



## Career and Family: Women's Century-Long Journey Toward Equity

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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The main argument in Claudia Goldin's new book, *Career and Family*, is that "greedy jobs" are the main obstacle for an economy to complete the last stage of the gender revolution: women's equality in the labor market and in the home to the same degree as men. The production function of greedy jobs exhibits a low degree of labor substitutability, making it costly to the firm to give a worker control over the amount and the timing of work. Importantly, the technological feature in the production function of greedy jobs leads to hourly wages that exponentially increase with work hours. As a result, having one partner specializing in a greedy job and another specializing in a standard job is the efficient outcome that maximizes a couple's income (while still allowing taking care of family responsibilities). Couple's equity and women's careers suffer.

Bringing the timing of work into an economic model of wage determination to explain the incompatibility between careers and family is simply revolutionary. Goldin's book does real service to academics in the social sciences and to the public more generally by bringing together much of her groundbreaking work. She has been making the point of greedy jobs for decades, and this book is fundamentally based on her past articles, all of which have been published in top journals and have been widely cited. The important lessons from the book go beyond the United

States, which is the main focus, and are equally relevant for international audiences. Goldin is successful in addressing her audience, and the book is full of stories of individual (notable) women and of personal experiences that bring the story home to readers (including her own story, as Goldin was the first woman to be tenured in the Department of Economics at Harvard).

The first part of the book offers a meticulously researched historical perspective of college-educated women's progress in the US labor market from the 1900s to today. A historical perspective of the barriers that women have faced for over a century shows that the struggle for gender equality is not new. One of the key themes in these first chapters is the recognition that there is positive progress toward gender equality at every stage in history. Progress toward greater equality comes from older generations passing on the baton to younger generations, and a new generation learning from the mistakes of older generations. Although progress is non-linear, as the example of the post-war reintroduction of legislation that prohibited married women to work shows, the book paints a refreshingly optimistic and uplifting picture of the progress made by women to reconcile work and family over this period.

The last part of the book takes on a more pessimistic tone, as the reader learns that something has to change in order for the baton to be successfully passed on to the next generation. We learn that occupational segregation can only explain one-third of the gender wage gap and that discrimination (the unexplained part of the gender wage gap) accounts for just 20 percent of gender differences in pay. What explains differences in the earnings of college-educated women five, ten, fifteen years after graduation are lower weekly hours of paid work and longer periods of leave. And the reason why women work less for pay and take more leave is because being "on-call" at a greedy job is not compatible with being "on-call" at home. Something has to give.

The book does a good job at describing the problem, yet by taking a very clear view of gender norms as essentially exogenous to the journey of these cohorts of graduate American women, it misses the opportunity to provide a satisfactory solution. Goldin proposes technological advances that increase the substitutability between workers and lowers the cost of granting flexibility to the firm (in terms of leave, number of hours, and when those hours are worked). Her solution relies on improvements in information technology that enhance the ability of high-skilled workers such as pharmacists, gynecologists, and anesthesiologists to share comprehensive records of each client. Information-sharing technologies make workers in these sectors effectively perfect substitutes for each other, which means they no longer need to be on-call at work because any co-worker can provide the service (Goldin and Katz 2016). Yet these sectors are characterized by being

intensive in programmable tasks that can be synthesized into protocols. In David Autor, Frank Levy, and Richard Murnane's (2003) terminology, these jobs are cognitive and routine-task intensive jobs. But in the same way that Goldin acknowledges that the contraceptive pill took so long to be discovered because of an ingrained lack of interest (and funding) on what was seen as a woman's issue, so the decision about which jobs are routinized (so they stop being greedy) may equally depend on gender roles. Similarly, Goldin talks about how in the US (as in other parts of the developed world) there is substitutability between ob-gyn consultants, which means a woman will have her baby delivered by whoever is on shift at her chosen clinic. At the same time, it is not deemed acceptable for an "important client" of law or consulting firms to be serviced by a different lawyer or consultant to the one with whom they initiated their business. This apparent contrast begs the question as to whether the difference between an obstetrician and a banker is about the social expectations on different types of services, because of a particular idea of leadership and success linked to masculinity, rather than simply skills, as suggested in the book. As such, the inability of firms to adjust to women's unpredictable demands at home may have little to do with the technology of a job and more to do with an ingrained lack of interest in women's issues by those at the top of the managerial hierarchy, traditionally men.

Another premise of the book is that in the absence of greedy jobs, household specialization around care would vanish. This assertion takes the technology of home production as given and fails to recognize the gendered nature of household decision making. Yet, there is a long line of research showing that entrenched norms on men's and women's roles in society, rather than simply the technology of home production, partner's comparative advantage, and specialization, can explain a household's decision around care (Bittman and Folbre 2004; De Laat and Sevilla-Sanz 2011). In contrast to what traditional household models would predict, women's care responsibilities during COVID increased regardless of their work status, whereas men's were very much dependent on being unemployed (Andrew et al. 2020; Del Boca et al. 2020; Sevilla and Sarah Smith 2020; Biroli et al. 2021). Additionally, whereas Goldin admits that technological improvements around home production technologies were a factor that freed up women's time to go to work (Greenwood 2019), she takes preferences around outsourcing as given. Further, childcare outsourcing is not a viable solution as it entails a loss of parental utility. Yet, there is evidence that college-educated women enjoy childcare much less than their less-educated counterparts (Gimenez-Nadal and Sevilla 2016). Goldin is not willing to contemplate the fact that market failures associated with the childcare system, such as asymmetric information rather than preferences, may indeed be at the root of the problem. As with any market

failure, government regulation (or subsidy or provision) may indeed be the solution.

To sum up, this is a great book with a revolutionary idea that could have benefited from engaging fully with the gendered structures of both work and family that determine the observed state of affairs. The underplaying of gender stereotypes is precisely what makes seeing a way out for making jobs less greedy and achieving couple's equity difficult. In failing to engage with the work done by economists and other social scientists on gender norms over the past two decades, the book misses the opportunity to elaborate on some of the contradictions it so vividly identifies and to be able to provide more creative solutions. The economics discipline is recently awakening to the fact that social norms (and gender roles in particular) are amenable to change. Understanding where social norms come from, the way they are transmitted, and how to change them remains elusive and is a promising area of future research (Giuliano 2020; Sevilla 2020; Lundberg 2022). Goldin is co-chairing a session at the 2022 National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) Summer Institute on "Gender in the Economy: Change and Persistence of Norms." Alternative ways of achieving gender equality at work and at home are on their way.

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