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**"THE MOST FEMININE OF ALL PROBLEMS," BALANCING BUDGET, TIME AND  
STYLE IN CLOTHING SELECTION: 1880-1920**

Jean L. Parsons

Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011

Transformation from custom to factory-produced clothing occurred in uneven stages. While the production side has been explored, there has been little analysis of the consumer's role. Women balanced budget constraints against sewing ability, available time, and less tangible factors related to fashion. This paper focuses on women's decision-making processes in a period of changing demand, changing markets, and new employment patterns.

Clothing purchase decisions were analyzed using family budget studies and women's advice literature. Studies of working class families revealed that income was important, but lifestyle, sewing ability, and a desire to be fashionable also figured prominently. Even families on limited budgets developed various strategies, including buying out of season or on the installment plan (More, 1907). Middle class families relied on ready-made and custom-made garments and did less home sewing (Bruere & Bruere, 1914). Although dress standards and budgets varied, wage-earning women often lacked both the time and energy to sew and chose instead to purchase cheap ready-made.

The availability of ready-made clothing affected and was affected by women's attitudes and budget constraints. However, more rapid fashion changes meant women sometimes chose style over quality. Changes ultimately influenced both clothing producers and consumers.

Bruere, M. B. & Bruere, R. W. (1914). Increasing home efficiency. New York: Macmillan.

More, L. B. (1907). Wage-earners' budgets: A study of standards and cost of living in New York City. New York: Henry Holt.