The liberation of women from exclusive domesticity did not originate in feminist books, or a war, or a big inflation, although those things did contribute to its progress. The rising enrollment of women in the paid labor forces of the developed world is a straightforward consequence of the industrial revolution of over two hundred years ago. That revolution has produced a long and continuing rise in the productivity of labor in the developed nations of the world. Economic progress has steadily raised the wage for an hour’s labor—the price of human beings’ time. Women have had to sell their time at a cheaper rate than men, and still must do so. But over the decades, the price employers have paid for women’s time has steadily risen along with the price paid for men’s. The key to women’s economic emergence is that their time has risen in price until it has become too valuable to be spent entirely in the home.

The spread of the idea that women are entitled to equal status and opportunities, as well as the changes in attitudes about what kinds of lives are possible, decent, and desirable for women, are a direct result of the rise in women’s employment. The changes in women’s lives which the rise in their jobholding has brought about are visible not only in the workplace, but also in schools, divorce courts, kitchens, child care centers. The cash wages which women earn motivate and finance many of the changes that have occurred in their lives. The prospect of good jobs motivates college education for many women, and their earnings pay for some of the tuition of their children. Women’s earnings finance paid-for child care, and the independent lives they must lead in case of divorce. The idea that women should have the same rights as men, and the same right to play leading roles in the economy and in society, gains acceptance as more women can and do pay for some or all of the bread on their tables.

The tide of women into paid employment has risen for more than a century. But for decades very little attention was paid; possibly the liberation of women from exclusive domesticity was news that people did not want to hear. The progressively greater numbers of employed women started drawing public attention only toward the end of the 1970s. By then,
people could not help noticing, because women who were employed had become the majority and women without jobs a minority.

If we look back, beyond the nineteenth century, which was the heyday of the housewife, to our preindustrial past, we see an era in which most wives did more than just housekeeping work. They did farm chores, or performed tasks in small-scale crafts enterprises run out of the family’s home. As industrialization progressed, however, people moved to cities and the work of urban men was moved to sites away from the home. Most married women became isolated from all work apart from housekeeping and child rearing. An urban husband in modest circumstances could take pride in the fact that he was now like a rich man in one respect at least—his wife had nothing to do with earning money, only with spending it.

We can sight the modest beginnings of wives’ emergence from this isolation from earning in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The labor market then was uninviting to women—the largest single paid occupation open to them was domestic service. Many of the women who worked for pay then did so because they lacked a father, a husband, a brother, or a son to keep them at home in comfort. African American and immigrant women from poverty-stricken families made up a considerable part of the female workforce, and their status and condition were such that no one would choose to emulate them. To society at large, and particularly to women enjoying the economic protection of a father or a husband, the condition of those women who worked for pay as servants or in factories, and even that of the “old maids” who worked as teachers, appeared pitiful.

Gradually, however, conditions changed. Some of those women who had men who could pay for their keep started to join the workforce. Among them were women with the ambition to practice a profession or run a business, and a few with literary aspirations—the “thousand scribbling women” of whose competition Hawthorne so bitterly complained. But women of more common gifts made up the bulk of the new entrants. Some of them enjoyed the work they were allowed to take up and all of them appreciated the money that went with it. The economic and social forces favoring the emergence of women from full-time unpaid domesticity grew steadily more important. As more and more women joined the parade from the home into paid work, attitudes toward employed women changed. What had been a mixture of pity and opprobrium became acceptance and even, in some quarters at least, admiration.

The Steady March to Employment

In 1870, women were about 16 percent of the labor force—those in a job or looking for one. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, their share had grown to 47 percent—just short of half. The proportion of women of working age in the labor force doubled in the seventy years between 1870 and 1940. Then there was an acceleration, and it doubled again between 1940 and 1985. Women’s participation in the job market has risen more