

PREFACE:
WOMEN AND WORK: AN INTRODUCTION

In this issue, *Feminist Studies* presents a collection of articles that focus our attention on the work lives of women in American history. The past lives of all workers are difficult to trace. Women who have worked outside the home have been particularly invisible in a society that has focused on women's home lives; they have left us even fewer written traces than their fathers, brothers, and husbands. The articles in this issue explore new areas about which little has been known, or they challenge our received wisdom in other areas. Uncovering the history of our involvement in work beyond the daily care of family members — and learning from it — seems particularly important now when a growing majority of us work in the wage labor market and increasingly recognize that our wages and opportunities continue to be limited. Most women continue to work at low wage sex-segregated jobs that are less likely to be unionized than men's. We need a better understanding of how this situation evolved in order to change it. The articles gathered here increase our understanding of some of the crucial factors that have contributed to present conditions: slavery, economic change, social reform, the labor movement, and women's collective actions. An earlier *Feminist Studies* collection on women and work (vol. 5, no. 2, Summer 1979) focused on reproductive hazards in the workplace, a topic that raises important current policy issues. This collection explores the historical underpinnings for that and other issues concerning women and work that continue to have political importance today.

Foremost among these is the importance of race in women's lives and the impact of race on the sexual division of labor. In "My Mother Was Much of a Woman," Jacqueline Jones explores the work that black women did as slaves and as free women immediately after the Civil War. As Jones points out, scholars have generally ignored questions related to the sexual division of labor under slavery and neglected the particular work of black women even though there has been much useful work both on slavery and on women. Jones provides a detailed account of the work of black women as field laborers, domestic servants, and wives and mothers; an analysis of the complex interactions of the demands of these different spheres; and a depiction of the conflicts black women were likely to have experienced. In her discussion of the ways in which black women and men organized family life after the war, she speculates about the costs, as well as the benefits, of a

more traditional sexual division of labor within families. She brings out the specificity of the conditions under slavery and in the immediate postslavery period that render many generalizations about the sexual division of labor simplistic.

Suzanne Lebsock's article on free black women in a somewhat earlier period in Petersburg, Virginia, uses court and other local records to investigate their work activities, property ownership, and familial relations, uncovering important aspects of their lives. Lebsock finds that free black women outnumbered free black men by three to two, that they married less frequently than white women, and that they were more often the main support of their families. These findings, as well as others — the economic oppression of free black women, the extremely varied family structures of free blacks — shed light on the controversy surrounding the concept of black matriarchy. In Lebsock's view, the discernible autonomy of free black women had its roots in racial oppression and was related to the scarcity of black men and chronic economic deprivation. As Lebsock points out, there is much that we do not know about how to interpret the data that she marshals — what motivated the women, how they experienced their situation, what they may have learned and carried forward from their experience.

The brief essay by Elaine Hedges that accompanies the illustrations of selected quilts from the Oakland Museum's exhibit, "American Quilts: A Handmade Legacy," conveys a powerful image both of the drudgery of the domestic work lives of women in the nineteenth century — especially in rural areas where women's extensive home production compensated for the lack of store-bought goods — and of their attempts to lift themselves out of that drudgery through art. Many women "stole" whatever time they could from routine household chores to sew quilts, enduring products of their skill and creativity which brought them pride and pleasure. Their quilts and their diaries help us recapture the inventiveness and grace with which they recreated their lives.

In "Women, Children, and the Uses of the Street," Christine Stansell describes a key element in the process of mid-nineteenth-century industrialization and illuminates an aspect of the working lives of ordinary women about which we have had little knowledge heretofore. She discusses the extent to which working-class people used the streets as workplaces and even homes, and made the streets truly public spaces. In this period, even very young children contributed to their families' upkeep by

gathering scraps on the street for use at home or for resale. Middle-class reformers tended to find this pattern deplorable and set about trying to guide working-class family life into conformity with middle-class standards. Stansell speculates that once working-class life was “successfully” removed from the streets, the streets became more dangerous, particularly for women and children. Women and children were effectively confined to their homes as part of the process which increasingly removed economic activity from homes and streets and centralized it in workplaces.

Two essays by Ruth Milkman and Nancy Gabin explore the impact of war on the sexual division of labor in highly industrialized workplaces, challenging received wisdom about the World War II period. In “Redefining the Sexual Division of Labor,” Milkman investigates the ways that women were actually incorporated into the civilian work force during World War II, particularly in the auto industry, and finds that although women performed many jobs that had previously been done by men, the *concept* of the sex segregation of jobs remained unchallenged. Indeed, early on in the war, there was much resistance to the utilization of women by both male workers and managers, which only abated as the shortages of male workers became more critical. Sex-segregated jobs — even if more jobs were now “female” typed — remained the norm, and women were viewed as doing men’s work only temporarily. Consequently, Milkman warns us, we had better revise our romantic image of “Rosie the Riveter”; she did not explode all stereotypes about women’s work during the war, but only altered them somewhat. By the war’s end, though, women began to challenge the temporary worker role assigned to them.

Nancy Gabin’s article, ““They Have Placed a Penalty on Womanhood,”” documents that challenge. She points out that some women did fight back when they were summarily dismissed from their wartime jobs at the end of the war. Her study of Detroit area locals of the United Auto Workers provides several examples of effective protest by women workers, and examines the ways in which labor unions both aided and hindered women’s efforts to challenge management’s policies and retain their jobs. Like Jones and Lebsock, Gabin and Milkman examine the changing relations between women and men as well as changing economic conditions. In so doing, they enable us to better understand the interconnections between sex/gender systems and economic systems and the ways in which both patriarchy and

capitalism affect our lives and condition our political responses.

Martha May's study of the Ford Motor Company's five dollar day in the 1910s also illuminates these interconnections. An uncommonly high wage for the time, the five dollar day was widely regarded as a "family wage," one designed to be adequate to support a wife and children who did not work for wages. Entering the debate about the origins and purposes of family wages — in both ideology and reality — May argues that, at least in this case, the family wage was neither the result of men's efforts to subordinate women nor of "unified" working-class demands for subsistence wages. Instead, it was the result of management's attempt to find a solution to labor turnover so severe it was hampering the production process. The higher wages increased the stability of the work force, benefited management, workers, and their families, but also reinforced the gender division of labor. Like Milkman and Gabin, May examines the importance the ideology surrounding women as wives, mothers, and homemakers holds for women's work lives outside the home. May rightly points out that the issues raised by the family wage are still with us today as women workers challenge the low wage levels of traditionally female jobs, begin to demand comparable pay, and stress their need to support their families as well as themselves.

Alix Kates Shulman's short story, "The Boarder," further examines the conundrum of the "family wage," women's economic dependence on men, and the meaning of marriage and domestic work. Again fiction helps us to think about old issues in new ways and to locate them in the emotional realm in which they are lived.

In her review essay of several books on the history of working women, Joan Smith argues strongly that the history of the work lives and protests of women will be incomplete and inaccurate if it focuses only on women's work outside their homes and ignores their intricately connected unwaged labor within families. Smith suggests that feminist scholars have only recently begun to ask the right questions about these interconnections. The articles in this issue of *Feminist Studies* begin to provide the answers as well.

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for the editors