

In the nineteenth century servants took over most of the chores and the organisation of the household, and clerks and assistants did the same in businesses.

The idea grew up of 'the perfect lady', elegant, well-dressed, and dependent on her father or husband because she should not work. The wives and daughters of middle-class men had to be seen to have plenty of leisure time. They used it to play music, to draw and paint and to do embroidery. Their place was at home.

Men described women as too 'delicate' to work. They praised the special 'feminine' qualities and often described them as 'angels'.

According to William Gladstone:

**SOURCE 2**

*If there be a subject . . . that is sacred [holy] . . . it is the character and position of women.*

W. E. Gladstone, Speech in the House of Commons, 18

In the 1850s some women began to challenge these ideas. Barbara Leigh Smith argued that through work women would find their rightful place in society:

**SOURCE 3**

*A listless, idle, empty brained, empty hearted, ugly woman has no right to bear children. To think a woman is more feminine because she is frivolous, ignorant, weak, and sickly, is absurd.*

Barbara Leigh Smith, *Women and Work*.

# Working women

Working-class women had always had to work, either to earn their own living or to contribute to the upkeep of their families. Before the Industrial Revolution they mostly worked at home. By the 1850s the range of jobs they did was wider and many worked outside their own homes. Even so, large numbers still worked at home in domestic industries such as handloom weaving, pillow lace-making, straw plaiting (source 4), and stocking-, glove- and button-making. Many women who worked outside their homes were in the dressmaking trade, often working long hours for low wages in workshops. Others worked in the textile industry, many in fact. The textile factory workers were the best-paid women workers though they were always paid less than men.



**SOURCE 4**

A Bedfordshire straw hat workshop, painted in 1891. The grandmother is plaiting straw and the mother and daughter are making the plait up into bonnets and hats. In the 1890s mass production in factories was putting many domestic plaiters and hat-makers out of business.

**activity**

- 2 Look at source 4.
- a Does it show that domestic plaiters and hat-makers were threatened by mass-production at the time it was painted?
- b What can you learn from it about the plaiting and hat-making trade in 1891?

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