

AMERICA'S WORKING WOMEN - A BOOK REVIEW

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This newly published book (1976), compiled and edited by Rosalyn Baxandall, Linda Gordon and Susan Reverby, traces women's work in America from the year 1600 until the present. Using original letters and publications, the editors present a continuing chronicle of the progress women have made in gaining equal rights in industry.

The major thrust of America's Working Women is in the presentation of the problems working women have encountered trying to organize themselves into effective bargaining groups in order to gain better working conditions and fair pay in our industrialized society. The editors also show how the influence of the idea of women's traditional role as mother and housewife has affected women in the work force. In fact, much evidence is shown from earliest times of women having to shoulder a double load, both that of provider and of women's traditional work.

Since 1865, when industrialization became a reality in America, women have played a key role in shop and factory life. "Girls" could be hired for much less money to work in the shops, mills, and factories than men because they needed jobs and these jobs were the only ones available to them. It has always been a fact that many women were the sole supporters of themselves and/or their children. Sometimes, especially during the Great Depression, women were the sole breadwinners in a family. Women were not paid enough to support even themselves no less any children they might have. Therefore, they began to organize and fight for better pay almost as soon as they became active in the work force.

Society, through the years, has blamed working mothers for many breakdowns in our social system. Increased juvenile delinquency is cited as a major problem caused by working mothers because of their absence from the home. This was proven ill-founded; children of working mothers have a delinquency rate 10% lower than that of children whose mothers stay at home. This is but one example of how a male-dominated society has "encouraged" women to play their traditional roles. Other instances of this "encouragement" was the lack of birth control methods until 1960, attempted legislation in the late 1930's that prohibited married women from working, dismissal from a job upon marriage, and lack of adequate child care programs.

The one time when female employment was actively sought in America was during World War II when many women were encouraged to work by the War Manpower Commission in 1943. Many services were offered to female workers such as shopping aids, pre-cooked meals and shoe repair service. The fact that these services existed gave women a vision of what was possible when government policy

encouraged women to work.

After World War II, there was a reverse in opinion. Women were encouraged to go back to their homes and become housewives. In fact, many women who had worked during the war years wanted to continue with their jobs but found that they no longer existed.

In the years 1955-1975, women continued to have problems with employment.. Although more women are employed today, they make less in relation to men than they did in 1955.

Women are channeled into the lower paying clerical jobs and entire industries such as banking have been stratified so as to keep men on the top and women on the bottom. Today, it is not the exception that the woman works. It appears that the women's liberation movement of the 1960's and 1970's has given impetus to the working class women in her fight for better working and living conditions.

The women's liberation movement has influenced the fight women have waged through the years for equal rights. Most important, however, it has brought this struggle out into the open where all levels of society can be more aware of the injustices that have been wrought on women workers. Although the movement was spearheaded by educated, higher class women, the ideas and ideals of the movement have filtered down to the lower working class woman. These women have taken specific feminist demands such as equal pay, equal job opportunities, and equal legal rights and made them their own.

America's Working Women explores the whole gamut of women's working class occupations from servants to nurses, factory workers to houseworkers, black workers to white workers. It pulls together the threads of women's heritage as homemaker and mother and shows how this heritage has affected the woman worker in American industrial history to the present.