LET WOMEN CHOOSE HER OWN VOCATION

Speech to the Negro Young People's Christian and Educational Congress
Hampton, VA, July 14, 1912

Mrs. President, Members of Federation:

I have been asked to appear before you and say a few words about the

WOMAN IN BUSINESS.

As this is my first appearance before the Federation, and as I am not fully aware of the method and manner of your ways and procedure, I beg that, should I not follow your usual beaten path of custom, you will pardon my ignorance, and acquit me of anything that may either seem like - or sound like presumption in the words which I now read in your presence.

WOMAN'S SPHERE.

The evolution and emancipation of woman from servitude, brutality and actual slavery, is a story so cruel and inhuman that it seems almost beyond human belief that sons could so ill treat and degrade their mothers. Pelletan, the French writer says: "Woman is the crime of man. She has been his victim since Eden. She wears on her flesh, the traces of six thousand years of injustice."

The word Wo-man, means taken out of man. Bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh: man and woman are one and the same. When God made woman, He gave her to man as a companion and a help-meet, and man converted his companion and help-meet into a servant and a slave. The great wall of superiority which man has attempted to maintain around himself, and the deep pit of inferiority into which he has attempted to keep woman, are both becoming useless and ridiculous under the all powerful searchlight of truth and equal opportunity. How can woman, made out of man himself - made out of his own flesh, his own blood and his own bones, be his real inferior? There is no such inferiority and the inequality of environment and opportunity. Man so frequently mistakes the inferiority of environments for inferiority of mind.

All woman asks, is a man’s chance, a man's opportunity, man's environment, a man's contact, a man's training, and the elusion of woman's inferiority flees like fogs that sulk away at the approach of God's omnipotent sunlight.
In bygone days, might, giant arms, strong legs and girth of body have been accorded first place—not mentality and power of intellect.

We have enthroned and applauded Jack Johnson and forgotten all about the heaven-gifted mind, Phyllis Wheatley.

Woman's sphere, in truth and justice, should no more circumscribe every woman to the hearth, the broom, the wash tub, the ironing board and the cooking stove, than it should decree that every man should be a grocer, a banker, a printer, a mechanic, or a professional man. There is neither justice or good common sense in the demand that every woman should confine her activities to the domestic duties of home, regardless of what her inherited gifts and inclinations are, than it is sensible to say that every man should be a merchant. As ability, adaptability, and inclination decide these things for man, so let them decide for women. There are thousands, aye hundreds of thousands of women, who will ever find their greatest joy and happiness, in making good bread, cooking good meals, and rearing good families; and there are thousands upon thousands who are anxious to become milliners, merchants, professional women, unhampered and free to make their living, to help support aged fathers and mothers, to help cloth and educate younger sisters and brothers, and secretly to hand to some heavily burdened married sister, a few dollars to make life's way less rugged.

Let woman choose her own vocation just as man does his. Let her go into business, let her make money, let her become independent, if possible, of man: let her marry, bringing into the partnership, if not money, a trade or business—something else besides the mere clothes upon her body—and the divorce courts will be robbed of more than half of their business, and married life will, to some extent, cease to be a sham, a mockery and a bitter disappointment.

Every dollar a woman makes, some man gets the direct benefit of the same. Every woman was by Divine Providence created for some man; not for some man to marry, take home and support, but for the purpose of using her powers, ability, health and strength, to forward the financial and business success of the partnership into which she may go, if she will. If there were one half of the care exercised, one half of the caution used in the formation of the marriage business, as there is in the formation of a partnership for merchandise business, we would not so often confront the question, is marriage a failure; for we can well offer to have our marriage fewer in number and better in quality.

We do so wish we could unteach the idea, especially to our own women that their first duty is to be born, then second duty to get husbands to support them and their third and last duty, to get rid of the husbands they were so eager to possess, as soon as possible, after they get them.
BUSINESS.

What is business? Business is the most comprehensive term in the world’s use to-day. It includes every form of human activity between the swaddling clothes and the shroud, as well as including whatever is done with the shroud after you are the silent, happy possessor of the same.

Business is the largest word in our American vocabulary, and like everything else American, it has two sides, a black side and a white side.

Business means work, successful business means money, and money answereth all things. Business means the making of money, the power that controls the world. Business, once, was occupation of man, solely. He, alone, was the broad winner, the protector, and woman looked up to him, and sought at his hands the necessary money for her many and varied wants. Business to her was a sealed book, an undiscovered country into whose depths she dared not venture.

But, the insistent, urgent, day in, and day out, demand for more food and better food, more shelter and better shelter, more clothes and better clothes — has driven women from the shelter of her father’s fireside out into the wide world to stand side by side with her brother and her father, or beside somebody’s else father, husband and brother, because her needs could not be supplied without her own personal, manual efforts. The bold fact remains that there are more women in the world than men; there cannot be and never will be an even arrangement, by which every woman can be paired and mated and wedded to a man; and the census of the land simply give mathematical demonstration to the fact that, if each and every woman in the land, was allotted a man to marry her, work for her, support her, and keep her at home, there would still be an army of women left uncared for, unprovided for, and who would be compelled to fight life’s battles alone, and without the companionship of man. And so let the married ladies at least, be charitable and generous, thanking Providence for His inestimable blessing to them — a husband — and at the same time, let our ladies, without incumbrance, thank the same Providence they are slaving and working for no man or master, and in the fullness of their own freedom — there is no man to be obeyed, no man to molest them and make them afraid. And, so, my dear Federationists, which side is the more to be envied? Which side more to your liking?

When growing necessity first began to force woman from the home, into the mills, factories, office, stores, banks, commercial houses, state and national clerkships, man resented her coming as an unwarranted indecorous act, that needed rebuke and severe condemnation. But neither the thunders of the pulpit, nor the sarcasm and rebuke of the press, could stay the onward march of the army of needy, hungry, ill-clad women, looking for bread and meat. Their work gave satisfaction, it was as good, if not better, than man’s. It cost less and Capital at once took advantage of woman’s necessity by compelling her to do a man’s work at a smaller wage. Of course the women rebelled, and are rebelling and rebellious even at this present moment, yet Capital is deaf—and will never hear their cries, until the women force Capital to hear them at the ballot box, and to do just and honest to them as to the men.
From the army of working women, laboring in every vocation in which man labors save three or four, woman by her superior work has largely conquered the prejudice against her as bread winner, working beyond the confines of her own home.

In whatever occupation you find men, you will also find woman. "Sex is no longer a bar; mere brawn is no longer the deciding test. Size of body amounts to so little, while the size and quality of the brain amount to so much.

Brain is omniscient. Brain is omnipotent - Brain conquerth all things. Brain is God—wherever it is found, whether it be in woman or man, in the Negro or in Mexican,—in the Islander of the far off sea—or in the beautiful town of Hampton!

From the laboring woman to the Business Woman has simply been a transition from hands to head—from manual labor to brain labor: and since woman possesses brain, the exact kind that man has,—there is no reason on earth why a woman should not be a Business Woman as well as a laboring woman. She does not measure up to man today in the business world, not because of lack of brain, but rather because of lack of opportunity.

Woman is behind because she started last. Man started with creation's dawn; woman started yesterday, and is today the standing wonder of the Business World.

An English paper recently published the following:

CLIPPING.

These are but a few noted instances of women in business—there are ten thousand others scattered throughout our land covering every phase of business into which man has gone.

It is strange that the above does not include the name of Hettie Green, 78 years old, one of the world’s greatest financiers, and Mrs. Frank Leslie, who took up at the death of her husband, his declining business, and made the Leslie publications by far, more successful than he had ever done.

My dear friends, women should go into business just the same as men; what stronger combination could ever God make—that the partnership of a business man and a business woman.

Woman may not see as far as man sees, but what they do see, they see quicker. But, my dear friends, all of the business about which we have been talking, is white business, and all of the women about which we have been talking are White Women. So let us turn our attention to the occupations of Negro Women.
OCCUPATIONS OF NEGRO WOMEN.

How many occupations have Negro Women? Let us count them: Negro women are Domestic menials, teachers and church builders. If I have omitted any, I do not object to having you supply them. There is nothing on the earth quite so limited in employment as the Negro woman. After we have struggled and sacrificed and kept them in school until graduation day—what employment is then for them the next day? It doesn't take a high school education to drive a baby carriage, nor it doesn’t take normal training for domestic service in the homes of our white friends and neighbors.

And as few as are the occupations in which a Negro Woman may earn a scant livelihood, have you ever deliberately stopped and thought over the alarming and awful fact that employment for Negro women grows less and less every day? Don't you know that white women are crowding Negro women out of employment all over the land? Don't you know that the white female population is increasing by natural means and also by emigration? Don't you clearly perceive that every white woman that comes seeking employment takes something that the Negro woman use to get. Don't you know that, in this very day, there are more white in domestic service, the land over, than ever before? Don’t you know that the hotels and sea-side resorts are shutting their doors in the faces of Negro women seeking work? Don’t you know that in the Economic War between the Negro woman and the white woman for victuals and clothes—the white woman is crushing the life out of the Negro woman? Have you thought out a plan or a means whereby the Negro woman can be saved against the steady increasing pressure of the white woman? Hasn't the same white woman driven the Negro women out of the tobacco factories, into which only once Negro women were employed?

Isn't this same white woman, driving the Negro woman out of the bed chamber, the nursery, the dining room, the sewing room, the kitchen and the laundry? Is this question of the less of employment, a proper one to claim the official attention of the Federation?

If it be not, then pardon me for calling attention to it; if it is a proper subject, what are you going to do about it?

THE NEGRO WOMAN IN BUSINESS

With but scant opportunities for occupation, and with these opportunities growing fewer, there is but slight foundation upon which the Negro woman, however desirous she may be, can launch out in business.

Successful conduct of business must have behind it money, energy and brains. There are hundreds of Negro women today, the land over, with money, brains and energy, and yet are afraid to step out into business.

There are more than five millions of Negro women in the United States: do you know, many of
this number who are really carrying on business? Why is it that the Negro woman is so far behind the white woman? Simply because the Negro, himself, the Negro man has not fully decided that business is necessary for the race.

We are bitterly and constitutionally opposed to business amongst ourselves and amongst our Negro women, and as a direct consequence, we have nothing carried on by them that we dare dignify by the high mercantile term, Business.

We are making a painful struggle to create business: and sooner or later, as the economic struggle grows more fierce, as the pressure grows greater and the Negro woman is shoved closer and closer to the wall—then we will begin to grow alarmed, and we will set in motion a few factories and mills in order that the flower of Negro womanhood may have an honorable occupation, and the Negro woman may go into business, and find enthusiastic race support.

It is this lack of support that is keeping Negro women out of business, and at the same time denying employment to those Negro women seeking work.

But in face of the fact, that we are very slow, very inactive and very conservative, Mrs. President, there is hope, the embers of race unity are smoldering, and it is in my humble judgment, the distinctive and imperative duty of this magnificent organization, composed of the very best there is in Negro womanhood, to blow these smoldering embers into a flame and to assist, encourage and help Negro women to launch out into business.