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On Gender, Labor, and Inequality

Ruth Milkman

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viii + 308 pp., \$95.00 (cloth); \$28.00 (paper); \$25.20 (e-book)

In this scholarly tour de force, Ruth Milkman brings together four decades of sociological research on women workers to paint a portrait of gendered labor patterns from the Great Depression of the 1930s to the Great Recession of 2007–9. With meticulous research, careful argumentation, and effective writing, Milkman shows how economic actors—especially women workers, unions, and employers—shaped women’s employment and key industries of the US economy. As they managed changes in the labor and job markets, these actors both maintained strict job segregation by gender and transformed it, with implications for the dynamism and rigidity of gender roles in society more widely.

This collection of previously published pieces is most in conversation with foundational theories in political economy (especially Marxist theories of class), socialist feminism, and sociological theories of organization. In the book’s introduction, Milkman concedes that these bodies of thought may seem “quaint” to contemporary students of intersectionality; and, indeed, most of the macro-level analyses presented in the first half of the book are not well suited to capture nuances in women’s experiences related to their identity, racial classification, immigration status, sexuality, or participation in informal job markets. Nevertheless, Milkman argues that during a time of rapidly widening inequality, an understanding of the interactions of class and gender is increasingly relevant, providing a needed corrective to theories that fail to account for social class in the lives of women. The final three chapters of the book explore rising income inequality and class distinctions among women workers correlated with ethnoracial categorization, immigration status, and level of education in more depth. Altogether, the volume brings class analyses into conversation with feminist scholarship, as it more firmly incorporates the experiences of working-class women into sociological theories of gender and inequality.

Over the course of the book’s eleven chapters, Milkman examines gendered labor patterns during key transitions of the US economy, from the Great Depression, through World War II, into the postindustrial period, and through the Great Recession. At each juncture, Milkman seeks to uncover not only macro-level labor patterns of women workers but also the key agents driving such patterns, including union leaders, employers, and women workers themselves. The first four chapters explore the role of job segregation by gender in shaping the working lives of women in industry during the 1930s and 1940s—a period that included the Great Depression, the influx of women workers during World War II, and the postwar transition period. Milkman finds that gendered job segregation showed remarkable persistence throughout this period and that job segregation by gender, rather than unequal pay for equal work, was the main driving factor of gender inequality in the labor market. Gendered job segregation was undergirded by perceptions of men’s and women’s work which deeply shaped the kinds of jobs available to women

throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The association of jobs with one or the other gender persisted during times both of labor surplus and of labor shortage: in times of labor shortage, women workers encountered expanded work opportunities, but these became reclassified as women's work with diminished pay and prestige. In times of labor surplus, manufacturers prioritized the hiring of men for higher-wage positions, often reassigning their association to men's work once again.

The fifth chapter considers the tension between materialist and culturalist explanations for gendered labor patterns with an extended consideration of "the Sears case." The Sears case involves a lawsuit brought by the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission against the Sears Corporation, alleging that the company discriminated against women in hiring for commission-based sales jobs. Each side brought in a scholarly "expert" to argue in their favor, illustrating tensions among conflicting interpretations of gendered job segregation, and gendered differences more broadly, in academia.

The sixth through eighth chapters shift focus to the gendered composition of labor unions and the role of organized labor in both reproducing and challenging job segregation by gender over time. Milkman finds meaningful variation within and among labor unions in their female membership and in the degree to which they campaigned to advance gender-specific concerns. The final three chapters explore differences among women workers and attend specifically to how widening class inequalities interact with race and immigration status to generate vastly different experiences for women in the work force. The last chapter concerns gendered dynamics of the Great Recession and finds that women's employment exhibited patterns similar to those during the Great Depression of the 1930s, in that demand for women's labor remained more stable than that for men, who tend to work in sectors such as construction that are especially affected by financial crisis. However, the periods differed in that the Great Recession failed to produce significant governmental efforts to reduce class inequality in its aftermath, unlike the period of reform that followed the Great Depression.

This volume illuminates mechanisms of gendered inequality in the work force, illustrating how class inequality and gendered inequality are inextricably linked. Students and scholars of gendered dynamics of labor and society will appreciate the breadth and abundance of macrosociological research as well as Milkman's accessible and effective writing style. As men and women workers alike learn to navigate ever-widening income inequalities, an understanding of how gendered work patterns shape the material and social worlds of women remains an urgent and necessary project, and Milkman's volume makes a vital contribution.

Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz, *Loyola University Chicago*