
Men's Work, Women's Work



Harriet Bradley

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A Sociological History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Employment

HARRIET BRADLEY

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A Social History of the Industrial Revolution

By J. H. Coatsworth

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For Sandy, Sonia and Pat: working women

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INTRODUCTION

Men's Work, Women's Work: the title of this book reflects current social priorities. All round the world women work, in the home, in the fields, in factories and workshops, alongside men or apart from them, growing food, making goods, rendering services. Yet the work that they do is habitually viewed as less important than the work performed by men, may not even be considered 'real' work. Moreover, in virtually every society of which we have knowledge men and women normally perform different types of work. This 'sex-typing' of jobs, the allocation of specific tasks to men and to women, has become so extensive and pervasive that the two sexes are rarely found doing exactly the same kind of work. Even when men and women are found ostensibly working side by side in the fields or in an office or factory, closer investigation may well reveal that they are actually doing different things: men are scything and women are gathering the cut corn, women are filing record cards and men are doing the accounts, men are stamping out parts and women are sewing and gluing them together. Men are controlling and women are obeying.

Which particular tasks and occupations are defined as 'men's' and which as 'women's' will vary according to time and place. Tasks which are now seen as men's tasks may historically have been performed by women or vice versa. For example, before the industrialisation of the cotton industry men habitually were weavers, while women did the spinning. The introduction of power-driven machinery brought a reversal of these roles. There are few tasks, even those that seem as typically 'masculine' to us in twentieth-century Britain as mining and forestry, which have not in some time and place been performed by women. The sex-typing of work may even vary from region to region in a country at any given time, as some of the case studies in this book will show. What remains constant, however, is

the segregation of the sexes and the persistence of ideas of the suitability of some work for women, some for men, whatever the particular nature of the tasks involved.

There have recently been a great number of sociological and historical studies of women's work in Britain and elsewhere, including some general histories (for example, Lewenhak, 1980; Lewis, 1984; Walby, 1987). What makes this study different from most of these is its specific focus on the segregation of the sexes within employment and the sex-typing of jobs. It is chiefly concerned with developments since the Industrial Revolution in Britain, from approximately 1750 to the present day. Patterns of gender-based occupational segregation are traced back to their pre-industrial origins in order to explain how our current ideas of what constitutes 'men's work' and 'women's work' have come into being. This inevitably leads to some consideration of the sexual division of labour in pre-industrial societies. I have also tried to include, for comparative purposes, material on other industrial societies, particularly the USA, where I have been able to find it. Here I have found particularly useful three books which have covered some of the same ground: Baker's masterly empirical study, *Technology and Woman's Work* (1964), Matthaei's *Economic History of Women in America* (1982), which like my book is particularly focused on sex-typing, and Game and Pringle's similarly oriented survey of Australia, *Gender at Work* (1983).

Although this is now a flourishing area of research, the interest in gender segregation at work is relatively recent. Much of the research reported on in this book has emerged as a result of the upsurge of academic interest in what we might broadly categorise as women's studies. This has led to a new concern with women's history, the role of women in society and ways of thinking about and conceptualising the relation between the sexes. That academic interest was itself the direct product of the political regeneration of feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s. Since much of this work is new, and a great deal of it consists of specialised and detailed historical or ethnographic studies focusing on one particular place or time period, it is not always immediately accessible to the non-specialist. Part of the intention behind this book, therefore, is to pull together a number of disparate studies in sociology and history and present them to the reader in an easily digestible and summarised form.

The book is divided into three sections. The first attempts to draw together existing contributions to the study of sex-typing and to provide a general overview of the state of knowledge in this area. Chapter 1 presents empirical evidence of patterns of segregation and sex-typing in contemporary societies. Chapters 2 and 3 consider the causes and consequences of these patterns; the range of explanations for their evolution provided by historians and sociologists is set out and assessed. Debates and disputes about the conceptualising of gender relations and

about historical trends are dealt with in this section.

The second part consists of ten case studies. These examine in much more detail the development of the sexual division of labour within a variety of industries and occupations. The case studies are drawn from all three sectors of employment, primary, secondary and tertiary, to illustrate both the range of employment areas in which women are currently found and the range of patterns of task segregation. In the mining industry, for example, women in Britain have been excluded almost completely from every task, while, at the other end of the spectrum, in the teaching profession women and men perform almost exactly the same tasks, although women are concentrated in the lower levels of the various teaching hierarchies. While each case displays unique features, it is hoped that they provide, when taken together, a clear indication of the major factors which have influenced current patterns of sex-typing. The case studies draw partly on published research material which I have tried to synthesise. Some of this is, as I have said, the product of the feminist revival, but older studies which have touched, however briefly, on the issues of gender segregation are also referred to. In this field, Alice Clark's *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (originally published in 1919 and reprinted in 1982) and Ivy Pinchbeck's *Women Workers in the Industrial Revolution* (originally published in 1930 and reprinted in 1981), products of an earlier wave of feminist research, remain classic texts, although the interpretations they offer are coloured by views of gender relations rather different from those appertaining today. I have also included new material drawn from primary sources, where appropriate, particularly to show exactly what tasks within each area were assigned to men and women. Most of this material comes from the Parliamentary Papers, but I have used some other sources, mainly nineteenth-century texts and commentaries. The chapter on hosiery draws upon the research I carried out for my Ph.D., which involved a wide array of documentation, including union minute books. In most, though not all, of the case studies I have been able to include material for America and other societies. There is no attempt to give a comprehensive history of developments in these countries. Rather the material is used to point to interesting parallels or contrasts.

The third part presents some general conclusions about the origins of segregation and sex-typing and its perpetuation, on the basis of the case studies. It also deals with some implications both for further academic work and for policy-making. The broader consequences of sex-typing for relations between men and women and its relation to other forms of social inequality are also briefly considered.

This book was conceived of as a project in 'historical sociology' or 'sociological history'. While reading for it, I became aware of the fact that historians and sociologists seemed frequently to ignore each other's work,

even when it related to similar topics. Initially this seemed odd, even irritating, but I realised as I worked on this book that it was not simply the result of ignorance or ill will. History and sociology have their own distinct languages and discourses, their own sets of dialogues, and this does pose a genuine problem for those of us who believe strongly that the two disciplines should draw closer to each other. This problem has its reflection in the style of my book. Whereas the empirical sections and case studies are written in a language which (I hope) anybody can understand, the parts dealing with historical and sociological debates assume some familiarity on the part of the reader with the basic concepts and concerns of each discipline, although I have tried where I could to give definitions of the more obscure pieces of disciplinary jargon. I hope that the reader does not find the result too positively schizophrenic! The attempt to make sociologists and historians familiar with each other's work still seems to me a vital one.

My study, of course, also has its political implications. In the last two decades, the renaissance of feminism has led to increased demands and campaigns for the equality of women with men in all aspects of social life. Despite increased public awareness and despite new legal measures against sex discrimination, women remain in a disadvantaged position in most areas of paid employment in most, if not all, contemporary societies, as international studies such as the New Internationalist's *Women: A World Report* (1985) and Chapkis and Enloe's *Of Common Cloth* (1983) demonstrate. While gender-based occupational segregation remains strong, measures like the British Equal Pay Act of 1970 are likely to remain ineffective. To attack that segregation more effectively we must try to understand its roots and the reasons for its obstinate persistence once instituted. It is hoped that this book may make some contribution to that understanding.

Part I

THE SOCIOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

GENDER SEGREGATION AND THE SEX-TYPING OF JOBS

*No more delightful wanderings ... Henceforth it must be work, woman's work,
dreary and monotonous sometimes, yet pleasant withal, as it rewarded me with the
proud consciousness that I was not only able to eat my daily bread but earn it.*

Wills, *Lays of Lowly Life*

In these words Ruth Wills, Leicester working woman and poet, looked back in 1861 at her transition from childhood to womanly status, when at the age of ten or eleven she gained a job in the warehouse at Corah's hosiery factory where she was to work for the rest of her life. Her comment reveals to us some of the ambiguous and contradictory attitudes common to most people who have to work under the prevailing arrangements and conditions of industrial capitalism. But it also tells us interesting things about social perceptions of 'women's work' in the middle of the nineteenth century. During the succeeding decades, ideas about 'men's work' and 'women's work' were to stabilise into the forms familiar to us today, after the period of tumultuous change in the nature of working arrangements and relationships and in working people's daily lives, which marked the long, slow, painful transition from one type of society to another that we now know by the shorthand label of the 'Industrial Revolution'.

Women's work in Victorian England was indeed often 'dreary and monotonous', both inside and outside the home. Though we shall have cause within this book to consider domestic labour or 'housework', the focus of study here is employment outside the home, wage labour. Wage labour for Victorian women meant filling the less prestigious, more routinised, often less skilled tasks in both the new manufacturing and service industries and the traditional areas of agriculture and domestic

service. While men's traditional trades and skills had often been challenged or destroyed by the new industrial system, they had succeeded in capturing for themselves the more responsible jobs and tasks which either were or could credibly be described as skilled. Women's work was low paid, often pitched at a level below subsistence needs, and few women, of any class, had expectations of anything better. Men were paid more and, while not yet attained, the 'breadwinner's' wage, sufficient to support a whole family, was their target, and claimed as their 'right' as head of a household. There was little sense that women's work was something that could be a source of pleasure and satisfaction in itself; it was undertaken solely out of necessity 'to earn one's daily bread'. The idea was gaining ground that all women, given the choice, would prefer to stay at home and devote themselves to things domestic. Few women had any real choice over the type of work they undertook, and the range of occupations open to them was limited. For men, however, a broader range of possibilities appeared, and for many middle-class and even some working-class men there was some prospect of a 'free' choice of trade and career. In any case men expected, if they did not always achieve it, some intrinsic satisfaction from their work, if only in the sense of the access it gave them to adult masculine status and the breadwinner role. Men's work offered an important source of social and personal identity, whereas for women the growing tendency was for their identity to be focused on their domestic roles as homemakers and mothers within the inturned, privatised family which was becoming the Victorian ideal. Finally, women's work was different in content from men's work: the characteristic features of women's and men's work as we know them today were becoming the norm in 1861.

As the case studies in this book will show, anthropological and historical evidence bears testimony to an almost infinite variety of forms of the sexual division of work. It would be hard to find any single activity which has not been, at some time or place, 'women's work'. Yet over time and space we can discern some general trends, some gender allocations that are more common than others. Murdock and Provost's wide survey of the sexual division of labour as recorded in 185 societies shows, for example, that hunting large animals, fishing, smelting ores, metalwork, mining and quarrying and lumberwork are almost everywhere male tasks. As we shall see throughout this book, female tasks tend to be less sharply distinguished. However, Murdock and Provost found that dairy production, cooking, carrying water and gathering vegetables were very commonly performed by women (Murdock and Provost, 1973). Virginia Novarra (1980) has argued, more generally, that six key tasks are performed mainly by women in the majority of societies: provision of food, care of the home, child care, nursing the sick, teaching and manufacture of clothing. These tasks are frequently performed by women in the home, as