspect of their economic lives. In order to understand the economic problems of African American women, we must go back and examine African Americans under the system of slavery.

West African Women

It is generally agreed that the majority of African slaves were forcibly brought to the United States from West Africa. The slaves were taken from their homeland and sold into slavery by Europeans and other Africans. Before coming to the United States, however, these West Africans had an established culture and set of beliefs and values. LaFrances Rodgers-Rose discusses the life of the West African woman and states that her most important role was that of mother. This role was crucial to the survival of the tribe. When the West African woman became pregnant, she would leave her husband’s home and go back to her father to await the birth of her child. She would not return to her husband and her wifely duties until she had weaned her child at about the age of three. This kept her from becoming pregnant again until her baby was no
longer an infant. It was the African perspective that "children should be raised healthy and happy-happy children make happy ancestors."\(^9\)

Motherhood was not the only role that was vital to the West-African woman. She was also very important in the marketplace. LaFrances Rodgers-Rose writes:

The African woman was instrumental in the economic marketplace. She controlled certain industries--the making and selling of cloth, pottery, spinning, and the sale of goods of various kinds. The economic position of the African woman was high. The women were traders and what they earned belonged to them. Some women became independently wealthy. The West African woman was also responsible for raising the food for her family--she planted the crops and maintained them.\(^{10}\)

The West African woman was usually part of a polygamous family structure. She took turns with other women performing the duties of a wife. She was very independent and earned her own way. This was the unique history and culture that the African woman brought with her when she entered slavery.

**Slave Life Before Emancipation**

Before these first African women set foot on the shores of the United States, one form of slavery already existed in the Virginia Colony. White indentured servants who were either forced or lured into servitude, came to America and were treated as slaves, but were confident in the fact that their period of service was for a limited number of years. However, this form of slavery could also be harsh. The 1619 Virginia House of Burgesses passed a law stating that masters could legally whip their slaves and female servants must obtain the consent of their masters before they could marry.\(^{11}\) Further, during that same period in Virginia, ninety white female servants were sold to planters as
wives; each wife commanded a price of 120 pounds of tobacco. In 1620, when the first Africans arrived in America, they, too, were considered to be indentured servants. White and African servants worked side by side doing the same kinds of work without distinction. Black female servants, white female servants, artisans' wives and high born mistresses all performed the same duties.

Slave labor became a very important element to the economic development of the United States. The sale of cotton and tobacco abroad made a healthy profit for the slave owners and provided foreign exchange for the colonies. Slave traders also made a lucrative profit from selling Africans to the colonists for cheap labor. Eric Williams states:

The United States slave economy was an integral part of a transcontinental economic system of wealth creation and trade: goods manufactured in Britain, such as cloth and guns, were traded for slaves in Africa (when the latter were not simply captured); slaves were sold to planters in the colonies, and forced to produce agricultural products; and planters exported these products and imported manufactured and luxury goods from Britain.12

Donald Noel13 argues that the African's status of indentured servant eroded into permanent slavery because he did not have the power or the resources to prevent it. Because African slaves were purchased, the colonists viewed them as property, innately inferior, and, thus, could be treated as subhuman. The writings of David Davis14 state:

Not only was enslavement a permanent, hereditary, and legal status in the United States, as elsewhere, but in addition, slaves were confined to a limited array of work rules, exploited in a capitalist system of agriculture, viewed as property rather than persons, and widely prevented from securing any release from slave status.

By 1640 it was patently clear that the system of permanent slavery was firmly ensconced in America. John Punch, a black servant, and two
other white servants ran away from their master in the Maryland colony. The run-away attempt was unsuccessful and the servants were punished for the deed. Four additional years were added to the length of required service for the white men. John Punch was sentenced to servitude for the rest of his natural life.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, the harshness of the penalties was based on the race of the servant.

By 1662, Virginia passed a law which stated that any children born to an African woman were considered slaves regardless of the status of the father. This further separated African and white slaves into two distinct classes. Historian Paula Giddings writes:

\begin{quote}
The circle of denigration was virtually complete with this law, which managed to combine racism, sexism, greed, and piety within its tenets . . . . Such legislation laid women open to the most vicious exploitation. For a master could save the cost of buying new slaves by impregnating his own slave, or for that matter having anyone impregnate her.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Other laws over time further condemned Africans into a separate caste system which kept them enslaved for life and considered as inferior property. Colonists were heavily fined for using white females in the field; however, they were free to use African females in any type of field work. Virginia declared that female domestic servants could not be used as field hands. However, if that female servant was African and "nasty and beastly" and unfit for household duties, she could be legally used as a field hand.\textsuperscript{17} Virginia also forbade the intermarriage of African men and white women. During the seventeenth century, African men and white women commonly lived together. Between one-fourth and one-third of the children born to unmarried white women in Virginia had African fathers.\textsuperscript{18} Even though these children were not white, they were not considered slaves. Virginian white women were fined fifteen pounds for
having "black bastard" children or given five additional years of indentured service. Some other states tried to enslave white women who were married to African men. Racial distinctions were evident in the way the laws applied to black and whites. Such injustices practiced by the colonists kept Africans in a separate, economically subordinate group. Whites, regardless of class, considered themselves superior to African Americans. By 1790, African Americans made up about one-fifth of the United States population. Ninety-two percent of these African Americans were slaves. One-fourth of all white families owned slaves which averaged about seven per family during 1790. Ninety-four percent of these slaves lived in the South where they comprised about one-third of the population. About seventy-five percent of the white land owners in the Southern Atlantic region owned slaves with an average of about 8 slaves per family. By 1860, three-quarters of these African Americans worked for owners who had over 20 slaves. The other twenty-five percent worked for owners who had over 50 slaves on their plantation.

During the antebellum period of slavery, African American women were regarded as property to be used as the owner saw fit. Allocation of a slave woman's labor was based on three different considerations--the whites' desire to increase staple crop production, to enlarge their work force, and to provide for the daily sustenance of their households. The typical female was not a house servant, cook, or nanny. By approximately 1850, seven out of eight slaves, men and women, were used as field hands. A slave's worth was measured by the amount of productivity the owner demanded. A male was rated as a full hand while a child was considered to be a quarter hand. The slave woman was also
considered to be a full hand unless she was a "breeder" or a "suckler," in which case she was rated as less than a full hand.\

Slave women were used in the tobacco, rice, and cotton fields, and helped to refine sugar. They were used in foundries, coal mines, ditches, and lumber mills. African American women helped to build the Louisiana levees, Southern railroads, and canals. Industrialists of the South made no secret of the reason for employing African female labor. They were much cheaper to capitalize and easier to maintain than the male slave.

Slave work in the "Big House" was also difficult. Slaves spent long hours on call to serve the master's whims. Cooking, cleaning, sewing, chopping wood, ironing, and minding the white children took up the greater space of the house slave's life. Often the house slaves were put in the field during the cotton harvest. Slaves were up before dawn to perform household duties for the master and then on to the fields to toil. In the evening the female slave returned from the fields to the house to perform more duties for the master. Female slaves were put to house chores at about the age of five or six. They waited tables, fanned flies, and minded the babies. When they were older, about twelve, they were sent to the fields to work. When the female slave got too old to work the fields, she was sent back to the house to mind the babies, cook, and sew. The circle of women's domestic work went unbroken from day to day and generation to generation.

African American slave women were valued for their "breeding" capacities, especially when the abolition of the international slave trade threatened the United States cotton industry. Slave owners were
able to replenish their slave population by relying on the females’ reproduction capacities. This in no way meant that the female slave was respected for "motherhood." Instead, they were considered as "breeders-animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers." Their infants could be sold away from them like calves from cows. A South Carolina court ruled that female slaves had no claims whatsoever on their children. They could be sold away from their mothers at any age because they were on the same footing as animals. The slave owners’ desires to have the female slave be productive and reproductive at the same time account for the high rate of miscarriages during the cotton boom years between 1830 and 1860. Female slaves were forced to work long hours in the fields at backbreaking labor just before and after confinement, damaging their reproductive systems. In many cases, the slave woman was expected to bear a child each year which led to a high maternal death rate. The fathers of these slave children were not always the man that the slave chose as her mate. The female slave was subjected to sexual abuse by the owner, the owner’s son, the overseer, and any white male that wanted to use her. If she refused the advances of the white male, she was punished or sometimes put to death.

The majority of female slaves married, even though marriage was not recognized by the owners or the law. Husbands and wives could be sold away from each other as well as their children. Women fought fiercely for their children; one slave mother promised that the first man who tried to come through her door to sell her children would have his head split open. Some of the adult females chose not to marry even though
they had children out of wedlock. The owners welcomed these out-of-wedlock children as increased wealth to their estates. Slavery was extremely difficult and cruel for the woman.

**Life as a Freed Slave**

The ideas of liberty and equality that were fought for in the War of Independence against Great Britain led many Northerners to believe that slavery should be abolished. In 1810, more than two-thirds of African Americans who lived outside of the South were free. These free African Americans did not enjoy a high quality of life, however. They could make contracts, work for wages, and marry as long as their partner was not white or a slave. Freedmen were restricted to certain housing and could move about if they had a white patron. These African Americans were not allowed to start their own schools, work as clerks or salesmen, and could not defend themselves against whites. In addition, these freedmen were forced to pay a special tax. African Americans were segregated into low paying menial jobs and excluded from apprenticeship programs and skilled trades. Between 1840 and 1850, mobs of Irish immigrants drove African Americans out of service work, work on canals, and railroads because they were black. At the same time, many laws specified that "if a free black, fit to work, shall neglect to do so and loiter and misspend his or her time," magistrates were required to bind him or her to indentured service. Faced with this kind of discrimination, most free African Americans earned their living doing domestic work or unskilled labor. In the 1850s, in Charleston, South Carolina, more than fifty percent of free African American women earned their living as seamstresses and dressmakers; another thirty percent were washerwomen or
house servants. These types of jobs were the mainstay for the African American woman well into the twentieth century. Not all of the free African Americans were poor—there was a middle class and an upper class. The upper class African Americans tended to be light skinned and were a little more acceptable to whites. They were able to afford to educate their children, unlike the poor African Americans. In 1850, in Charleston, South Carolina, the richest tenth of free African Americans owned over fifty percent of black wealth. Over three percent of African American women in Charleston at this time were employed in professional positions such as nurses or shopkeepers. Women were also property owners; some of considerable wealth. In Petersburg, Virginia, during the early 1800s, African American women made up 40 percent of the black taxpaying population and 13 percent of the population as a whole.

Single motherhood was also common among free African American women due to the laws that prohibited blacks from marrying whites or slaves. Possibly, women of wealth were unwilling to give their property and independence to husbands. In Petersburg during 1820, 58 percent of African American households were headed by females. Sixty-one percent of the households were headed by females in Charleston in 1850.

Free African American women were activists for education and for equal rights for men and women. Maria Stewart, who was thought to be the first African American woman to speak publicly about the concerns of her race, said:

O ye mothers, what a responsibility rests on you! It is you that must create in the minds of your little girls and boys a thirst for knowledge, the love of virtue, the abhorrence of vice, and the cultivation of a pure heart.
Free women were not fighting to have the same rights as their men, because free African American men had few rights. Rather, the movement was to uplift the entire race by providing education and freedom for those still enslaved in the South. Milla Granson, a slave, helped to secretly educate hundreds of slaves in her midnight school. Sojourner Truth, an ex-slave, fought for the abolition of slavery and women’s rights.41

African Americans After Emancipation

When Emancipation came, the African American woman was no longer lured by house service; instead;

the path of salvation for the emancipated host of black folk no longer lay through their kitchen door, with its wide hall and pillared yards beyond. It lay, as every Negro soon knew and knows, in the escape from menial serfdom.42

African Americans were emancipated, but still were not free of the white man’s supremacy. However, the Reconstruction Period of 1865 to 1898 brought significant changes for freedmen. During this period, African Americans found employment through the Freedmen’s Relief Bureau and some were given plots of land to farm. By the mid-1870s, between 4 and 8 percent of freed families in the South owned farms. Between 1980 and 1910, the number of African American-owned farms doubled. By 1910, they owned 14 percent of all farms owned in the South. Thirteen African American men were elected to the House of Representatives and two to Congress by 1870. Stores, churches, and banks developed and education was within reach through agricultural colleges established by and for African Americans.43
According to the 1890 Census, there were 2.7 million African American females over the age of 10. These females worked for wages: 38.7 percent in agriculture, 30.8 percent in household domestic service, 15.6 percent in laundry work, and 2.8 percent in manufacturing. For women employed in manufacturing, these jobs did not represent increased opportunity. Instead, they were assigned to the lowliest, nastiest jobs that whites did not want.

Women employed in the agriculture sector worked as sharecroppers alongside men. Often, the owners would draw up contracts that required sharecropping women to pay up to thirty percent interest on their harvest. This insured landowners that freedwomen could not possibly meet payment and would forever be indebted to them.

Of course the farmers could pay no such interest and the end of the first year found them in debt—the second year they tried again but there was the old debt and the new interest to pay, and in this way, the "mortgage system" has gotten a hold on everything that it seems impossible to shake off.

The convict lease system was another way that whites kept African American men and women in bondage. White landowners could lease cheap convict labor to work their lands. African American men and women were arrested on the slightest pretext and thrown into prison to be leased out as convict labor. Because these men and women were leased and not owned, the white landowners worked them sometimes until they dropped dead. Men and women convicts were housed together in the prisons and yoked together for labor. The 1883 Texas State Convention of Negroes passed a resolution that "the practice of chaining male and female convicts together was strongly condemned." One of the motivating reasons for the founding of the Afro-American League of 1890, was the "odious and
demoralizing penitentiary system of the South, its chain gangs, convict labor, and indiscriminate practice of mixing males and females."^49

W.E.B. DuBois observed that

. . . the profit potential of the convict lease system persuaded many Southern planters to rely exclusively on convict labor—some employing a labor force of hundreds of black prisoners. As a result, both employers and state authorities acquired a compelling economic interest in increasing the prison population. Since 1876, Negroes have been arrested on the slightest provocation and given long sentences or fines which they were compelled to work out.^50

African American women were especially vulnerable to this perversion of the law. Even after emancipation, women were still considered fair game for the white male’s sexual aggression. Any female resisting these sexual attacks could be thrown into prison.^51

After the freeing of the slaves, the majority of women worked in agriculture; the next largest group was employed in domestic service. According to the 1890 Census,^52 in thirty-two of the forty-eight states, domestic service was the dominant occupation for African American men and women. In seventy percent of these states, there were more men and women working as domestics than all occupations combined.^53 Isabel Eaton’s companion essay in Dubois’s 1899 study of the Philadelphia Negro,^54 showed that sixty percent of all African American workers in Pennsylvania were employed in domestic work. Former slaves who came North found that the only occupation open to them was domestic service, a continuation of slavery. Even teachers who were fired because of prejudice had to seek employment in the kitchens of white women. Eaton interviewed 55 white employers concerning domestic help. Fifty-four of the employers preferred African American domestics. One employer stated that she preferred African American women for domestics because “they looked more
like servants." Such were the racist views that helped to keep African American women segregated in domestic occupations.

African American Women From 1900 Through World Wars I and II

The 1900 Census revealed that 44 percent of African American women were employed in private household service, while another 44 percent were employed in agriculture. Less than one percent were professionals and another three percent worked in manufacturing; and a negligible number worked in sales, managerial, or clerical occupations. By comparison, less than one-third of employed white women worked in domestic service, one-third worked in manufacturing, ten percent in clerical, four percent in sales, and ten percent in agriculture. Racial stereotyping of African American women as promiscuous helped to keep them locked into domestic service jobs; African American women were unfit to work alongside white women. They would have preferred to work the factory jobs because of the higher pay; however, both African American women and men were excluded from almost all factory jobs except for tobacco stemming and oyster shucking.

With the onset of World War I, many African Americans left Southern agriculture and migrated North to better paying jobs. The overwhelming need for labor for war production forced employers to hire African Americans, in spite of the protests from white workers. According to one study, migrants also fled the South to escape the injustice of the courts, lynchings, denial of suffrage, discrimination in public conveyances, and inequalities in education. Between 1910 and 1930, 1.2 million African Americans left the South for better jobs in the North and Mid-West. White employers still placed white male workers over African
American men who worked in menial jobs in the meat packing industry, steel mills, automobile industry, and as janitors. White male workers protested African Americans taking their jobs and started race riots. The year 1917 saw 40 African Americans killed and thousands left homeless by a race riot in East St. Louis, Illinois. In addition, twenty-three African Americans and fifteen whites were killed in a Chicago riot in 1919. Because African American men had difficulty finding work to support their families, women had to seek paid employment, often in domestic service. From 1900 to 1930, African American women were more likely to be employed than women of any other racial-ethnic group. African American married women were five times more likely to be employed than married white women.

Before and after World War I, African American women were still barred from high paying employment. Many white women refused to work beside them and demanded separate eating and bathroom facilities. Small businessmen contended that they could not handle the additional expense, so they refused to hire African Americans. Further, businessmen believed they would lose their white clientele if African Americans worked as salespersons, clericals, or receptionists. The Department of Labor observed, "strong prejudice against admitting black women to more skilled and better paid kinds of work, which were reserved for white women." Clerical and sales sectors grew rapidly after World War I; however, only one percent of African American women were employed in these sectors compared to over one-third of white women. Qualified African American women with high school diplomas were unable to obtain jobs in these sectors. Instead, they had to seek domestic employment for which they
were overqualified. One qualified African American woman who unsuccessfully sued for employment as a clerical concluded, "the way things stand at present, it is useless to have the requirements. Color-the reason nobody will give, the reason nobody is required to give, will always be in the way."62

Finding jobs in the manufacturing sector was just as difficult for African American women. Only 8 percent of African American women were employed in manufacturing at jobs that no white worker would want. (See Table 3.) These nasty and sometimes dangerous jobs included hog killing, rag picking, commercial laundering, and cleaning. Many of the women who were factory workers were not operatives; instead, they were hired to do the cleaning.63

The Depression of the 1930s found African Americans in a more desperate economic state. Domestic jobs previously designated as "black jobs," were now redefined as "white jobs" because of the shortage of jobs. African American railroad firemen were beaten and murdered by white railroad workers to get them off of the job.64 African American women had little or no success getting employment at all. Historian Jacqueline Jones writes:

Most of these women could only find seasonal or part-time employment; racial and sexual discrimination deprived them of a living wage no matter how hard they labored; and they endured a degree and type of workplace exploitation for which the mere fact of having a job could not compensate.65

By 1935, about 30 percent of African Americans were receiving government relief. In the South, they received less from programs administered by whites. However, the New Deal brought a growth in
government jobs; thus, African American men and women were able to get clerical and professional jobs in that sector.

More economic opportunities appeared with the onset of World War II. Defense industries needed more workers and, as during World War I, were forced to hire African Americans. A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, organized a march on Washington to protest discrimination against African Americans in the war industry. As a result, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 in 1941, which prohibited discrimination in the federal government and defense industries. This order also established the Fair Employment Practices Committee. War-time labor shortages opened up a million new jobs for African Americans. Four hundred thousand African American women left domestic work for the factories, doubling the number of factory workers. African American men and women joined unions for protection from whites who staged hate strikes against their working in the factories.

The end of the war and the decreased demand for defense industry labor resulted in African American women being pushed out of the factories and back into domestic work. The women organized for higher wages in domestic work, better working conditions, training, and job placement. All of the gains made during the war were not lost. As Table 2 shows, between 1930 and 1960, African American women employed in the sales and clerical sectors grew eight-fold, while employment in the manufacturing sector doubled. These changes allowed African American women to finally move out of domestic service jobs and into higher paying jobs. In 1950, 42 percent of African American women worked in private
household service. By 1960, 39 percent were employed in this category, and by 1970, the percentage had declined to 18 percent.

It took African American women almost one hundred years from emancipation before they finally moved out of the fields and the master's house into better paying jobs that their white counterparts had historically enjoyed. Decades of racial and sexual discrimination hindered the economic progress of African American women, their families, and their communities. Despite the racism, odds against her, and attempts to keep the African American woman oppressed, she has persevered in the work force.
CHAPTER 4
THE ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WORKERS IN THE LABOR MARKET

To understand the difficulties and disadvantages African American women workers experience in the labor market, we must examine the structure of the labor market. Economic theorists have offered an explanation by stating that the segmented or dual market with its disproportionate number of African American women workers in the secondary tier has caused these women to be more disadvantaged than black men or whites. Others posit that African American women bring less "human capital" to the labor market and are, therefore, disadvantaged relative to their counterparts. It is the purpose of this chapter to discuss these markets and how discrimination against African American women workers has caused them to be disadvantaged relative to black men and whites.

Discrimination

In a discussion of the disadvantaged position of African American women workers in the labor market, we must closely examine the kinds of discrimination these women face that contribute to their being in such a position. The daily discriminations that are pervasive in every aspect of their lives influence the labor market's reaction as to their value as workers. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the kinds of
discrimination that African American women face and how these relate to this group's position in the labor market.

African American women have long realized that their lives and circumstances are different from any other group of people living in America. We are bound with all women who are viewed as a weaker sex, as well as connected to African American men who are considered as inferior to other mankind. Therefore, African American women are bound by being female and black; bondage which adversely effects the economic progress of the group. Racism and sexism form a double jeopardy that keeps African American women from achieving their economic goals as easily as their white counterparts. Mary Church Terrell, the first president of the National Association of Colored Women, wrote in 1904

> Not only are colored women . . . handicapped on account of their sex, but are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women.67

Frances Beale, a founding member of the Women's Liberation committee of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), introduced the term "double jeopardy" to describe the dual discriminations of racism and sexism that oppress African American women. She wrote about black women

> As blacks they suffer all the burdens of prejudice and mistreatment that fall on anyone with dark skin. As women they bear the additional burden of having to cope with white and black men.68

Further, she expostulates that the dual jeopardy of discrimination translates into economic disadvantages. Beverly Lindsay adds classism as a third form of discrimination against the African American women. In her study, she presents the paradigm that whiteness, maler.ess, and money are advantages. Therefore, being black, female, and poor represent
disadvantages. Beverly Lindsay argues that this triple jeopardy of racism, sexism, and classism is "the most realistic way of analyzing the position of African American women." Deborah King's research posits that classism, racism, and sexism work together to form three interdependent systems of control that dictate the status of African American women. These forms of discrimination against African American women are multiplicative rather than additive. She cites this historical example in her argument: African American women were subjected to the same physical labor and abuse as African American men, but, the women also had to endure circumstances that came about because she was female. Angela Davis, in Women, Race, and Class, wrote

If the most violent punishments of men consisted of floggings and mutilations, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped. At the same time, African American women were forced to "breed" children like animals to boost the "capital" of a slaver economy. African American women were exploited as concubines, mistresses, and sexual slaves of white men.

These are not the same experiences that white women faced; these conditions were allowed to exist because of discrimination against race and class.

The preceding body of research and examples lends credence to my argument that racial, sexual, and class discriminations have long existed for African American women in their daily lives and they greatly influence their economic conditions. Discrimination determines the way the market reacts to their value as workers. Human capital and segmented market models react adversely to African American women workers because of racial. sexual, and class discrimination.
The Labor Market: Human Capital Theory

The "human capital" labor market model states that in a perfectly competitive market, individuals who have the same education, experience, and on-the-job training, as well as other forms of human capital will be paid equally. Differentials in earnings are due to the differences in attributes that the worker brings to the market and they determine the earnings and the labor force participation of the worker. The economic definition of employment discrimination states that discrimination exists when workers of the same ability receive differentials in earnings. Economic theorists have argued that African American women workers do not fare as well as African American men and whites because they bring less "human capital" to the market. Less human capital translates into lower earnings; therefore, these workers are disadvantaged because they have not adequately prepared themselves for the market. However, as we will discuss in the next chapter, according to the research done by Patricia Gwartney-Gibbs and Patricia Taylor\cite{72}, the human capital model falls short of adequately explaining why African American women workers are disadvantaged in the marketplace. The 1980 statistical results of their research showed that if African American women workers had the same rates of return on their employment characteristics as whites and African American men, they would realize only 66 percent of the earnings of white men. Further, if African American women workers had the same employment characteristics as white men, they would earn only 78 percent of the white men’s earnings. These differentials in earnings for workers of the same ability point to employment discrimination against African American women workers. According to this study, no matter what human capital
characteristics African American women possess they will not be remunerated at the same rates as white men. Discriminatory wage setting practices tend to be a better explanation for the disadvantaged position for African American women rather than the lack of human capital.

Phyllis Wallace posits that prospective employers discriminate based on their "perception of reality." She states,

When an employer incurs some costs in order to determine a potential employee's true productivity, the employer assesses the prospective employee on the basis of preconceived ideas of the average characteristics of the group or groups which the applicant belongs rather than the individual's characteristics.73

Preconceived ideas of the worker's attributes cause employment discrimination, confining African American women to lower earnings and less desirable jobs. Deborah King asserts from her research that men earn more money than women and white earn more money than blacks at the same levels of education. (See Tables 4 and 5.) Discrimination against race and gender become an issue when explaining why African American women workers earn less than their counterparts. However, her research reveals that African American women workers did not consistently earn less than white women at all education levels. At the post secondary level, African American women earned more than white women but considerably less than white men. White women who had secondary education or less earned more than black women at the same levels. Table 4 represents the varied and conditional influence of race and gender on socioeconomic and educational status of African American women. White men earn the highest median incomes followed by African American men and white women. African American women are ranked at the bottom of the reference group. The educational rankings differ; both white men and
Table 4

Race and Gender Interactive Effects on Socioeconomic Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Economic Status ($)</th>
<th>Educational Status (yrs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White males</td>
<td>16,467</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black males</td>
<td>9,448</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White females</td>
<td>6,949</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black females</td>
<td>6,164</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Income figures are 1984 median incomes for those fifteen years or older. Educational attainment is for 1984, median years of school completed.

Source: Debra King, *Black Women in America*

Table 5

Multiplicative Effects of Race, Gender, and Class on Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incomes</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than a high school diploma</td>
<td>9,525</td>
<td>6,823</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 years of high school</td>
<td>13,733</td>
<td>9,260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3 years of college</td>
<td>14,258</td>
<td>10,532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>19,783</td>
<td>14,131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or more years of post-baccalaureate education</td>
<td>23,143</td>
<td>18,970</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Income is 1979 median income. Educational attainment is used as a measure of economic class.

Source: Debra King, *Black Women in America*
women have more schooling than African American men and women. But, in both cases, the African American women is at the bottom of the rankings. Gender is more important in understanding the income rankings, while race is more important in understanding the educational rankings.

Table 5 shows the relationship between race, gender, and class and their influence on income. Class is represented by educational attainment; education is an important determinant of income, and despite race or gender, those with more education earn more than those with less education. Men earn more money than women at the same educational level, and whites earn more than African Americans at the same level of education. Among women the relationships to income is influenced by race. Because African American women have the subordinate status of being black and female, it would be expected that they would have the lowest income regardless of their education. However, the returns of a college degree or higher are greater for African American women than white women. African American women who have less than a college degree earn less than white females at the same level. In 1988, only 63 percent of African American women over the age of 25 had graduated from high school compared to 78 percent of white women. This leaves a large percentage of African American women without the ability to earn higher wages. However, since African American women are not consistently in the lowest categories, it would suggest that the multiple discriminations are varied and complex in the ways they affect the economic status of African American women.

The human capital theory, therefore, does not adequately explain the difficulties that African American women workers face in the labor
market. Segmented market theorists offer other explanations for the limited success of African American women workers.

**Segmented or Dual Labor Markets**

Segmented markets, according to labor market theorists, are divided into the primary and secondary sectors, with each segment having distinct characteristics. The primary segment is described as having "larger firms with organizational structure, industrial location, market concentration and power, ability to adapt to a changing environment, and factor endowment and extend of conglomeration." Jobs in the primary sector are managerial and professional with higher pay and more status than jobs in the secondary sector. These jobs usually require more formal education and present the opportunities for promotion and advancement.

Secondary market firms are characterized as "competitive, exercising no autonomous influence over market prices, and are typically involved in a single product line or a series of related products." Jobs in this sector are characterized as having lower wages than the primary tier, poor working conditions and benefits, and a high turnover rate. Teresa Amott has done extensive studies of African American women workers and their status in the segmented markets. She further divides the markets into upper and lower primary tiers and upper and lower secondary tiers. (See Table 6.) Using her analyses, the present economic picture for African American women reveals a mixture of progress and decline in their status. African American women no longer work only in domestic capacities; they are represented in almost every job category. Table 6 shows an increased share of African American women working in managerial
Table 6  
The Distribution of African American and European American Workers Across Labor Market Segments, by Gender, 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African American Women</th>
<th>African American Men</th>
<th>European American Women</th>
<th>European American Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper-Tier Primary</td>
<td>..</td>
<td>++</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-Tier Primary</td>
<td></td>
<td>++</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper-Tier Secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>++</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-Tier Secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percent: 0 20 40 60 80 100

Source: Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), p. 188

and professional jobs in 1980. At the same time, however, 32 percent of African American women worked in the lowest tiered jobs, 12 percent were unemployed and one-third of all African Americans lived in poverty.

Teresa Amott further analyzes the status of African American women workers using Table 7 to show the relative concentration of African American women in selected white-male dominated occupations between 1970 and 1980. A relative concentration of 100 means that African American women have their fair share of these jobs equal to their share of all
Table 7


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1970</th>
<th>1980</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>UPPER-TIER PRIMARY JOBS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Diagnosing</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm Owners &amp; Managers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales Representatives (Commodities &amp; Finance)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executives, Managers, &amp; Administrators</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LOWER-TIER PRIMARY JOBS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective Service</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei, Race, Gender, and Work (Boston: South End Press, 1991), pp. 188-89

jobs. A number higher than 100 means that they have more than their fair share, and a number lower means they have less than their fair share of these jobs. African American women's relative concentrations increased in all of the white masculine top-tier primary sector jobs except farm owner and manager. Their share doubled in engineering, sales representatives in commodities and finance, and executives, administrators, and managers. These trends will probably continue as long as the share of African American women who complete college continue to rise. African American women also increased their share of lower tier primary sector jobs. Between 1970 and 1980, African American women more than doubled their share of protective service and transportation jobs.

Further examinations of Table 6 shows that another 7 percent of African American women were employed in the lower tier of the primary
sector. These women were mostly employed as nurses; African American men's share of these jobs is about four times greater than African American women.

It is evident that African American women are economically oppressed when you look at the distribution of these workers across the labor market. More than three-fourths of African American women's paid labor is in the secondary labor market. Compared to African American men and whites, these women have the largest share of the lower-tiered secondary labor market. Almost one-third of these women hold the low-paid, low status service jobs. This is about three times the share of white men working in the lower-tiered secondary jobs. Black poverty is understandable when you realize that the majority of African American women work in ill-paid jobs.

Compounding the economic problem of low wages is the fact that black female heads of households doubled between 1960 and 1988. In 1960, 22 percent of African American families were headed by a female. That figure jumped to 43 percent by 1988. In that same time period, the poverty rate was 52 percent for all persons living in a home headed by an African American female. Single mother families raised over one-half of all African American children and this represented three-fourths of all poor, black families. African American families were three times more likely to be headed by a female than white families in 1986. Black single mother heads of household earned only about 35 percent of the income that two parent black families earned and less than 30 percent of what white two parent families earned in 1988.76 These poor, female
headed families tend to be concentrated in the inner city ghettos where education, housing and jobs are inferior.

This perpetuates a cycle of poverty that is difficult to break. In the late decade of the eighties, an African American was eight times more likely to be poor than his white counterpart. Various reasons can be cited for the increase of African American female heads of household and they are influenced by the racism of society. Historically, some African American women have chosen to be heads of households because of their West African culture, or laws forbidding slaves to marry free or white citizens. Today's reasons include a shortage of African American men because of incarceration and high death rates due to combat, ghetto violence, and high risk occupations.

In spite of the obstacles of being African American, female, poor, and sometimes alone, these women continue to persist in their efforts to support themselves and their families. African American women continue to struggle for economic justice by organizing to fight against the injustices that race, gender, and class prejudices bring to bear. African American women have overcome the oppressive system of institutionalized slavery and the years of racist and sexist attitudes that kept them in the worst of menial jobs. Contrary to popular rhetoric, African American women still support the efforts of their men, raise their children, and work for the good of their community.

A survey of the current literature supports the fact that African American women continue to struggle economically and the struggle is rooted in their historical experiences in the labor market.
CHAPTER 5
SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

At the inception of the idea for this project, in 1986, very little literature had been written about the African American professional woman. Perhaps it is because the African American woman had only been admitted to the professional ranks for such a short time. Therefore, her progress or lack of progress had not been the object of much study. Further, "women's issues" that were studied were issues of primary concern to white women. Information and statistics on blacks were aggregated; numbers included both African American men as well as women. This made it extremely difficult to get a clear picture of the African American woman’s economic status.

One of the earliest research projects launched to study the labor trends of the African American woman was done by Elizabeth Almquist entitled "The Doubly Disadvantaged: Minority Women in the Labor Force."77 This project dealt not only with African American women but with various other minority women in comparison to the white woman. Included in this study were African American, Asian American, Japanese American, Native American, Mexican American, and Puerto Rican Women. Elizabeth Almquist hypothesized that being woman and a minority was a double disadvantage in the labor market. The research revealed that each of the groups of women had an occupational distribution that was very similar. Japanese-American women were more closely identified as having the same
occupational distribution as white women while the African American woman had the highest index of occupational dissimilarity in relation to white women. More African American women were employed in the lower tier secondary market than white women. Based on data that the researcher presented, there are certain similarities among white and minority women. Minority women enter and remain in the labor force for the same reasons that white women do. The more education that a woman possesses, the more likely she will enter and remain in the labor force. The greatest disparity noted was not among white women and minority women, but between men and women. Women have not been able to translate their educational and occupational achievements into earnings as easily as white men do. Being female and of a minority group is truly a disadvantage in the labor market. According to her research, being female is the greater drawback since all minorities are not uniformly disadvantaged.

Patricia Gwartney-Gibbs and Patricia Taylor did a 1986 study, "African American Women Workers' Earnings Progress in Three Industrial Sectors,"78 that provided an updated picture of the economic progress of working African American women. These researchers argue that the "human capital" theory in neoclassical economics does not adequately explain the condition of African American women in the labor market. According to the "human capital" theory, individuals that have the same work experience, education levels, on-the-job training, and other forms of human capital will be paid equally in perfectly competitive labor markets. These individuals will be similarly productive and of equal value to their employers. Economists explain African American women's
earnings, which are lower than African American men and whites, by their historically lower education levels. The statistical results of the study showed little confidence in the "human capital" theory and pointed instead to discrimination and segregation for the differences in the earnings of African American men and women.

The researchers used three questions to examine African American women workers' earnings progress. First, what were African American women workers' actual earnings in three industrial sectors in the United States in 1960 and 1980? Second, what would African American women have earned, hypothetically, if they had the same average human capital and other employment characteristics as African American men and whites in three industrial sectors in 1960 and 1980? Finally, what would African American women have earned, hypothetically, if they had the same rates of return on their employment characteristics as whites and African American men? The three industrial sectors examined in this study were defined as the Core, Periphery, and Government. High wages and profits, unionization, and high productivity characterized the "core" industrial sector. Labor intensity, low profits, low wages, and high competition characterized the "Periphery" industrial sector. The Government sector included federal, state, and local employment.

The results of the study showed that African American women made progress in their earnings relative to African American men and whites in the three industrial sectors between 1960 and 1980. As expected, greater earnings differentials existed in the "Periphery" industries; African American women earned about 20 percent of white men's earnings. The researchers suggest that eliminating discriminatory pay structures will
do more to eliminate earnings inequities in the three industrial sectors, than improving the employment characteristics of African American women workers. Findings for the second research question showed that, if African American women workers had the same characteristics as white women, their earnings would have surpassed white women in all three industrial sectors in 1980. If African American women had the same characteristics as white men, they would have earned about 78 percent of white men's earnings in 1980. This casts doubt on the human capital perspective of understanding earnings inequalities. In support of their findings, some scholars have theorized that no matter what African American women's employment characteristics are, they will not be recompensed at the same rates as white men.\(^79\) This points to wage setting discrimination by employers against African American women. In answer to the third research question, the authors found that, if African American women had the same rates of return to their employment characteristics as white women, they would have achieved about 100 percent of their earnings in 1980. In comparison to white men during that same period, African American women would have achieved less than two-thirds of the earnings of white men. In summary, Patricia Gwartney-Gibbs and Patricia Taylor suggest that the "human capital" theory cannot explain the unique earnings experience of African American women. Instead, we must look at ways to eliminate discrimination and segregation in all industrial sectors so that African American women can achieve equal pay status.

Sharlene Hesse Biber's essay, "The African American Woman Worker: A Minority Group Perspective on Women at Work,"\(^80\) also examines the
economic conditions of African American women. Her purpose is to debunk the myth that African American woman workers are one of the most successful economic groups in society. The focus questions of her research were: Do African American women differ in their labor force experience from white women? Also, is there any basis for the increasingly popular notion that African American women's dual oppressed status has become an advantage in the labor market? The myths she challenges are as follows: First, African American women obtain better jobs. Second, it is easier for African American women than men to obtain employment, even if it is of the worst, menial kind. These myths follow from the assumption African American women are powerful matriarchs with almost superhuman power. For example:

In recent years the African American woman has almost become a romantic, legendary figure in this society because the vast conception of her as a person is largely dictated by these stereotypes. The idea that she is almost superhuman, capable of assuming all major responsibilities for sustaining herself and her family through harsh economic and social conditions has been projected in much of the popular literature as well as the academic research. Implicit in this popular conceptualization of African American womanhood on all fronts is that she is felt to be stronger than other women, and certainly stronger than African American men.  

These myths and stereotypes have been accepted without critically looking at relevant statistics. Sharlene Hesse Biber argues from statistics that African American women have higher levels of unemployment, higher underemployment and lower earnings than African American men and whites. In addition, more African American women than white women head families that are below the poverty line. The essay concludes that there is little evidence to support the idea that being African American and a woman has special advantages in the labor market.
She also concludes that African American women differ in their labor force experience from white women and the root causes of these differences can be found in the legacy of slavery. Sexism and racism against African American women follow from established social attitudes and practices that have determined their position in lower paying, blue and white collar jobs.

James Geschwender and Rita Carroll-Seguin support these conclusions in their article, "Exploding the Myth of African American Progress." This myth, according to the authors, that all African Americans are making tremendous progress toward achieving economic equality and will continue to do so for an indefinite period, is dangerous and false. First, this myth is dangerous because it has been used to support the rationale that government no longer needs to act against racial discrimination in the economic arena. Second, inaccurate and incomplete analyses of the data have led to a false, optimistic picture of economic progress of African Americans. The data does not consider different labor force patterns of African American women compared to white women. African American women have always been more likely to work outside the home and have contributed significantly more to the economic support of their families. Evidence shows that the survival of African American families has depended largely on the economic and cultural strength of the woman holding the families together, child rearing, and passing on traditions. These researchers suggest that an analysis of the past trends of racism against African American women workers is necessary to predict trends of the future. In addition they argue that:

The precarious hold upon a middle-class standard of living that many African American families were able to acquire in the
1960s and 1970s, is now likely to be lost. As a decline in real wages and reduced state spending, combined with racism that continues to discourage educational and economic opportunities for African Americans, we appear to be in the process of returning to a racially polarized society. Increasing numbers of European American families are experiencing economic strain and an increasing number of African American families are failing to meet their minimal survival needs.85

A variety of articles has recently been written in women’s and business magazines that focus largely on African American readership. Each economist or sociologist proffers the same argument: the African American woman is losing ground in the economic arena as we head into the next century. Julianne Malveaux, an African American economist, voices the same argument. Her article, "Moving Forward, Standing Still: Women in White Collar Jobs,"86 contends that the proportion of African American working women has increased. However, the income disparities between African American women and whites continue to grow.
CHAPTER 6

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Evidence from my research suggests that African American females still confront discrimination and gender inequality in the labor market. Statistics of higher unemployment and lower pay bear witness to the fact that African American women are indeed disadvantaged relative to their white counterparts. Many problems that these women experience are caused by both racism and sexism. It is extremely important to reiterate that the plight of the African American woman cannot be separated from the plight of the African American community. Whatever adversely affects the African American woman has resounding adversities for the African American community as a whole. Currently, the majority of African American children live in households with a female head. Economic conditions that jeopardize the mother certainly limit the future and well-being of the children.

These blatant inequities against the African American woman can, in some measure, be rectified by policy makers. An agenda designed to improve African American women's status in the labor market should include the following salient points:87

• Our economic structure should be revised so that full employment at decent wages with adequate benefits is available to everyone. Programs that provide training but not decent jobs are of little consequence. Properly structured and administered employment
training programs benefit African American women, improving their economic status. Incentives that promote the access of African American women to employment and training for upward mobility are crucial.

- Affirmative action programs that do not provide for employment expansion only shift the burden of unemployment to another segment of the population. Legislation that provides all workers with jobs and dignity on the job is imperative. Institutional racism has always been a part of our country and probably will remain so. Affirmative action is required to alleviate some of the labor market problems African Americans confront on a daily basis. Dismantling affirmative action was a blow to the limited gains achieved by African Americans. There is strong evidence that affirmative action had a positive influence on education and employment for African Americans. The overturning of court ordered busing to desegregate schools will exacerbate the already bleak future of inner city schools with a mostly minority population. The United States will return to a racially divided country on all levels, doing irreparable harm to the black community. Affirmative action should be reenforced as a necessary tool to improve the status of all of the minorities in this country.

- This nation's budget priorities provide more spending for the military and the wealthy than for the survival of the middle- to low-income citizens. These priorities should be revised to provide more funding for education, training, social programs, energy and urban revitalization. Child care provisions, as well as
provisions for family emergency leave should be included in these new budget priorities.

- Child care provisions are a priority not only to black women, but to other working women as well. Women cannot be effective in the labor market if there is not adequate care for their children. Both low cost day-care and low cost transportation are required. This strategy assures adequate income for women supporting families after transportation and day-care costs have been met.

- Set asides and other public support for minority owned businesses should be an integral part of this new agenda. Black women owned businesses generate less income than other groups who are in business for themselves. However, black women are less likely to be discriminated against when they are employed by black business owners. The development of black owned businesses with a strong plan of hiring black employees augurs the economic well being of the black community.

- Each of these strategies alone cannot provide strong policy but taken together they can become part of a solution. The free market system will not provide employment to everyone seeking employment, but economic planning and a fundamental change in the system can increase the odds. At present, we are more concerned with "profits" than with "workers." A revamping of that priority may provide a successful policy to encourage African American women and other minorities to seek and remain in the marketplace.
Conclusion

Black women have had a long and lasting economic commitment to this country. Despite the fact that their unemployment rate is much higher than that of white women, African American women continue to work outside the home. Using factors that determine why women choose the marketplace, one would logically assume that African American women would have participation rates greater or at least comparable to that of their white counterparts. Rapid growth in earnings among African American women and greater educational opportunities should foster more participation in the market. The increased number of women heads of households would provide incentive for African American women to actively seek employment outside of the home. However, unemployment rates are climbing not only for African American women but for African American men as well. The African American community as a whole is affected by these current employment trends and their appears to be no end in sight.

Possibly, such strategies as greater investment in human capital, antidiscrimination, and affirmative action programs may prove to be antidotes for the condition African Americans face. Unless this condition is addressed and attempts made to correct the present situation, African Americans may very well become a separate, forgotten "underclass" segment of American society.
ENDNOTES


9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.


14. David Davis quoted in Williams, p. 16.


16. Ibid, p. 37


24. Ibid.

25. Ibid, p. 10

26. Ibid, p. 11


36. Blackburn and Ricards, p. 23.


38. Ibid.


41. Ibid, pp. 234-35.


44. Wertheimer, op cit., p. 228.

45. Ibid.


47. Ibid, p. 689.


53. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

56. 1900 Census, Occupations, Table 3, p. 419.


58. William Harris, The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982 p. 104.


60. 1920 Census, Occupations Table 2, p. 340.

61. 1900 Census, See Appendix A.


64. Harris, op cit., p. 104.


66. Harris, op cit., p. 122.

67. Quoted in Giddings, op cit., p. 367.

68. Quoted in Giddings, op cit., p. 367.


70. Ibid, p. 272.

71. Davis, op cit., p. 79.


73. Phyllis Wallace quoted in La Rodgers-Rose, p. 27.


75. Ibid.


87. Wallace, op cit., p. 32.
