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Confronting Economic Gender Inequality

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Squaring Up: Policy Strategies for Raising Women's Incomes in the United States
Mary C. King, ed; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001, 296 pp., $75.00 (hardback), $24.95 (paperback).
Breaking Out of the Pink-Collar Ghetto: Policy Solutions for Non-College Women
Sharon H. Mastracci; Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004, 256 pp., $69.95 (hardback), $26.95 (paperback).

The expansion of market relations into new arenas, reflecting the bourgeois need to "nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere" (Marx and Engels 1998: 39), is not just geographic. Colonization begins at home, as seen in the progressive commodification of women's previously unpaid labor. Thus, even as women slowly improved the gender division of housework (Bianchi et al. 2000), more and more unwaged labor was moving into low-wage jobs in the service economy (Duffy 2005). Women's waged work is still gendered and segregated, tainted by a traditional and ongoing association with devalued characteristics such as caring (Cohen and Huffman 2003; Folbre 2001). Nevertheless, paid workers are more interchangeable than unpaid workers—just ask a male fast-food cook—and that could be good for gender inequality. These two books bring much needed attention to the problems of gender inequality in labor markets themselves, and also in other arenas in an era dominated by expanding market reach.

1. Pressure Points for Gender

Bringing women's unpaid work into the paid labor market is a mixed blessing, as the summary by Mary King in her collection of essays titled *Squaring Up* suggests. The commodification of women's work offers new avenues to approach gender inequality. However, labor market inequality is intractable, in part because U.S. feminist efforts to break down gender divisions have been limited by political defeats over policies such as paid parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and on-site childcare. Inequality in paid work undermines women's power within families (Fuwa 2004), which slows progress toward gender equality in other realms.

Pursuing policies against women's undercompensation for taking care of children is therefore a necessary feminist strategy. This is the approach advocated in the chapter by

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Randy Albelda and Chris Tilly, whose suggestions amount to different ways for the state to support poor women's work for their children: raise welfare benefits, index them to inflation, standardize them across states, and stop using welfare policy to penalize paid work. Such a stance by the state would recognize a collective economic responsibility for child rearing and well-being.

In her chapter, Nancy Folbre points out that the state already picks up a substantial portion of the costs of childrearing, but with no explicit or comprehensive rationale for how much support should be provided, in what form it should come, and who should bear the costs. The rationale should not be so difficult to muster. These investments are efficient—returns in terms of children's future productivity outweigh the costs—but they also contribute to equality by lifting families out of poverty and improving public education. The thornier question politically is support for parenting, as distinct from children themselves; Folbre shows that the current web of welfare policy, tax credits, and exemptions in the United States amounts to paltry state support relative to the combination of outlays and opportunity costs that parents (especially women) bear when they raise children.

Reforming policy with regard to women's unpaid work has been daunting. But as women's work is increasingly waged, feminists can attack their undercompensation in new ways. Attempts at reducing inequality in wages have been hampered by the political difficulty of confronting a national system with no centralized wage setting, as Margaret Hallock argues in her chapter. Thus the drive for pay equity legislation yielded small gains relative to the widespread, employer-by-employer efforts it spawned. Similarly, affirmative action, in a piecemeal fashion, has produced observable if modest broadening of job opportunities for women, according to a review of the evidence here by M. V. Lee Badget and Jeannette Lim. They conclude that affirmative action is necessary if not sufficient to close the gender pay gap, but remains worth the political effort needed to keep it on the public agenda.

Because employers have an incentive to treat workers as interchangeable in the labor market, the gendering of paid work should be less resilient than unpaid labor in the family (Cohen 2004; Jackson 1998). Thus, targeted increases in women's human capital might yield high payoffs. To that end, Catherine Weinberger tests whether gender equity in the study of mathematics through high school would narrow the gender pay gap in later careers. She concludes this intervention would have modest positive effects, but only among those women who end up attending college.

Another approach is more gender-neutral. Several of the economists in this collection point out that employed women benefit disproportionately from reforms that compress the wage structure or boost wages for workers at the low end generally. Thus King argues that gender inequality in wages falls when the minimum wage or union representation in female-dominated occupations rise. When women dominate among the poor, addressing poverty also reduces gender inequality, even if it does not directly reduce the gender division of labor.

2. Breaching the College/Non-College Divide

Formal credentials are supposed to be one of the mechanisms for the rationalization of the hiring process (Weeden 2002). To the extent that ability labels are applied rationally rather than ascriptively, equally qualified men and women should be interchangeable as workers. Thus, if employers recognize college graduation as an indicator of ability (or trainability), then providing access to higher education for more women is a means by which high-level state policies, such as low-cost student loans or large state colleges, can have trickle-down effects on employer behavior even in a labor market with decentralized decision making.

Women's access to higher education has increased rapidly, and they now handily outnumber men graduating with four-year degrees. In the early 1970s, there were 68 women for every 100 men with college degrees in the young-adult population (ages twenty-five to thirty-four). By the early 2000s, that ratio had risen to 114 women per 100 men. Thus, even if the average employer of college graduates kept his biased evaluation of applicants stuck in the 1970s, with a constant tilting toward male résumés, his pool of employees would include more women as the applicant pool became more feminized. By this credential theory, occupations requiring college degrees should have moved toward desegregation over the last generation.

That is what happened. Cotter and colleagues show that the decline in occupational segregation since the 1950s has been most pronounced among college graduates. In fact, almost the entire decline in segregation is accounted for by professional, managerial, and nonretail sales occupations. Some integrated occupations (e.g., real estate agents) became larger, while some male-dominated occupations (e.g., lawyers) became more integrated (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2004). This bolsters Sharon Mastracci's argument in *Breaking Out of the Pink-Collar Ghetto* that the "college for all assumption," embedded in most policy efforts to promote gender equality in the labor market, is at best irrelevant and at worst damaging to the (albeit shrinking) majority of employed women who do not have four-year college degrees. It is these "non-college" women that Mastracci wants to get into "non-traditional occupations," especially male-dominated, skilled trade jobs.

If jobs requiring college degrees are desegregating in part because they are permeable to qualifications that women acquire through the ostensibly universalistic institutions of higher education, then what is the comparable process for non-college women? Although jobs in the skilled trades often require formal credentials, there is no process for securing these qualifications that compares in universality to college education. Externally supported training and apprenticeship programs designed to develop women's skills and access to these jobs might represent a solution comparable to the expansion of access to college that has broken down some barriers for professional, technical, and managerial jobs. However, these programs for working-class women are tiny in comparison. Barbara Byrd's chapter in *Squaring Up* shows that women are still just 2 percent of construction workers: of eighteen construction occupations, none were more than 6.4 percent female in 1998.

To help illustrate this college/non-college divide, I calculated occupational segregation and labor force gender composition for those with and without four-year college degrees in the early 1970s and the early 2000s using the March Current Population Surveys (details of all supplemental analyses are available upon request). Women increased their representation at both the college and non-college levels of the labor force, but the rate of increase was more than twice as great for college graduates: the labor force reached about 47 percent female for both groups, but the college-graduate gap had been much larger in the early 1970s (32 percent versus 40 percent female). This reflects both women's increased college completion and their growing tendency to convert educational credentials into employment (Cohen and Bianchi 1999). The changing gender composition of these worker pools probably contributed to the more rapid decline in occupational segregation among college graduates. The index of dissimilarity fell from 66 to 42 for college graduates (a drop of 36 percent), compared to a drop of only 20 percent for non-graduates (from 70 to 56).

Mastracci argues persuasively that while policymakers generally focus on promoting college education, "the market" is not likely to accomplish the desegregation of working-class jobs. She sets out to demonstrate the efficacy instead of a multifaceted approach to integration: "When employers, unions, government, and nonprofits have worked together to train, place, and retain women in [nontraditional occupations], the result has been a policy solution providing a pathway out of the pink-collar ghetto for many non-college women" (*Breaking Out*: 5).

Her book combines an analysis of data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) with case studies of several state-run and hybrid programs aimed at bringing women into male-dominated jobs. The statistical analysis is not entirely convincing, mostly because Mastracci is looking for effects of scattered, small, and diverse programs with broad household sample data. But her description of the individual programs and how they work is plausible and persuasive. Still, it is not clear where the best investments lie, whether with skilled-trades integration programs or the promotion of college opportunities. Byrd concludes, "The significance of women's entry into skilled trades as a strategy for raising women's incomes is thus, as yet, not great" (*Squaring Up*: 222). Even if "college-for-all" only helps some women, it might help more of them than advocates for integration programs can hope to reach on a politically feasible scale.

Despite its strengths and the importance of the issue she raises, some parts of Mastracci's book are not helpful. For example, in her introductory sections she confuses concentration with segregation, citing as evidence of segregation that 4 percent of all working women were secretaries in 2001, and that half of all women worked in twenty-eight occupations. But 4 percent of all working men were truck drivers that year, and half of all men were in just thirty-five occupations (my analysis of CPS data). Concentration into a few occupations may be a problem (for women or men), but it is not the same as segregation into different occupations. Then, in arguing the importance of her study, she concludes about the trend in segregation, "Despite women's gains in educational attainment compared to men, women still hold the same jobs they always have" (*Breaking Out*: 8). The point is to underscore the failure of markets to "work" as promised, and this kind of ahistorical statement is vague enough to be empirically untestable, but it does not capture the dynamic of change in U.S. gender inequality. As we have seen, women have increased both their educational attainment and their access to male-dominated jobs, but these gains are spotty and skewed toward middle-class women. They also fairly well stalled in the 1990s (Cotter et al. 2004). It is better to acknowledge the progress made so that its mechanisms can be understood than to downplay the reality of change to motivate a sense of urgency.

It is interesting that *Breaking Out* appears after a quarter-century in which non-college *men* took such a beating economically. My CPS calculations show that from 1976 to 2001 the real median annual earnings for full-time year-round working civilian men with less than a four-year college degree fell by an average of 0.3 percent per year. Women in that category had an average increase in median earnings of 0.7 percent. The biggest contrast is from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s. In 1999 dollars, median earnings for these men fell from $38,000 to $33,920 between 1986 and 1996, a drop of 10.7 percent. During that time, women in the same category saw their median earning rise from $24,320 to

$25,228, a rise of 3.7 percent: not a ten-year earnings boost anyone aspires to, but better than what men experienced. As a result, these non-college women closed the gender earnings gap by ten percentage points in ten years, from 64 percent to 74 percent.

What does it mean that while non-college women have failed to break into male-dominated skilled-trades jobs their wages have grown, even as men in their education group have seen wage declines? Maybe the desegregation we have seen for non-college workers, slow as it has been, reflects the declining fortunes of non-college men as well as the progress of women. Desegregation does not just mean people moving into better jobs; some men are now working in previously female-dominated jobs. For example, cooks (except private household) were 40 percent male occupation in 1972, but thirty years later 62 percent of them were male.

Mastracci's is an uphill battle, promoting an intensive state and private investment in gender-specific programs to help increase women's representation in a set of occupations that have faced declining fortunes. The alternatives for these women, however, are also daunting. They would benefit from general policies that reduce class inequality, such as raising the minimum wage or expanding union representation, but these are no political walks in the park either. The "college-for-all" approach, on the other hand, has proven effective only for those not left behind. Mastracci's effort helps demonstrate that non-college women deserve better.

Both of these books belong in all research libraries with collections in gender and economics. They are highly readable and demonstrate sound research strategies and methods. They also display a passion for gender equality that makes them not only suitable but desirable for graduate students as well as for classrooms of undergraduates concerned with the economics of gender inequality. *Squaring Up* may be suitable for a broader array of courses concerned with gender inequality—including sociology, political science, as well as economics—while *Breaking Out*, with its more limited empirical and methodological focus, will be more useful in economics courses.

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