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Black Pink Collar Workers: Arduous Journey from Field and Kitchen to Office

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The black female workers' journey from field to office was a long and arduous one. This paper examines the transition of black women from agricultural laborers to pink collar workers during the period 1900 to 1980. More black women than white women have had to work in paid employment in order to maintain their families economically. Discrimination against black pink collar workers in career advancement and the better-paying positions, is especially critical because so many black families are female-headed households in need of all the economic resources that the mother-breadwinner can obtain.

The sources for this paper may be found in Washington, D.C. in the Washingtoniana and Black Studies collections of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library; the Library of Congress; the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center; and the United States Department of Labor Library.

This paper examines the transition of black women from agricultural laborers and personal and domestic service workers to pink collar office workers during the period 1900 to 1980.

The term pink collar worker describes a broad category of clerical or office worker occupations: "stenographers, typists and secretaries, shipping and receiving clerks; clerical and kindred workers; . . . office machine operators . . . bookkeepers, accountants, cashiers, and telephone operators . . . sales workers; salesperson, sales demonstrators and real estate salesperson" (Wandersee, 1981, p. 87). (Howe (1977) also includes beauticians, waitresses and homemakers.) The black female
workers' journey from field and kitchen to office was a long and arduous one. Racial discrimination in all of its guises obstructed her way. In the beginning, inadequate education was a major obstacle. Even when black women had the necessary education, pink collar employment, especially those jobs which put them in the public eye, were denied them because their physical appearance and voices did not meet the standard of beauty established by the majority culture. A few were hired by blacks, some others were hired in positions where the public did not see or hear them, and a few others obtained work by "passing" as whites. The tide did not turn until the real obstacle—racial discrimination—was outlawed in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Law. Only when equal opportunity became law did parity occur in hiring for pink collar occupations.

Benjamin Ringer's (1983) conceptualization of America as a "dual society" provides a paradigm with which to study and interpret the black pink collar workers' arduous journey from field to office.

Ringer (1983) contended that U.S. society has consisted of two societies: the People's Domain on one side and the Plural Society on the other. The People's Domain has the guiding ideal of the American creed which included the ideals of the dignity of each individual, the equality of all men, and the unalienable rights of all people to justice, freedom and the pursuit of fair opportunity. Only whites could be in the People's Domain; they were the chiefs and officials and the norms in the People's Domain were democratic and the values were universalistic, egalitarian, and achievement-oriented. On the other side, the Plural Society, where nonwhite minorities dwelled, the normative value was the racial creed: nonwhites should live separately from whites; nonwhites are not equal to whites. While nonwhites could not enter the People's Domain, whites went back and forth from the People's Domain to the Plural Society. They were in control on both sides. For Ringer, the history of the U.S. is one of a continuous struggle on the part of the members of the excluded, Plural Domain, to expand access to the People's Domain.

The "dual society" concept provides a cogent frame of reference from which to analyze and better understand the way in
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which race increases the tension between democracy and equality in America; the existing social, ethnic and religious stratification; and the time and regional variations in the form of arrangements of race and ethnic relations in America. In addition, the dual society framework compels those who were unaware to see that, historically and now, nonwhites in America have received the treatment that they have as a result of efforts to maintain the "People's Domain"—a society under white dominance.

In the Beginning (Post Civil War to 1900)

Two hundred and fifty years of slavery ended with the surrender of the Confederate Army in 1865. The early Reconstruction Period (1865–1870) saw universal enfranchisement (for males) and free public education but not economic independence or security; most blacks worked for their former slave masters. Between 1870 and 1900, blacks throughout the South experienced universal disenfranchisement through state constitutional amendments enacting poll taxes, grandfather clauses, literacy tests, etc. In addition, secret terrorist groups such as the Camellias and the Ku Klux Klan engaged in activities to support the political actions of the larger society to control blacks, remove them from political power, and bring about "White Supremacy" through the enactment of racial segregation laws—"Jim Crow" laws. Jim Crow laws forbade intermarriage; and established the separation of the races in all walks of life from sitting together in trains and depots to learning and worshiping together in schools and churches. "Negroes could be certain of an improved status only in the field of education...there seemed to be a greater willingness to tolerate the growing educational institutions than any of the other agencies of Negroes to improve themselves" (Franklin & Moss, 1988, p. 239).

Prior to the Civil War, black women were restricted to two fields—agriculture and domestic service (Foner and Lewis, 1989). Most black women over the age of ten were slaves working on southern farms and plantations, and whether at work in the field or the slave quarters "hard labor...was the defining characteristic of black womanhood in the south" (Ryan, 1979, p. 112).
Five years after the Civil War many black women withdrew from the labor force and then reentered at a dramatic rate between 1879 and 1880.

In 1888, 73.3 percent of black single women and 35.4 percent of black married women in seven southern cities reported paid jobs. Among white women only 23.8 percent of the single and 7.3 percent of the married reported paid employment. Even when family income, husband’s employment, and demographic factors are held constant, black women were still far more likely to work than white women (Kessler-Harris, 1983, p. 123).

Most black women worked then for the same reasons that they work now—not because they wanted to but because they had to due to the low earnings of their black men when compared to the earnings of white men. Then as now, fewer black families than white had a choice about women working outside the home.

In 1870, there were fewer than 100,000 office workers in America and most of these were white men. The 1880 Census recorded 7,019 women office workers (Erickson, 1934); we do not know if any of them were black because occupational information by sex and color was not delineated until the 1890 Census (Women’s Bureau, 1934).

Enlarged Opportunities (1900 to 1950)

There was a great deal of turbulence in the dual society from 1900 to 1950. Race relations were tense. “White supremacy” reigned in the South, that is, whites were favored by almost every institution but especially the law, the courts and the schools. During the first two decades, lynchings and race riots were frequent occurrences throughout the nation, but especially in the former Confederacy. For example, between 1900 and 1914, there were 1,100 lynchings, an average of 78 per year. By 1917, the number had declined to 38 but increased to 58 in 1918. There was a steady increase of race riots with the peak year being 1919 when there were 25 from June to December (Franklin & Moss, 1988). Herculean efforts by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to rouse Congress, state legislatures, and the general public regarding the horror
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of lynching, with the goal of having anti-lynching legislation passed by Congress, escalated in 1919 but despite the fact that bills were introduced in 1922 and 1934, Congress never passed an anti-lynching bill (Weiss, 1983).

During World War I (1914 to 1919), thousands of blacks migrated out of the South. The push from the South was both economic and social: severe labor depression, boll weevil infestation of cotton, floods, injustice, inequality, disenfranchisement, segregation, lynchings and burnings. The pull to the North was a demand for labor caused by the decline of foreign immigrants (from 1 million in 1914 to 300,000 in 1915) (Franklin & Moss, 1988).

While social conditions were better in the North, blacks were excluded from Labor unions in the North for most of the first three decades of the 20th century (Franklin & Moss, 1988).

The Great Depression affected blacks earlier with extensive unemployment beginning during the recession of the mid-1920s. When the New Deal relief programs emerged in the 1930s, racial discrimination insured that in many communities black families received smaller relief grants than white families and were excluded from many of the employment programs, not hired in equitable numbers, or paid lower wages than whites for the same work (Franklin & Moss, 1988).

High points during this period included the formation of the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Negro Industrial League, the Joint Committee on National Resources, and other civil rights groups; labor unions (such as A. Philip Randolph's Pullman Car Porters and Maids Union), which sought to improve the sociopolitical status of blacks; the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s which produced black artists whose prose, poetry, plays, and paintings about black life in America influenced and inspired their generation and generations to come; and the relatively pro-black Franklin Delano Roosevelt White House. Roosevelt established a "Black Cabinet" (black advisers in various governmental departments), and New Deal programs which benefitted blacks as well as whites, especially in the areas of education and housing. In addition, from 1930 to 1950, there was broader enrollment in labor unions, especially the CIO; a steady increase of black school enrollment (although
there was disparity in the amount spent per capita on white students and black students, for example, in 1930 in the South, $7 for whites and $2 for blacks); more than one hundred black colleges by 1950 (from one in 1854); the initiation of the integration of the armed forces under President Harry Truman in 1948 and 1949; Truman’s Executive Order requiring fair employment in the federal service; and the 1948 Supreme Court decision outlawing restrictive covenants in the real estate industry (Franklin & Moss, 1988).

Executive Order 8802 outlawing discrimination in defense industries by President Roosevelt in 1941, resulting from political pressure by activists such as A. Philip Randolph, caused thousands of blacks to be employed in the defense industries (aircraft, shipbuilding, welding, automotive mechanics, electricity, etc.). Many of these industries had never employed blacks. The New Deal job training programs, especially those in the NYA and the WPA, were significant in establishing the perception that blacks were ready for this new employment. Additionally, during this period black participation in labor unions such as the United Automobile Workers, United Steel Workers, National Maritime Union, United Rubber Workers and the national councils of the CIO, increased significantly (Weiss, 1983; Franklin & Moss, 1988).

By 1900, most white women in the labor force were employed as “domestics, farm laborers, unskilled factory operatives, seamstresses and teachers” (Wandersee, 1981, p. 84). Factory work was closed to the majority of black women who, because of their slavery past, were considered unfit for the factory or skilled work. Only the cigar and cigarette industry employed large numbers of black women prior to World War I (Women’s bureau, 1939). Nationally, 95% of all black women workers labored in farm work and domestic and personal service and 11.9% worked as dressmakers and seamstresses (usually in their own homes). In Chicago in 1900 .7% of black workers were doing clerical work and 1.9% were professionals (lawyers, doctors, clergy, teachers, actors, and musicians (Spears, 1967). The percentage of clerical workers and professionals who were women was not reported.

Between 1900 and 1910 new work opportunities became available to American white women. The economic growth of
this period created new jobs in the service and clerical occupations (Wandersee, 1981). Doing business became more complex involving more letter writing, more sophisticated bookkeeping methods, different marketing, more research, increased record keeping as well as the expansion of auxiliary commercial services. Services such as banking, investment managing, insurance, advertising, and publishing increased the demand for more clerks (Erickson, 1934). In 1910 clerical workers were the fourth largest category of white women workers and by 1940 they were the largest category (Wandersee, 1981).

By 1910, 84.7% of black women workers remained in agriculture, domestic, and personal services and 15.3% were in non-agricultural occupations. Most nonagricultural positions were those of barbers, laundresses, manicurists, untrained nurses and midwives, seamstresses, and a few teachers (Greene and Woodson, 1930). Among Chicago's black women workers in 1910, 63% remained in domestic and personal service, particularly as laundresses (Spears, 1967). Spears (1967) does not show what percentage of the .4% of black clerical and 1.5% of black professional workers were women. However, he does observe that "Negro women were particularly limited in the search for desirable positions. Clerical work was practically closed to them and only a few could qualify as school teachers" (Spears, 1987, p. 34).

In 1910, sales also began to open as an occupational area for white women. At that time, 2% of them were working as real estate salespersons and by 1940, 20% of real estate persons were women (Wandersee, 1981). Among white women workers in 1910, approximately 9.2% were professionals and these were concentrated in the areas of teaching, nursing, social work, library science and religious work (Wandersee, 1981).

Addie Hunter (1911) writing in Crisis about a study done by the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy on the employment of black women in Chicago, found that the 15 to 20 black teachers in the public school system did not feel discriminated against and felt they had the same chance of promotion as their white colleagues. The researchers found:

The real barriers are met by the women who have had only an average education—girls who have finished high school, or perhaps only the 8th grade. These girls, if they were white, would find
employment at clerical and office work in Chicago’s department stores, mail order houses and wholesale stores. But these positions are absolutely closed to the Negro girl. She has no choice but housework (Hunter, 1911, p. 24).

Ms. Hunter (1911) avowed that the principal occupations open to Chicago’s black women were domestic service and teaching and that this left most of them relegated to domestic service since their education did not qualify them for teaching. Some black women who were able to conceal their racial identity were able to acquire pink collar jobs in the early part of the 20th century. “Many of the Negroes are so nearly white that they can be mistaken for white girls, in which case they are able to secure very good positions and keep them as long as their color is not known” (p. 25). She described one woman’s experience:

One girl who has only a trace of colored blood was able to secure a position as salesgirl in a store. After she had been there a long time she asked for an increase in wages, such as allowed the white girls, but the request was refused and she was told that she ought to be thankful they kept her at all (Hunter, 2911, p. 24).

Hunter (1911) advised that since there was no discrimination against black seamstresses, more black women should take up sewing and added that a “lack of industrial training” (pp. 25) prevented many black and white women (but especially black women) from acquiring employment.

During World War I (1914 to 1918) there was a shortage of labor which provided larger numbers of black women the opportunity to enter industrial occupations that white women were leaving. Additionally, small numbers of black women entered the professions, office work and sales (Women’s Bureau, 1939). In 1920, 87% of black women workers remained in agricultural and domestic and personal service. Of the 12.9% who did not remain in such jobs, most were laborers, manicurists and hairdressers, some were seamstresses, and untrained nurses and midwives, and a few were teachers (Greene and Woodson, 1930).

Among Chicago’s black women workers in 1920, clerical occupations were still almost closed to Negroes...Women with high
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school—and even college—education still had no real alternatives to domestic service. The two large mail order houses, Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward, hired Negro women as temporary help, but the downtown stores and the Chicago Telephone Company—major employers of female labor—refused to even experiment with Negro help (Spears, 1967, p. 155).

Ms. Mary Louise Williams (writing in 1923) described how upon graduating from high school in a small city in New York, she applied to several offices for employment and was told that there was no need of “colored help”. After doing some odd jobs and housework she eventually landed a job as a “forelady and stock clerk” in the perfume department of a “manufactory”. After working there for one year, her salary doubled. One evening, as she and a coworker were walking home, she saw her mother and introduced her to the coworker. The next day she was fired. Her boss explained: “There is no fault with your work, but the girls will not work with a Negro. We would gladly keep you if we could, but it is better to lose one girl than to lose twenty” (Foner & Lewis, 1989, p. 390). Until she introduced her coworker to her mother, it was not known that she was black.

Ms. Williams related another incident in which she answered an ad placed by a department store for a colored girl with a high school education. She expected a sales position but learned that the opening was for a bootblack in the ladies bathroom. She was told that she was too light-skinned for the job and learned that a darker woman with two years of teacher’s training had been hired. The objective of hiring an educated black woman was to have customers avoid contact with “objectionable Negroes” (Foner & Lewis, 1989, p. 390).

Ms. Williams eventually went to work in a sewing shop where she was paid less than the white workers. She moved to Cleveland where she found more job opportunities for black women because of the large number of black professionals and black owned “clubs, hotels, rooming houses, ice cream parlors, drugstores and restaurants” (Foner & Lewis, 1989, p. 391).

At the time of World War I, Ms. Williams worked in a white hotel washing glasses and silver for $40.00 per month. When the assistant steward was drafted, she talked herself into his
job even though it was "man's work". Her monetary fortunes soared until he returned from the war and took back his job (Foner & Lewis, 1989). She wrote of this experience: "This position afforded me so many luxuries of life that it showed me what a joy work would be to the Negro woman if given a position and a salary instead of a job and wages" (Foner & Lewis, 1989, p. 391).

A news article on the front page of the January 26, 1924 New York Age headlined: "Colored Woman Now Private Secretary to Harlem Banker" proclaimed that a Mrs. Florence Richardson "an expert stenographer and social worker... [was] probably the only colored woman in New York holding a position of this kind" ("Colored Woman", 1924, p. 1).

Lorenzo J. Greene and Carter G. Woodson (1930) asserted in the 1920s that "only under rare instances, can Negroes secure employment in white business houses" (p. 312). They explained that black, white and pink collar workers, were employed by black businesses—especially black insurance companies and there were not enough black businesses to employ many blacks.

By 1930 there were approximately 4 million office workers and women constituted 51.5% of the total (Erickson, 1934). From 1920 to 1930 the number of black women in clerical work increased by about three-tenths of one percent (Women's Bureau, 1934), yet in 1930, less than 5% of clerical workers were black women (Women's Bureau, 1939).

Fifty-six percent of all gainfully employed native-born white women workers labored in white or pink collar occupations: transportation and communications, sales, public service, professional service and clerical (Brown, 1938). Five percent of black women were in sales, clerical work, transportation and communication and the professions (three-fourths were teachers; one-tenth trained nurses; and approximately 1,000 were employed as actresses, college presidents and professors; musicians and music teachers) (Brown, 1938). Five percent were employed in pink and white collar occupations despite the fact that between 1920 and 1930, black women's participation in professional occupations (especially teaching) had increased by approximately 60% (Women's Bureau, 1934). Five percent of black women
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worked in tobacco, clothing, food and textile industries and the remaining 90% remained in agricultural work and domestic and personal services. Half of those in domestic service and personal service worked in private homes and the others were "home laundresses or laundry workers, waitresses, charwomen, cleaners, untrained nurses and midwives, beauty operators, elevator tenders and so on" (Women's Bureau, 1939, pp. 60–61).

Jones (1985) argued that blacks were excluded from pink collar jobs by the racism which proclaimed the "native-born white American standard of female beauty" as the standard for the "sexy saleslady". By this period in American capitalism

business had discovered the link between spending money and ego gratification; the most effective medium between public and product, according to advertising experts, was an attractive, well-spoken and pliant young woman who invested whatever she was selling with her own charms...[including] a pleasing physical appearance (or voice) (p. 179).

Majority culture standards of beauty ruled. This consideration influenced the hiring of any women dealing directly with the public—sales clerks, receptionists, secretaries and telephone operators. Case in point: Montgomery Ward was the largest employer of black clerical workers (1,050 in 1920) and they were all mail-order personnel who had no direct contact with the public. When local restaurants complained that blacks eating in their establishments would drive away their white customers, Wards built its own cafeteria to conceal its black employees from the public view (Jones, 1985).

In 1932, the Women's Bureau surveyed women office workers in seven cities—New York, Hartford, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Chicago, Des Moines, and St. Louis. They interviewed 43,000 women in 314 offices. They looked at the employment of black women in only two of the surveyed cities—Chicago and Atlanta. In Chicago, there were six offices employing 101 black women and in Atlanta there were two offices employing 57 black women (Erickson, 1934). The Bureau found

the two races were not employed together in any office visited, but 5 insurance companies and 1 publisher in Chicago and 2 insurance offices in Atlanta all controlled and managed by Negro ownership
were found employing Negroes. In both cities several banks and other types of offices employing Negroes were contacted, but they had only from 1 to 3 women... too few to form a representative group (Erickson, 1934, p. 92).

The Bureau found that the black women insurance workers had a median income of $80 per month as compared to $94 per month for white women insurance workers, and in Atlanta for black women it was $55 per month to white women's $94 per month. Most of the black women were stenographers, the rest were general clerks (Erickson, 1934). The Bureau stated that for these black women

the amount of general schooling and the attendance at business schools were higher than for the study as a whole. In Chicago 50 of 100... completed high school, and 34 more had some advanced training. In Atlanta 16 of 56 were high school graduates, 23 more had advanced training (Erickson, 1934, p. 92).

Brown (1938) cited several reasons for the small number of black office workers: (a) blacks had a relatively short span of time (apparently since emancipation) in which to demonstrate an ability to do skilled work; (b) inadequate educational facilities; and (c) not enough black businesses and professional institutions. As was the case with most of the writers of her time, she did not mention racial discrimination directly. She assumed that blacks would be hired by blacks and that in a depression black businesses would fail and without the safety net of other black businesses for employment, black office workers would have to find other work—at lower occupational levels.

Brown (1938) felt that there were several sound reasons to enact social policy to alleviate the problems of black working women.

The public must pay heavily for the substandard working and living conditions of many thousands of Negro women workers... in 1935... one in every four Negro women workers [was on the relief rolls]... two-fifths of these... [were] the economic heads of families... a situation that is of grave impact... (p. 13).

She advocated social and labor legislation which would provide all workers with a minimum wage, improvement in
educational and training facilities, and trade-union organization (Brown, 1938).

In 1929 and 1930 in the North, West and in Washington, D.C., many white businesses were forced to employ blacks as clerks, salespersons, bookkeepers and stenographers as a result of pressure from organized boycotts of their businesses by the black community (Green & Woodson, 1930). Most of these businesses, while white-owned, were located in black neighborhoods. It was customary in the North, West and in Washington, D.C. for white businesses to hire blacks to conduct their business with black consumers. Many boycotts were organized by "Housewives Leagues" who spearheaded "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns in Chicago, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Detroit, Harlem and Cleveland. These campaigns produced "an estimated 75,000 new jobs for blacks during the depression decade...an economic impact comparable to that of the CIO in organizing efforts, and second only to government jobs as a new source of openings" (Jones, 1985, p. 215).

In a survey of women working in five and ten cent stores and budget chain department stores in nine states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, and Oklahoma), there were only nineteen black workers in the total of 2,946 (Pidgeon, 1930). Nine of the 19 were in Alabama, three each in Kentucky and Ohio and two each in Arkansas and Missouri. This is the only mention made by Ms. Pidgeon of black women workers.

Black women federal government typists in Washington, D.C. in 1939 were routinely placed in separate work rooms and separate stenographic pools where they were "assigned to the least exacting work" (Green, 1967).

In 1940, 2% of black women had clerical and sales jobs (Women's Bureau, 1952); 33% of white women had clerical jobs. Sixty percent of black women lingered in domestic and personal service (Jones, 1985). Between 1940 and 1944 the percentage of black female clerical workers doubled, but blacks still represented less than 2% of clerical workers and "most of them remained invisible to white business customers and concentrated in government jobs around Washington, D.C." (Jones, 1985, p. 253).
The "government girls', as they were called, were recruited both from D.C. and other areas. Norma Madden (Hall, 1988) recalled that in 1945 when she was 18 years old and a high school senior in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, a government recruiter gave a secretarial skills test at her school. She passed the test and was assigned to the Navy Department in Arlington, Virginia as a stenographer. She remembered that in those days most blacks were file clerks. Many of the women recruited during the War years stayed in Slowe Hall, now a Howard University coed dormitory, and then a federally-owned residence for black women from 1942 to 1955, built specifically for black women working in D.C. in the defense effort. Washington was a segregated city at that time and housing for black women would probably have been a problem if the government had not maintained its own residence facility.

By the end of World War II the position of black women workers had improved. They never got some of the best paying jobs—in steel mills as welders, ship fitters, and riveters. But the number involved in low-paid and low-status domestic work dropped by 15% while the number of factory specialties more than doubled, and clerical, sales and professional workers substantially increased. Ninety percent of the black women in the labor force after the war had been in the labor force in 1940. Their movement into better jobs reflects not changed attitudes but their ability to take timely advantage of enlarged opportunities (Kessler-Harris, 1982, p. 279).

The Genesis of Parity (1950 to 1980)

During the second half of the 20th century, because of domestic and foreign pressures, there was a push from the executive office and the courts (especially the federal courts) to close the gap within the dual society, to end the breach between the American Creed and the actual practice of democracy. The NAACP and other civil rights groups accelerated their efforts to obtain full equality for blacks. Their work resulted in the Supreme Court outlawing segregation in the public schools in 1954, and the passage in 1957, under President Eisenhower, of the first Civil Rights Bill since 1875, as well as the creation
of the United States Commission on Civil Rights (Franklin & Moss, 1988).

Blacks retained jobs in the industries which first hired them during World War II and new jobs as clerks, bookkeepers and buyers became available in the retail industry. Membership and assumption of leadership roles in labor unions, especially the AFL-CIO continued to increase. Organized religion focused more than ever on eliminating discrimination and improving intergroup relations, and some churches integrated. By the mid-1950s, the Interstate Commerce Commission and the Supreme Court had outlawed segregation on railways and buses (Franklin & Moss, 1988).

The continuous migration of blacks out of the South led to their concentration in industrial communities, such as Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland, enabling them to have significant political power in those cities (Weiss, 1983). The number of registered black voters increased, even in the South, and the number of elected Black local, state, and national legislators increased, especially in the North and West. In 1956, there were 40 blacks in the state legislatures and three in Congress. By 1966, there were 97 in the state legislatures and six in Congress; and by 1979, there were more than 200 in state legislatures, 16 in the Congress, and hundreds of black mayors, more than 600 city councilpersons and over 1,000 other elected officials (judges, alderpersons, marshals, school board members, etc.). In addition, several were appointed to high posts in the national government (Franklin & Moss, 1988).

The boycott, under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders and groups in the mid-1950s; and marches, student sit-ins, and freedom rides in the 1960s became powerful tools in the elimination of disenfranchisement, unfair employment opportunities, segregation of public facilities, and de facto segregation in housing and education— even as white resistance frequently manifested itself in violence (murders, bombings, beatings) or in "white backlash." "White backlash" manifested itself in the North

in the actions of whites who discovered their prejudices for the first time or who resented direct action protest to eliminate discrimination in their own communities...in the South [it] was
merely the normal determination with which some segregationists went about the task of preserving the old order (Franklin & Moss, p. 449).

While public housing became increasingly desegregated beginning in 1950, even with the passage of the 1968 Fair Housing Act, blacks still had unequal access to housing, frequently being met with violence if they moved to an all-white neighborhood. Many whites, and the jobs which supported city dwellers, moved to the suburbs, out of the reach of blacks, making structural unemployment a significant issue. Inadequate housing, underemployment and unemployment influenced the deterioration of the black family. Prior to the 1960s, 75% of black families were dual parent households but by 1983, 48% of families with children were single parent families (Franklin & Moss, 1988).

In the latter half of the 20th century, the number of nonwhite women in domestic service (private households) declined from 59% in 1940 to 42% in 1950 and those in "other service" no longer called "personal service", i.e., practical nurses, beauty operators, waitresses, elevator operators, hospital attendants, etc., rose from 10% in 1940 to 18% in 1950 (see Figure 1). The number of nonwhite professionals (97% of whom were black) increased from 4% in 1940 to 6% in 1950 (including 257 black women physicians and surgeons and 83 lawyers and judges). The proportion of black women who worked in clerical and sales occupations rose from 2% in 1948 to 6% in 1950 (Women's Bureau, 1952) compared to 40% of white women clerical workers in 1950 (Jones, 1985) (See Figure 2).

The proportion of black women workers in clerical and sales work almost doubled by 1960—an increase from 6% in 1950 to 11% in 1960 (See Figure 1). By 1960 42% of black women of working age were in the labor force; the migration from farms to industrial and metropolitan centers, and out of the South had occurred to the extent that just over half of black women lived in the South; 23% of black women were high school graduates, compared to only 14% in 1950; and their median income had increased by 29%—from $703 in 1949 to $905 in 1959 (still amounting to only 60% of white women's median income) (Women's Bureau, 1960).
Figure 1. Black women in domestic service, personal services, and office and sales work.

In 1964, a political development occurred which had an extraordinary impact on black women workers—Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination in hiring on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin and established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to implement the law.

Between 1960 and 1970...the percentage of black women in the clerical and sales sector increased from 3 to 11% in the South and from 17 to 33% in the North. By 1980, 34% of all gainfully employed black women were in the areas of technical, sales and administrative support,...[in 1970] northern black women's median earnings were about 95% of white women's (up from 75-80%)...[in 1960]...southern black women's relative earnings were more scattered (up from 45 to 55% in Mississippi and Louisiana) (Jones, 1985, p. 302).
In 1970, 43.1% of black females were service workers—down from 60% in 1960. Of these, 17.5% were private household workers as compared to 37.4% in 1960 and 25.6% were "other service workers" as compared to 22.7% in 1960. The number of black female professionals increased to 10.8% from 6.8% in 1960 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1960, 1970).

Conclusion

Throughout the black female worker's history in America, more married and single black women than white women have had to work outside of the home in order to maintain the family economically. The black woman, doing the same work as the white woman, has been paid less for her labor. The black female worker has moved up the occupational ladder traditionally after
the white woman has moved out of a particular job category to a higher one. The black female worker has been unable to presume equitable treatment when applying for a job even if she is more qualified than the white applicant; and when given the opportunity, the black female worker has consistently prepared herself for the higher status jobs. Even now, the standards of beauty of the majority culture interfere with the black pink collar worker’s ascent up the occupational ladder. Recent reports of discrimination by New York City employment agencies reveal that these agencies send only “all-american types” (code name for blue eyed blondes) to Fortune 500 companies for executive secretary and even receptionist positions. Criminal action is now being taken against many of these agencies by the state of New York. The extent of this practice is unknown.

The present scandal appears anachronistic in the context of the multiethnic society portrayed in the media by way of its reporting, advertising and staffing. What predisposes Fortune 500 executives to feel that their clientele would be offended by the presence of a black, hispanic or oriental secretary or receptionist? Ringer’s (1983) view of the U.S. as a “dual society” argues that racism is not an aberration in American society but an essential component of the reaction to nonwhites and to their domination. It argues that America is still a racially divided country, and that this division increases the tension between democracy and equality—the tension between the American Creed and the racial creed.

Discrimination against black pink collar workers, as it relates to career advancement and the better-paying positions, is especially critical because so many black families are female-headed households in need of all the economic resources that the mother-breadwinner can obtain. In 1985, 50% of all black families with children were headed by single females who had only 25% of total black family income (compared to two-parent families with 70% of black family income). While 42% of white children will probably live in single parent households for some portion of their childhoods, 86% of black children will live in a single-parent family, and in 1986, 67% of those children were living in poverty (Jaynes & Williams, 1989).
References


