

James Madison University

**JMU Scholarly Commons**

---

MAD-RUSH Undergraduate Research  
Conference

Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual MadRush  
Conference: Best Papers, Spring 2020

---

## African American Women in the Domestic Service Industry during Reconstruction. An Intersectional Analysis

Kathryn Small  
*James Madison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/madrush>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Studies Commons](#), [United States History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

---

Small, Kathryn, "African American Women in the Domestic Service Industry during Reconstruction. An Intersectional Analysis" (2020). *MAD-RUSH Undergraduate Research Conference*. 1.  
<https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/madrush/2020/women/1>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conference Proceedings at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in MAD-RUSH Undergraduate Research Conference by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [dc\\_admin@jmu.edu](mailto:dc_admin@jmu.edu).

## African American Women in the Domestic Service Industry during Reconstruction. An Intersectional Analysis.

After the American Civil War came to an end, race relations in the United States entered unknown territory. Previously, US citizens could look to the law for a strict interpretation which defined the status of African American slaves as the property of their white owners. However, after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, which declared the freedom of slaves, the black population was eager to assert their new rights as emancipated citizens of the United States. One of the ways they wanted to take advantage of their newly-found freedom was in their work. However, the majority of the southern white population were very resentful of the proclamation, and therefore proceeded to limit the economic advancement of African Americans in society. For black women, this meant their employment opportunities were largely restricted to the domestic service industry, where they were still under the direct control of white employers. Due to their bitterness, white employers took advantage of their black domestic servants with long working hours, unreasonable workloads, and extremely low wages. Black female workers had few if any alternatives, which highlights the intersectional prejudice faced by African American domestic servants in the reconstruction era.

This essay will focus on the different forms of discrimination faced by African American women and will evidence how race relations remained a contentious subject in American society during reconstruction.

The struggles of African American women, freed from slavery, began immediately after the Civil War ended as they had real difficulty asserting economic independence from the white population. This was largely due to black women being confined to roles within domestic

service, as many had experience of this work as slaves, but also this profession was seen as the least desirable by the working female population. Many of the negative opinions surrounding household labour resulted from the “low wages, long hours, ill treatment, and unpleasant tasks”<sup>1</sup> required from employees. As a result, the majority of white domestic servants left the industry in search of work in secretarial roles and jobs in department stores. African Americans migrated to the cities in large numbers to fill this void when they left their servitude. This led to populations in Southern urban centres such as Atlanta to “nearly double”<sup>2</sup> in size at the end of the Civil War. The post-war period created significant financial and social instability across the whole nation, which resulted in African Americans becoming the victims of institutionalised and personal discrimination from their white counterparts. Government institutions such as the *Freedmen’s Bureau* were created to combat this racial abuse and aid the transition of African Americans from bondage to freedom.

An article published by *The Charleston Advocate* exemplifies the negative public opinion surrounding reconstruction that led to the social instability of the time. With a target audience of the white population, the use of phrases such as “oppress and plunder the white race”<sup>3</sup> highlight and somewhat encourage those to the fear the emancipation process. This article therefore gives an insight into the potential reasons behind the racial oppression directed towards African Americans, specifically female domestic workers, who experienced intersectional forms of abuse. The white population were fearful of what freedom meant for

---

<sup>1</sup> Hunter. T, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labours After the Civil War*, Harvard University Press, 1997, p.28.

<sup>2</sup> Hunter. T, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labours After the Civil War*, p.8.

<sup>3</sup> “The Prospects for South Carolina.”, 11<sup>th</sup> May 1867, *The Charleston advocate*, [volume] (Charleston, S.C.), *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress, Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> October 2019.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025784/1867-05-11/ed-1/seq-2/>

the order of society. No longer could African Americans be automatically put on the lowest rung because of their status as 'property', they could now advance freely, which left many white people vulnerable and afraid, both for their physical safety and their superior position in society, ultimately leading them to take their fear out in the form of racial abuse and violence.

However, this racial oppression did not deter many African American women from taking pride and enthusiasm in their newly found freedom. The majority of the black population remained very optimistic. One of the reasons for this was they felt the conditions and nature of their employment were now solely under their control for the first time, which ultimately "gave meaning to their freedom after emancipation".<sup>4</sup> For domestic servants, this meant notifying their employers of the differences between employment and ownership. One of the main ways they demonstrated this, was by designing their labour agreements to more easily accommodate their family responsibilities and schedules.<sup>5</sup> In order to achieve this, many African American women "insisted that domestic service be broken down"<sup>6</sup> and tasks, such as cooking and cleaning, separated. As a result, domestic servants attempted to refuse to perform an extended and unrealistic list of assignments, which would have had the effect of ultimately lengthening their working hours to the point where they could not sufficiently take care of their families. However, the economic desperation felt by many black families meant the majority could not refuse. Overall, this however does show African American women

---

<sup>4</sup> Schwalm, L, Chapter 6, "*In their Own Way*": *Women and Work in the Postbellum South*, in *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina*, University of Illinois Press, 1997, p.187.

<sup>5</sup> Schwalm, L, Chapter 6, "*In their Own Way*": *Women and Work in the Postbellum South*, in *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina*, p.209.

<sup>6</sup> Schwalm, L, Chapter 6, "*In their Own Way*": *Women and Work in the Postbellum South*, in *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina*, p.209.

were now striving for economic autonomy and were willing to try and stand up for themselves, an option that was not possible during enslavement, as it would have resulted in extremely cruel punishment.

However, as scholar Leslie Schwalm acknowledges, the ability for African American women to affect the conditions of their work was compromised by the economic oppression forced upon the free black population. Generated by white resentment, economic discrimination directed towards black employees was created by several factors. Firstly, the uncertain economic society created as a result of the Civil War made it impossible for African American women not to work, as the wages for black men were not sufficient to allow the family to survive without earning two wages. The threat of “starvation most likely left thousands of freed people without other choices”<sup>7</sup> than to accept any labour contracts they were given, without room for negotiation or complaint. Furthermore, the lack of opportunities open to African Americans to gain an adequate education often made it difficult for black employees to understand and negotiate important clauses of their labour contracts. As a result, several employment “contracts bound labourers to terms they may not have understood”<sup>8</sup>, ultimately locking them into agreements with potentially “abusive or exploitative employers.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, laws surrounding vagrancy were introduced to encourage a hard-working population and punish those without a job. This could be seen as another form of indirect discrimination, as African Americans were potentially more likely to

---

<sup>7</sup> Schwalm, L, Chapter 6, “*In their Own Way*”: *Women and Work in the Postbellum South*, in *A Hard Fight for We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina*, p.200.

<sup>8</sup> Schwalm, L, Chapter 6, “*In their Own Way*”: *Women and Work in the Postbellum South*, in *A Hard Fight for We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina*, p.199.

<sup>9</sup> Schwalm, L, Chapter 6, “*In their Own Way*”: *Women and Work in the Postbellum South*, in *A Hard Fight for We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina*, p.199/200.

find themselves unemployed and homeless during this time. Overall, this further limited the control black employees had over their work options and prospects, as in many ways, exploitative employment was better than none at all. The oppressive economic environment created, resulted in the majority of domestic workers accepting the regulations of any employment they were given, overall highlighting the intersectional factors working against autonomous black employment.

An article published in the *Holmes County Farmer* highlights the oppressive economic circumstance many African Americans were forced to endure. Written in 1865, the article demonstrates the work of “poor-houses”<sup>10</sup> in aiding those who were struggling to survive. Poor-houses consisted of a form of sanctuary for those unable to work, and operated to protect many from the harsh consequences of vagrancy laws. As the article points out, African Americans often made up the majority of occupants, with the poor-house in South Leavenworth housing “about fifty negresses”.<sup>11</sup> However, poor-houses were not a desirable destination, as entering the poor-house meant admitting you could not find work, which came with an onslaught of social discrimination and was a difficult situation from which to escape. Once again, African Americans suffered the worse of this prejudice, as the use of the derogatory term “negresses”<sup>12</sup>, as opposed to ‘African American women’ highlights. This shows not only were they victims of class and economic prejudice, but because much of the white population were fearful of the new status of free African Americans, they were targets

---

<sup>10</sup> “Just Like Them.” 19th October 1865. *Holmes County farmer*. [volume] (Millersburg, Ohio), *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> November 2019. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84028822/1865-10-19/ed-1/seq-1/>

<sup>11</sup> “Just Like Them.” 19th October 1865. *Holmes County farmer*. Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> November 2019. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84028822/1865-10-19/ed-1/seq-1/>

<sup>12</sup> “Just Like Them.” 19th October 1865. *Holmes County farmer*. Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> November 2019. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84028822/1865-10-19/ed-1/seq-1/>

of racial abuse as well. This newspaper's primary purpose is to attract a regular readership, who, at this time, would most likely be white. In order to appeal to white readers, the *Holmes County Farmer* adopted the common, derogatory view of African Americans that defined the reconstruction period in America. Although this can be disadvantageous as it presents a potentially unbalanced and inappropriately negative perspective of black Americans, it can be useful for understanding the racial prejudice that kept the black population socially and economically oppressed at this time.

Socially, African American women were also subjected to the gender norms of the time, surrounding domestic work and family life. Not only were many domestic servants bound by contracts where they were required to complete extensive lists of tasks including the "cooking, washing, ironing...general housework and anything about the yard or garden"<sup>13</sup>, they were also expected to complete the majority of them again once they returned home. One contract had a built in clause that the woman be allowed "half of each Saturday [off] to wash [the families] clothes".<sup>14</sup> This unrealistic schedule made balancing work and home life very difficult for most black women, and helps explain why so many fought for more control over their labour conditions, as the work expected from them was too much.

In contrast, remaining present in the home for African American women was extremely important. The institution of slavery had taken its toll on the majority of families, who saw their siblings, parents, spouses and children sold to other estates and taken away, often not to

---

<sup>13</sup> Noralee Frankel, *From Slave Women to Free Women: The National Archives and Black Women's History in the Civil War Era*, Federal Records and African American History (Summer 1997, Vol. 29, No. 2), Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> September 2019.

<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/slave-women>

<sup>14</sup> Noralee Frankel, *From Slave Women to Free Women: The National Archives and Black Women's History in the Civil War Era*, Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> September 2019.

<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/slave-women>

be seen again. Emancipation meant not having to endure this torture again, and as a result, black women were determined to be as active and present as possible in family life and the home. The lack of flexibility built into labour contracts, surrounding family life, combined with the social expectations of women at the time, demonstrates how African American domestic workers were subjected to a range of pressures from all aspects of their life.

Many of these contracts were created as a result of the undefined, social instability produced after the Civil War. During this time, race relations were very tumultuous, as much of the white population no longer knew how to treat African Americans, now they were free people. Rebecca Sharpless discusses how the engrained features of “subjugation and prejudice”<sup>15</sup>, developed by the power structures of slavery, made a post-emancipation working relationship very difficult for both parties. As a result, relations between the whites and blacks became very tense and uncertain, as “old expectations clashed with current realities”<sup>16</sup> regarding what freedom meant. In domestic servitude, many white owners became employers overnight, and did not know how to alter their behaviour to suit their new role. On the other hand, African American women were not willing to go back to work in conditions similar to that of slavery. Consequently, labour contracts were produced to create a compromise between vastly different social expectations. However, because of this, neither party was satisfied. An article published in the *Harper's Bazaar* highlights the frustration of many white employers with their domestic servants. Entitled “Between The Two Women”, it states how many white

---

<sup>15</sup> Rebecca Sharpless, Chapter 6, “*Gendering Jim Crow: Relationships with Employers*”: *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960*, University of North Carolina Press, 2010. p.160.

<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Sharpless, Chapter 6, “*Gendering Jim Crow: Relationships with Employers*”: *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960*, p.160.

employers view their servants to have “established a custom of sloth”<sup>17</sup>. The use of this term is an example of engrained prejudice and discrimination. Sloth is one of the seven deadly sins and this phrase helps establish the trope of the lazy black female domestic servant after their emancipation, who was now unwilling to meet the potentially unrealistic work expectations previously required of them during slavery. The *Harper's Bazaar* was a magazine directed towards an upper-class white audience, many of whom could afford to employ domestic servants. As a result, it proves to be a useful source when analysing white opinions of the time and gives an insight into how tense the relationship was between employer and worker.

Similarly, an article in the *Daily Inter Ocean* addresses how social apathy directed towards the domestic service industry became a national movement that transcended race lines.

Published in Illinois in 1874, almost a decade after the end of the Civil War, it exemplifies how race relations remained very tense on a nationally spread level, however from the African American point of view. In the article, it states how “slavery has...been the child of ignorance and sloth”<sup>18</sup> of the white population, that has led to the unrealistic workload of African Americans being taken for granted. Once former enslaved workers demand suitable working conditions, they are deemed lazy. This philosophy has led to equal amounts of apathy amongst African American domestic servants, as is present in their employers.

Overall, this shows how discontent in the domestic service industry was not a problem

---

<sup>17</sup> "Between the Two Women.", December 5<sup>th</sup> 1874, *Harper's Bazaar* (1867-1912), p. 790. Volume 7, Issue 49, Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> October 2019.

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/125670764?accountid=11667>

<sup>18</sup> "The Help Problem.", *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, Illinois), November 16<sup>th</sup> 1874: 4, *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*, Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> September 2019.

<https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2:11499A3E9CB040E8@EANX-119EFF49158B7CD8@2405844-119EFF49662219A8@3-119EFF4AD707E3A8@The+Help+Problem>

exclusive to employers, but rather how it was present in employees as well. Furthermore, this newspaper is a national publication, which suggests African American women could use platforms such as these to make their frustrations public on a larger scale, ultimately making their discriminatory treatment a national, not only a localised, issue.

The differing expectations between black workers and their white employers manifested into discrimination at work. Domestic servitude was already regarded, by white Americans, as the most 'unrespectable' profession for a woman to work in, which was mainly why vacancies were filled by African Americans. As a result, the profession largely became segregated through race, which provided a reason for white employers to target their black workers with racial and economic discrimination. As scholar Rebecca Sharpless highlights, "wages, hours and tasks [were] extremely uneven"<sup>19</sup> for black domestic workers compared to their white counterparts. Economic discrimination was a very common experience for African Americans, where the largely unbalanced ratio between wages received and work required could be regarded as a form of waged slavery as they were being so severely exploited.

At this time the majority of women, of all races, were looked down upon for working at all rather than remaining in the home. However black domestic servants bore the brunt of this discrimination because of their race and field of work. A petition from the working women of Boston, given to the Massachusetts's state government in 1869, highlights the labour discrimination of working women. It is one of the first campaigns for women in an official government format, and whilst it does not identify the specific concerns of black women,

---

<sup>19</sup> Rebecca Sharpless, Chapter 3, "*Long Hours and Little Pay, Compensation and Worker's Resistance*": *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960*, p.96.

many of the labour complaints made are relevant to the experiences of African American domestic workers. For example, whilst the arguments for higher wages and reduced working hours are made, one appeal, to be free from “working on the Lord’s Day”<sup>20</sup>, was a specific request of black domestic workers. Sharpless discusses how taking away a black women’s privilege of not working on a Sunday could be seen as a way white employers were encroaching on the free status of African Americans,<sup>21</sup> as their right to religious freedom was being breached. During the time of slavery, religion became a very important virtual escape from the horrors of everyday treatment and punishment. By refusing to provide black workers with the opportunity to attend church on a Sunday, many believed it was taking away their rights as a free citizen.

Discrimination against black domestic workers expanded beyond wages and working hours. As a newspaper article published in the *Nashville Union and American* testifies to, relations between black and white America reached such tense levels that African Americans began to fear for their lives. Entitled “These Wicked Students”, the article discusses the constant fear many black people felt of being verbally harassed and physically attacked. In one particular interview with an African American woman, she states how she has to walk home before dark, as she feels protected by the daylight.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, this was a common fear of many

---

<sup>20</sup> *American Broadsides and Ephemera*, 1869, Series 1, no.12769, American Workman Office, Boston, Massachusetts. Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> October 2019.  
[https://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/Evans/?p\\_product=EAIX&p\\_theme=eai&p\\_nbid=C4DO4CIBMTU3MDg0OTkxMy43NzEyNzE6MToxMjo3Ni43OC4yNDEuNzg&p\\_action=doc&p\\_queryname=7&p\\_doref=v2:10D2F64C960591AE@EAIX-10F4547176D20308@12769-@1](https://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/Evans/?p_product=EAIX&p_theme=eai&p_nbid=C4DO4CIBMTU3MDg0OTkxMy43NzEyNzE6MToxMjo3Ni43OC4yNDEuNzg&p_action=doc&p_queryname=7&p_doref=v2:10D2F64C960591AE@EAIX-10F4547176D20308@12769-@1)

<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Sharpless, Chapter 3, “*Long Hours and Little Pay, Compensation and Worker’s Resistance*”: *Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960*, p.101.

<sup>22</sup> “These Wicked Students.”, 29<sup>th</sup> October 1873, *Nashville union and American*, [volume] (Nashville, Tenn.), *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Lib. of Congress, Accessed 13<sup>th</sup> October 2019.  
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033699/1873-10-29/ed-1/seq-3/>

black women. However, as many were employed in domestic servitude, their long working hours, often made it impossible for them to travel in daylight, both in the morning and evening. This was another factor that convinced black women to join women's rights movements and sign petitions for reduced working hours, such as the one mentioned above.

To conclude, African American domestic servants suffered discrimination as a result of several factors, the main two being race and gender, which intertwined to maximise their negative effect. As a result of these traits, black domestic workers were abused with longer working hours, fewer wages, verbal abuse and exploitative labour contracts, all of which combined to limit the progress of emancipation and the new free status of African Americans. Although the former slaves now had their freedom many of them were still effectively "enslaved" by, or as a result of, their economic, societal or educational circumstances. By studying primary sources in the forms of newspaper articles, government petitions and magazine editorials, scholars are able to gain a fuller understanding of the intersectional forms of discrimination black women faced in the reconstructive period, and ultimately how and why race relations have remained so strained throughout this time and into the present day.

## **Bibliography:**

### **Primary Sources:**

- *American Broadsides and Ephemera*, 1869, Series 1, no.12769, American Workman Office, Boston, Massachusetts. Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> October 2019.  
[https://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/Evans/?p\\_product=EAI&p\\_theme=eai&p\\_nbid=C4DO4CIBMTU3MDg00TkxMy43NzEyNzE6MToxMjo3Ni43OC4yNDEuNzg&p\\_action=doc&p\\_queryname=7&p\\_docref=v2:10D2F64C960591AE@EAI-10F4547176D20308@12769-@1](https://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/Evans/?p_product=EAI&p_theme=eai&p_nbid=C4DO4CIBMTU3MDg00TkxMy43NzEyNzE6MToxMjo3Ni43OC4yNDEuNzg&p_action=doc&p_queryname=7&p_docref=v2:10D2F64C960591AE@EAI-10F4547176D20308@12769-@1)
- "Between the Two Women." December 5<sup>th</sup> 1874. *Harper's Bazaar (1867-1912)*, p. 790. Volume 7, Issue 49. Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> October 2019.  
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/125670764?accountid=11667>
- "Just Like Them." 19<sup>th</sup> October 1865. *Holmes County farmer. [volume]* (Millersburg, Ohio), *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> November 2019.  
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84028822/1865-10-19/ed-1/seq-1/>
- "The Help Problem." *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, Illinois), November 16<sup>th</sup> 1874: 4. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*. Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> September 2019.  
<https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2:11499A3E9CB040E8@EANX-119EFF49158B7CD8@2405844-119EFF49662219A8@3-119EFF4AD707E3A8@The+Help+Problem>
- "The Prospects for South Carolina." 11<sup>th</sup> May 1867. *The Charleston advocate. [volume]* (Charleston, S.C.), *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> October 2019.  
<<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025784/1867-05-11/ed-1/seq-2/>>
- "These Wicked Students." 29<sup>th</sup> October 1873. *Nashville union and American. [volume]* (Nashville, Tenn.), *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. Accessed 13<sup>th</sup> October 2019.  
<<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033699/1873-10-29/ed-1/seq-3/>>

### **Secondary Sources:**

- Leslie Ann Schwalm, Chapter 6, "In their Own Way": *Women and Work in the Postbellum South*, in *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina*. University of Illinois Press, 1997.
- Noralee Frankel, *From Slave Women to Free Women: The National Archives and Black Women's History in the Civil War Era*. Federal Records and African American History (Summer 1997, Vol. 29, No. 2) Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> September 2019.  
<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/slave-women>
- Rebecca Sharpless, Chapter 3, "Long Hours and Little Pay, Compensation and Worker's Resistance": *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960*, University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

- Rebecca Sharpless, Chapter 6, "*Gendering Jim Crow: Relationships with Employers*": *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960*, University of North Carolina Press, 2010.
- Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labours After the Civil War*, Harvard University Press, 1997.