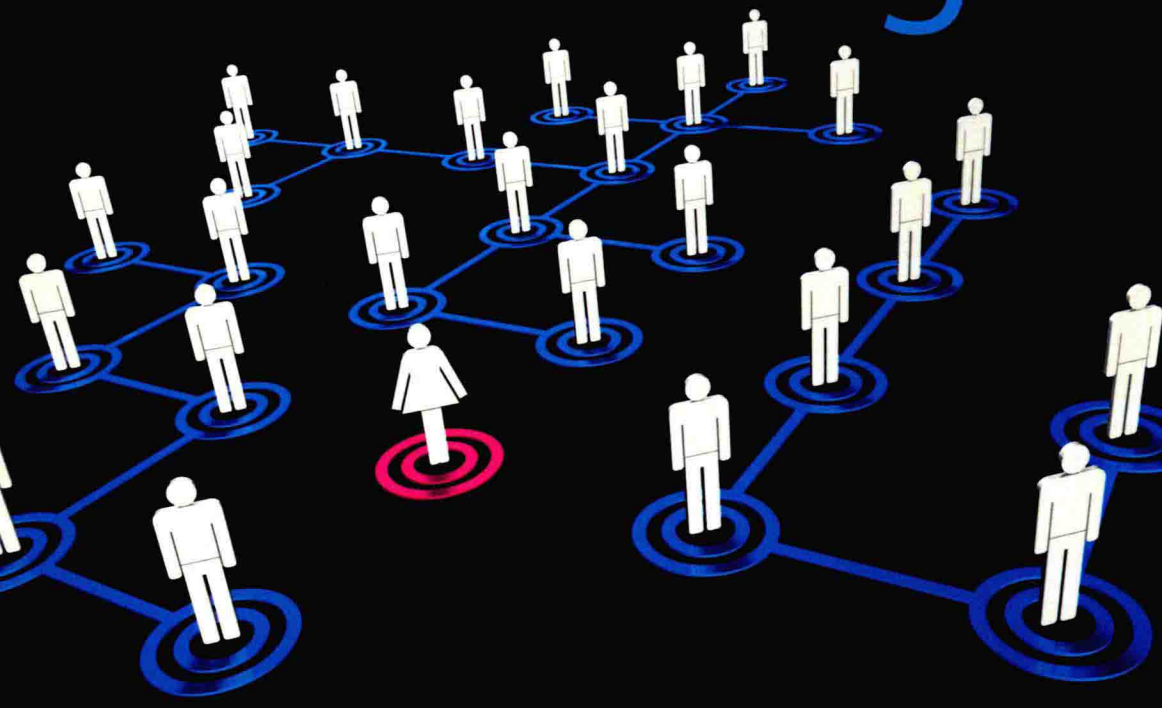
Getting In Is Not Enough



Women and the Global Workplace

Edited by
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GETTING IN IS NOT ENOUGH

A *Feminist Formations* Reader

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Introduction: Women and Public Work

COLETTE MORROW AND TERRI ANN FREDRICK

Work has long been a touchstone issue for feminists because women's relationship to work is a question of power: how does women's labor enable or constrain their access to personal, economic, social, and political influence? In *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests that work offers feminists a site where they can forge transnational and cross-cultural solidarity, resist oppression, and make empowering social change without recourse to reductionist and essentializing notions of identity: the "intersection of gender and work, where the very definition of work draws upon and reconstructs notions of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality, offers a basis of cross-cultural comparison and analysis that is grounded in the concrete realities of women's lives" (2003, 144). Two hundred years before *Feminism without Borders* (2003) was published, Mary Wollstonecraft, in *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), also linked women's labor to their well-being and civil and economic rights. In the years that separate these two paradigm-setting feminists, innumerable others have explored the possibilities and problems of gender and work. In the United States and other high-income countries with "advanced" free-market economies, middle-class, mainstream feminists relied on a strategy of framing their quest for gender equity in terms of rights to paid employment, contributing to popular misconceptions that entering the workforce is *the* Western feminist project, an end in itself rather than a means of attaining equality. In this book, we call this approach to empowering women via the right to public work "access-based feminism."[1]

Other feminists—concerned that employment constrains rather than empowers women, especially poor and working-class women, immigrants, and disenfranchised minorities in both developing countries and "advanced," capital-intense economies—argue that access-based feminism perpetuates injustice. Rather than campaigning for increasing women's resources and power by means of greater access to paid work, they advocate for systemic change that will "fundamentally transform" existing socioeconomic and political structures (Moghadam 2009, 111). This approach is characteristic of transnational and women of color feminisms, which, depending on practitioners' research and activist concerns, ideology, social locations, and sites of praxis (including the United States), may also be shared by social justice, liberatory, socialist, Marxist, borders/borderless, "Third World," multicultural, international, and global feminisms (Lock Swar and Nagar 2010, 4). To avoid confusion, we will use the nomenclature *transformative feminism(s)* to identify this approach.

Women's empowerment as conceptualized by access-based and transformative feminisms has been a focus of *Feminist Formations* (formerly the *NWSA Journal*) since its inception, and the journal consistently publishes research that investigates the complex nature of women's relationship to labor. Drawn from almost two decades of *Feminist Formations*, the articles included in this book critically examine women's paid work in terms of both access and a broader agenda of achieving feminist social change worldwide. In aggregate, the essays reveal, and in this volume we argue, that discussions of the ways in which women affect and are affected by work consider three major spheres:

- Economic: How does women's pay compare to others' earnings in their community? What roles do forms of power such as race and ethnicity, class, nation, migration, ability, sexuality, and religion play in the value assigned women's work? Are women able, through their work, to control the money they earn?
- Social: Do women experience positive, workplace-supported connection to others within their workplace? What connections and/or value do they experience within their homes and communities as a result of their work?
- Political: How much agency do women exercise in their jobs? Are they able to affect change within their workplaces? Does women's work increase their leverage to enact change in their communities and cultures?

Responses to these queries republished in this book offer a range of perspectives that (1) reject U.S. popular culture definitions of feminism, (2) frequently critique access-based feminism, (3) advocate for transformative social change, and (4) rectify widely held misinterpretations of feminist ideas about work, beginning with the myth that concepts such as "woman" and "work" are discrete, uncomplicated categories. This scholarship demonstrates the roles that race and ethnicity, class, sexuality, corporate practices, government policies, and economic systems play in women's experiences of work. Furthermore, the retrospective addresses diverse women's work experiences in the United States and other parts of the world. Our focus is on representing a wide range of viewpoints in the scholarship as well as on the multiplicity of women's work experiences. In this introduction, we briefly discuss the history, implications, and limits of access-based and transformative feminisms before introducing the articles, which, taken together, provide a critical and complex view of women and public work.

Access-Based Feminism: A Historical Overview

Access-based and transformative feminisms both respond to the rise and historical development of capitalism, a system that distributes power on the basis of wealth. While transformative feminism rejects capitalist economics as fundamentally oppressive, the goal of access-based feminism is for women to capture an equitable share of capitalism's benefits, which traditionally were reserved for men only. Hence, it tends to appeal to women living in and *profiting* from capitalist economies. For this reason and because access-based feminism developed in tandem with liberalism (a philosophy that posits collective concerns should not limit individual choice), it attracted relatively large followings in Western societies where modern capitalism first became a major force and that are now organized around neo-liberal capitalism (sometimes referred to as late capitalism).

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when modern capitalism was maturing, it was twinned with liberalism by European philosophers such as John Locke and Adam Smith, who claimed that men are citizens with "natural" rights—property ownership and the consent to be governed—because of their ability to reason and their participation in the marketplace and political sphere. In contrast, women were sequestered to the private sphere and denied the status of citizen because their ability to reason was deemed inferior and their primary activities—reproduction and child rearing—had no market value. Given these contexts, the conclusion that access to the market—paid work—would enhance women's power and status was a culturally familiar strategy that English and U.S. feminists from the eighteenth century through today have leveraged to demand political and economic rights. For instance, in 1792, Wollstonecraft, though she never campaigned for women to work outside the home, turned liberalism on itself (without challenging its basic tenets) by arguing that women's ability to fulfill traditional gender roles rested equally on personal virtue and having "a civil existence in the state" (1988, 149). This, along with her contention that women's capacity for reason equals men's, was the basis for Wollstonecraft's demands for women's education and emancipation. By being recognized as men's intellectual "fellows," women would be better able to execute their traditional domestic "duties" and the responsibilities of citizenship: "Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens" (150).

Over the decades, scores of feminists adopted Wollstonecraft's access-oriented arguments and expanded them to include work outside the

home. During the mid-twentieth-century, access became synonymous with U.S. feminism in part because the media, which gave greater coverage to the population wishing to enter the workforce—white, middle-class, heterosexual women—than groups with less privilege, made access-based feminism a conspicuous element of U.S. mass culture. Additionally, the feminist notion that the personal is political, suggesting that "all aspects of personal life have social dimensions, just as all political power relations have personal dimensions," thrust issues traditionally considered private into public discourse (Gordon and Hunter 2002, 249). What previously had been an individual concern became a social movement for employment. The rationale driving this movement was that, in a capitalist economy, paid work would increase women's earning capacity and give them power to enact change in the home, workplace, government, and community. To this end, access feminists from the 1960s through today have sought to reform rather than replace capitalist structures. Much of their platform entails initiatives that make working outside the home tenable. For instance, access proponents demand affordable childcare, family leave policies, and stop-the-clock policies that shield women from penalties incurred when they take family leave. Other reforms include ending the sexual division of labor, discriminatory hiring, sexual harassment, the gender wage gap, and sex segregation and gender hierarchies in the workplace.[2]

Today, access feminists' insistence that jobs—especially leadership positions at the highest levels of government, business, and other institutions—are the key to attaining gender equality continues to be the most recognizable form of U.S. feminism. It has succeeded in some respects but not others. In the United States, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 proscribed sex-based wage discrimination. It was soon followed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which expanded prohibitions against discrimination to multiple areas and which the Supreme Court has interpreted as disallowing sexual harassment at work. The U.S. Congress then passed the Education Amendments of 1972, which ban discrimination against females by federally funded schools: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" (Family Educational and Privacy Rights Act of 2010). In 1981, the United Nations put in force the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which codifies international law pertaining to women's rights: "The Convention provides the basis for realizing equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life—including the right to vote and to stand for election—as well as education, health and employment"[3] (United Nations Commission on the Status of Women 1979).

Such laws and persistent feminist activism have enabled women who historically were blocked from public work—typically middle-class white women—to enter the workforce at high rates, particularly in the United States.[4] Furthermore, work and access to work have increased many women's economic, social, and political power, especially when that work arises in response to the economic and labor needs of their communities. In "Gender Distortions and Development Disasters: Woman and Milk in African Herding Systems," Bonnie Kettel demonstrates, for instance, that women whose work serves an important role within their communities may be able to parlay that work into greater social and economic standing (1992). Additionally, the increased presence of women in government and corporate leadership can be attributed to access-based feminism. For instance, Sonia R. García and Marisela Márquez (chapter 9) illustrate that increasing numbers of Chicana politicians—motivated by concerns regarding their families and communities—have been making inroads into traditional, mainstream politics, an area of work that in the U.S. has traditionally been dominated by white men.

Nevertheless, gender equity is far from complete. Women everywhere continue to be underrepresented in powerful, high-paying leadership positions, and wage parity is unlikely to materialize anytime in the foreseeable future. Yasemin Besen-Cassino (chapter 1) demonstrates that in the United States wage disparities between men and women begin during the teen years. In addition, women's lifetime earnings are far less than men's, and, as a group, men do not participate equally in women's traditional household duties, including child rearing and caring for aged or ill family members. In fact, most women now shoulder the double burden of full-time work in and outside the home, but few societies have accommodated working mothers' needs for safe, affordable childcare and adequate paid family leave or adopted policies and institutions that enable women to achieve a tenable work-life-family balance. Janine A. Parry, in "Family Leave Policies: Examining Choice and Contingency in Industrialized Nations," shows that U.S. family leave policies are woefully inadequate because hostility to limiting the free market far outweighs the influence of women leaders and unions and, we would add, any real allegiance to so-called family values (2001). Even First Lady Michelle Obama—a Princeton and Harvard graduate and working mother—has spoken openly about her struggle to juggle family and career.

These conditions have prompted some progressive feminists to argue that historically access-based feminism has served the needs of the U.S. economy to a much greater extent than it has facilitated women's empowerment. The United States, for example, could not have sustained its role in World War II without a 57 percent increase (from 1940 to 1944) in the number of women employed in all sectors of the economy. However, U.S. women who readily stepped up to this economic challenge faced

discrimination and, as a group, did not realize lasting improvements in life quality, such as long-term financial independence, because returning veterans reclaimed their jobs after the war's end (Altbach 1974, 65). Another example is that midway through the twentieth century, as the U.S. economy shifted from manufacturing to the service sector, its ability to sustain productivity rates and avoid recession depended in part on securing a new pool of workers. From this perspective, white, middle-class women's en masse entrance into the workplace clearly benefited the national economy while creating new challenges with regard to women's traditional child rearing and other work in the home (Douglas 2007).

Another troubling failure is that women who have achieved success as the result of access-based feminism often do so on the backs of disenfranchised women. Colleen Canty-Mack points out that "poor women of color and/or immigrant women [are] laboring in the domestic sphere of other women's homes . . . [at a] much greater rate today . . . to facilitate the entrance into the public sphere of more privileged . . . women," which promotes class competition rather than mutually beneficial alliances (2004, 166). That workplace success can increase divisions among women is further borne out by Melissa Wright's findings that, once promoted from "blue collar" jobs to managerial positions, women internalize corporate cultures and distance themselves from former coworkers on the production line rather than opening doors for them (2000, 209, 221). Clearly, women's greater access to paid employment in the United States and other highly developed capitalist economies shows that paid work is no panacea for gender inequality.

Transformative Feminism and Views on Women's Labor

Transformative feminists argue that access-based feminism's failures are at least partially due to its close ideological affiliation with liberalism and capitalism. One area where liberalism and access-based feminism overlap is the primacy they give to the idea of the "individual" with rights and liberty. A central concept of liberalism, this principle contributes to access-based feminism's emphasis on the right of the female citizen (as an individual) to freedom, which both liberalism and capitalism define as economic opportunity. This prominence of the individual preempts the possibilities for collective action, which transformative feminists believe is more effective and a greater good in and of itself. Another key factor in access-based feminism's failures, suggest transformative feminists, is its reliance on reform—creating spaces for women in existing institutions—rather than making thoroughgoing, deeply rooted change. Significantly, transformative feminist economic agendas far exceed the goals of access-

based feminism (though transformative feminists unequivocally support specific access-based initiatives, such as eliminating the gender wage gap). At its core, transformative feminism, a catchall term that encompasses the principles of transnational, women of color, and other liberatory-oriented feminisms, is committed to dismantling systems that inequitably distribute power because of racism, class bias, capitalism, imperialism, patriarchalism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression as they are manifest in local and global contexts. Ultimately, transformative feminists seek to disassemble oppressive socioeconomic and political structures and replace them with just institutions.

Transformative feminisms' historical roots lie in multiple intellectual and political traditions, while transformative praxis is shaped by local and global contexts. For example, women of color feminisms are particularly prominent in the United States and other regions where power and wealth are apportioned according to intersections of race, class, and gender. Resistance to imperialism and colonization is a hallmark of transformative feminisms in regions with a history of being colonized. Transformative feminists everywhere generally oppose neo-liberalism, the governmental and corporate movement to impose radical free market capitalism throughout the globe, because it is a form of socioeconomic imperialism that intensifies the stratification of resources and power and (re)colonizes the world's most vulnerable populations.

From at least the mid-twentieth century, transformative feminists in the United States, especially practitioners of women of color feminism, have critiqued access-based feminism for privileging white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual women's concerns and issues. Scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (1990), bell hooks (1984), and Audre Lorde (1998) point out that the access-based movement primarily benefited the populations who advocated for it. For instance, affirmative action has advanced white women more than other groups that it covers (Wise, chapter 7), and the glass ceiling—an invisible but real barrier that keeps qualified people out of top leadership—is less penetrable by women of color than by white women. As a result, in the United States, there is a substantial, persistent wealth gap between white women and women of color. As Patricia Hill Collins explains in *Black Feminist Thought*, women of color encounter a racial as well as sexual division of labor, a point underscored by Heather Boushey and Robert Cherry, who establish that even during the U.S. economic expansion of the 1990s "the position of African-American women deteriorated relative to white women . . . [and] the economic advances of professional women have outpaced the advances of working-class women" (2003, 49).[5]

Boushey and Cherry's findings also highlight the important role that class plays in access-based feminism. Their research demonstrates

that women who hold jobs defined as lower-class and/or "deskilled" often find work more limiting than empowering. In fact, as scholars such as Lynn Duggan (chapter 2) demonstrate, the women most often hired for these positions experience low wages, few benefits, unsafe work conditions, and lack of job security, all of which *reduce* their access to power.

Transformative feminists whose practice is oriented around world issues critique access-based feminism for its almost exclusive concern with conditions in the United States and a concomitant lack of attention to global macroeconomics, particularly the negative effects of neo-liberalism on poor and working-class women in developing countries. In fact, many transformative feminists argue that U.S. women's economic opportunities are made possible, in part, by the worldwide spread of neo-liberalism, which the United States has led as it has pursued international market dominance since World War II. They contend that globalization of the free market has significantly added to "America's breathtakingly disproportionate wealth and economic power" (Chua 2004, 232), while "reduc[ing] the ability of women around the world to find paid work that offers security and dignity" (Desai 2002, 32). An oft-cited example is U.S.-based corporations' efforts to boost profits by locating production in developing countries that have a large pool of "cheap" labor. For instance, Ahmed (chapter 4) demonstrates that sweatshops prefer to employ women because they can be paid less and are perceived to be more easily "controlled." Unions are usually banned and, in the absence of health and safety laws, employees work in dangerous conditions and commonly experience abuses ranging from harassment to sexual assault. If employees and local activists protest, corporations relocate. Transformative feminists argue that this system exacerbates the stratification of global wealth by moving capital from poorer to richer nations—particularly to high-income countries with "advanced" free-market economies where traditional socioeconomic patterns distribute it to already privileged groups, including women who have accumulated resources and power through access-based feminist reforms. At the same time, sweatshops in countries like Bangladesh (see Ahmed, chapter 4) and the Philippines (see Licuanan-Galela, chapter 3) perpetuate class oppression and gendered hierarchies rather than empowering women in their families and communities. The sweatshop example, transformative feminists argue, is proof that access-based reform is an insufficient remedy for women's disenfranchisement globally and, worse, that it diminishes the possibilities for global feminist solidarity by reinforcing class and national divisions rather than dismantling inequalities.

The divisive potential of access-based antidotes to inequality increases when the language of access and empowerment is coopted and deployed in service of governments and global financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, World Trade Organi-

zation (WTO), and even U.N. agencies whose stated mission is to empower women. For instance, Alexandra Hrycak's research on women's organizing in post-Soviet Russia shows how the women's movement weakened when the United States and its subcontractors imposed the access-based model through aid and development initiatives (2002, 70–79). These projects concentrated resources on promoting leadership among elite women (the nouveau riche of Russia's free market capitalism) while disenfranchising grassroots activists who had successfully used maternalist collective action—a model that was defined in part by women's traditional role as mother and used collective decision making and advocacy strategies—to campaign for social justice during the final years of the Soviet era. The U.S. approach silenced seasoned, effective activists and put the women's movement in the hands of a relatively small population of emerging professionals who were profiting from neo-liberalization of Russian markets, an economic "therapy" whose aggregate effect was the feminization of poverty. Without practiced activists, the post-Soviet women's movement was significantly weaker than its predecessor. Moreover, in the new economy, the number of women's advocacy groups shrank to less than 1 percent of all Russian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and they exercised little power in local and national policymaking.

Another chilling example pertains to the Iraq War, specifically, President George W. Bush's claims that it was undertaken to liberate women, and the creation of "puppet" women's NGOs to advance the ruling coalition's agendas (Zangana 2007, 11). Bush's conflation of feminist ideas and language with U.S. economic imperialism produced a discourse that has since become commonplace. For example, atrocities against Afghan and Pakistani women and girls routinely have been invoked to justify "unpiloted drone bombings" that inflict heavy civilian casualties along the two countries' border. Likewise, violations of Iranian women's human and civil rights have been used to solidify anti-Muslim, anti-Iranian sentiment and to cultivate "war fever" when tensions escalate between the United States and Iran: in 2009, when opposition parties protested Iranian election results and, before that, in 2007–2008, when Vice President Richard Cheney urged military action against Iran. Furthermore, institutions and governments ranging from the United Nations to the Western media have picked up this refrain, citing women's political—but not economic—rights to legitimize the expansion of neo-liberal economics. (See, for example, *Time* magazine's cover story on August 9, 2010, "What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan?") As a result, feminists working outside the United States, particularly in the Middle East and South Asia, have developed the false perception that U.S. feminists support their government's militarization as well as neo-liberal "solutions" to poverty. Needless to say, this obstructs transnational feminist alliance building