

A blue-toned photograph of a woman in a garment factory. She is wearing a patterned vest over a dark top and is focused on sewing a piece of fabric. The background shows other workers and industrial equipment, creating a sense of a busy manufacturing environment.

URBAN SURVIVAL

**The World of
Working-Class Women**

Ruth Sidel

Urban Survival

THE WORLD OF WORKING-CLASS WOMEN

Ruth Sidel

with a new introduction by the author

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

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in memory of

Helen Johnson

a warm and wise friend

who struggled long before it was fashionable
against the dual oppression of class and sex

INTRODUCTION TO THE BISON BOOKS EDITION

Nearly two decades ago I began interviewing the eight women who speak about their lives in this book. Rereading *Urban Survival* for the first time in many years, I am struck by how generous the women were in sharing their lives, how vividly they recreated the events that shaped who they are, and how the issues they highlight—the difficulty and complexity of combining work and family, inadequate and insensitive human services, employment insecurity, racism, sexual harassment, fear of crime—have remained urgent problems in the lives of many Americans, particularly women. These women speak movingly of the centrality and importance of their families, of their constant care and concern for their children, and of their feelings of connection with the men in their lives. While their strength, determination, and resilience are evident, what is also striking is how much calmer, less threatening, and less hostile urban America in general and New York City in particular seems to have been in the mid-1970s than it is often pictured today in the mid-1990s. In fact, intimations of many of the themes and conflicts that have come to dominate our urban culture are apparent in the women's accounts of their lives; moreover, virtually every issue about which they were concerned seems to have become more difficult, less solvable, more ridden with anxiety and fear.

The women were selected in part because they were working class. I used the three standard criteria for determining class—occupation, education, and income. The women and their families had incomes above the poverty line and could provide for their day-to-day needs, but they were not truly middle class. Today, determining who in the United States is working class is even more problematic and ambiguous than it was when *Urban Survival* was written. The image of the United States as a largely middle-class society with a small percentage of the population who are clearly more affluent at the top of the pyramid and a larger percentage at the bottom living in poverty is the common perception of most Americans. A more accurate picture of the class structure is considerably more complex.

Although occupation, education, and income are still key in determining social class, occupation and income have become even more inextricably linked to education over the past two decades. Between 1979 and 1989, for example, the income of male high school dropouts declined 18 percent while the income for female dropouts declined nearly 12 percent. Income declined substantially (nearly 13 percent for males and over 3 percent for females) for high school graduates as well. Males with one to three years of college also experienced a significant decline in income (over 8 percent) while females

with the same amount of education saw their income rise nearly 4 percent. Only when workers had completed four years of college did both men and women realize an increase in income over the decade of the 1980s—for men a bare rise of 0.2 percent and for women a significant increase of 12.6 percent. The real advantages accrued to workers with post-graduate training—nearly 10 percent for males and nearly 13 percent for females.¹ It is clear that the interplay between education and social stratification is stronger than ever and that, for the most part, the women profiled in *Urban Survival* would have experienced a substantial decline in earnings, if they had remained employed at all, in the intervening years. And, lest we assume that the segment of society that has suffered these losses is small or relatively insignificant, economist Barry Bluestone has noted that “the extreme losers in this new meritocratic society—those with no more than a high school diploma—still comprise more than half of all U.S. workers.”²

Not only has much of the working class and middle class experienced a significant downturn in their economic status, but they are trying to survive in an increasingly unequal society. While the vast majority of Americans have been losing ground, the richest among us have been getting even richer. According to researchers at the Federal Reserve Board and the Internal Revenue Service, the richest 1 percent of U.S. households owned an even bigger share of total private wealth in 1989 than they had in 1983. In that year, the top 1 percent owned 31 percent of total private wealth; by 1989 they owned 37 percent. The richest 10 percent of the population owned and controlled an incredible 68 percent of total private wealth in 1989, “a jump in inequality,” according to Paul Krugman, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, “to Great Gatsby levels.” In 1989 the top 1 percent owned more private wealth than the bottom 90 percent of the population! As Claudia Goldin, a Harvard University economic historian, has noted, “Inequality is at its highest since the great leveling of wages and wealth during the New Deal and World War II.”³

In order to determine working-class status for the original study, the income levels used at the low end were the families’ “ability to provide for themselves the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter” and at the high end a gross income of \$15,000 per year. The federal poverty line was not used as the bottom demarcation of working-class income because the poverty line is set at such a low level that families living at or just above it are likely in reality to be still living in poverty. If the study had been done in the early- to mid-1990s, comparable income levels for “low to middle-wage income” families would be significantly higher—approximately \$12,000 to \$23,999 depending on the size of the family.⁴

Work was a key aspect of the lives of these eight women. Seven of the eight had outside employment—six full-time and one part-time—and all worked

in typically female occupations. Participation in the labor force has continued to increase during the past decade and a half. In 1980, 51.1 percent of American women worked outside of the home; by 1992, 57.2 percent were employed.⁵ And today, despite significant gains by women in professional and managerial occupations, of the twenty leading occupations for women, eleven are traditionally “female” jobs. Moreover, fourteen out of the twenty leading occupations for women pay median weekly earnings below the \$368 average for all women employed full-time in 1991.⁶

In 1991 labor force participation for white and black women was virtually identical (57.4 percent and 57 percent respectively) while the rate for Hispanic women was somewhat lower (52.3 percent).⁷ In 1992 divorced women were most likely to be in the labor force (74 percent), followed by never-married women (64.7 percent), married women whose husbands were absent (61.8 percent), married women whose husbands were present (59.3 percent), and finally by widows, who had a significantly lower participation rate (18.8 percent). Labor force participation of mothers increases significantly with the age of the children. In 1992, 58 percent of mothers with children under six were in the labor force, 75.3 percent with children ages 6 to 13, and 77.5 percent with children aged 14 to 17.⁸

A study conducted by the Women’s Bureau in 1994, *Working Women Count! A Report to the Nation*, found that, while women today compose nearly half of the nation’s work force, a “staggering 99 percent of women in America will work for pay sometime during their lives.”⁹ The study also found that nearly 80 percent of the respondents either “love” or “like” their jobs.¹⁰ This mirrors the attitudes of the women in this book who, although they were all underpaid and had few if any opportunities for upward mobility, nonetheless derived great satisfaction from their work. The central concerns of the women interviewed in the Women’s Bureau study include problems such as high levels of stress, lack of occupational mobility, discrimination because of gender and race, child care difficulties, the need for higher wages, and inadequate health, pension, vacation, and sick leave benefits.¹¹ Thus, while the numbers of employed women have increased during the last two decades and while wages for women have risen moderately, many of the concerns expressed by the eight women profiled here are still very much in evidence in the mid-1990s.

Several of the women in *Urban Survival* spoke of their anxiety about losing their jobs. As working-class women whose skills often derived from on-the-job experience or anti-poverty training programs rather than from more traditional academic or professional training, several were precariously holding on to their positions and fearful of losing them. Moreover, many of these women, like millions of others in the United States, work in the human service sector; as support for such services has diminished, many of these jobs

have been eliminated and many more are in jeopardy. As politicians call for fewer government programs, particularly fewer programs to serve the poor and near-poor, women who work in human services, many of whom are barely maintaining a working-class standard of living, are particularly vulnerable to being laid off. These women often have few other economic resources or alternative skills; therefore, the cutbacks may well propel previously economically stable, working-class women into poverty.

At least one of the women, Elinor Thomas, was managing to stretch her husband's modest salary as a postal clerk to provide for themselves and their two children. Because of his desire that she remain at home, she spent significant periods out of the labor market. As we have noted, real income, particularly male income, has dropped significantly in the intervening years and families have needed two incomes just to maintain their standard of living. It is therefore likely that Elinor would now be back at work as a nurse's aide and be happy to have the job.

Of the eight women profiled, only one, Christina Ramos, was a single, never-married mother; two of the women were widows. If the study were done today, in all likelihood more of the women would be divorced or never married. According to the Bureau of the Census, between 1970 and 1993 the fastest growing marital status was divorced persons. The number currently divorced more than tripled from 4.3 million in 1970 to 16.7 million in 1993.¹² During the same period, the number of never-married persons doubled. Similar patterns occurred among whites, blacks and Hispanics. In 1970, 73 percent of white adults were married; in 1993 that percentage had decreased to 64. Among Hispanics, 72 percent were married in 1970 compared to 60 percent in 1993. And among blacks 64 percent were married in 1970 while less than half, 43 percent, were married in 1993.¹³

Because of these trends, children under eighteen are far more likely to be living with only one parent today than when *Urban Survival* was written. In 1970, 12 percent of children lived with one parent; by 1993, that percentage had climbed to 27. The vast majority lived with their mothers (87 percent) while 13 percent lived with their fathers.¹⁴ Clearly, those families that managed with two parents working would have a far more difficult time surviving on a single paycheck, particularly on the income of the mother.

Another issue that has become significantly more problematic is crime and the fear of crime. Several of the women speak of their anxiety about becoming victims of crime, especially in their neighborhoods. Concern about safety was surfacing as an important urban issue during the 1970s, but there is little doubt that crime, particularly in lower-income neighborhoods, and the fear of it has sharply escalated. Crime among young people, drive-by shootings, and drug-connected gun wars that all too often wound and kill innocent bystanders have become almost routine in some neighborhoods. Many women

who once ventured out at night, albeit with caution and concern, find their lives severely restricted by the fear and reality of crime. These restrictions can significantly limit women's private lives, their work options, and, in a variety of ways, their very sense of autonomy and independence.

Yet another aspect of late twentieth-century American life that these eight women touch on is race. While several of them allude to negative feelings about people of color, particularly in the context of personal safety, and some of the minority women speak of discrimination, especially in the workplace, overt expression of intergroup hostility and racism has become far more commonplace and some would say acceptable since *Urban Survival* was written. As I have documented in a recent book, *Battling Bias: The Struggle for Identity and Community on College Campuses*,¹⁵ in recent years the United States has been characterized by increased division by race and class. We are bombarded by reports of increased hostility between racial and ethnic groups and by tragic, violent, high-profile cases such as the unprovoked killing of Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst, New York; the vicious attack upon "the Central Park jogger"; the bitter conflict between blacks and a Jewish sect in Crown Heights, Brooklyn; and, preeminently, the beating of Rodney King, the 1992 acquittal of the police officers, and the rioting in Los Angeles that followed, including the brutal beating of Reginald Denny. These mythic, larger-than-life events inevitably become part of our consciousness, part of the way we view our world, and they contain in concentrated form the suspicion, fear, anger, and hatred that groups in the United States so often feel toward one another.

But violent incidents give us only one perspective of the complexity of racial conflict in American society; to probe the nature of intergroup interaction, one must examine day-to-day life more closely. One of the myths that has developed over the past two decades is that African Americans and other people of color are being given preferential treatment in the United States. In part because of the way Republicans have used race as a wedge issue to mobilize the anger of the white working and middle classes, the idea that blacks are benefiting while whites are suffering is widespread.

In his powerful book, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism*, sociologist Jonathan Rieder quotes an analyst of lower-middle-class rage and fear: "They feel the pressure, like everything is fading away. It's all in danger: the house you always wanted is in danger, the kids are in danger, the neighborhood is in danger. It's all slipping away."¹⁶ The residents of Canarsie whom Rieder interviewed spoke again and again, often with brutal and undisguised venom, of how they were losing ground and how the poor and particularly blacks were benefiting from the social policies of the 1970s. One city worker "explodes": "These welfare people get as much as I do and I work my ass off and come home dead tired. They get up late and

they can shack up all day long and watch the tube. With their welfare and food stamps, they come out better than me. . . . So why should I work? I go shopping with my wife and I see them with their forty dollars of food stamps in the supermarket, living and eating better than me. . . . Let them tighten their belts like we have to." Another man exclaims, "Who's feeling sorry for me? The colored have gotten enough. Let them do for themselves like we do."¹⁷

In fact, scapegoating the poorest and least powerful among us has become national policy. Diverting blame for the growing inequality within U.S. society and the deterioration of the quality of life for the majority of Americans from those in power to the least powerful among us has become a technique perfected by many conservatives, implicitly or explicitly sanctioned by many Democrats, and encouraged or tacitly sanctioned by large segments of the media.

In his book, *Race and Class in Texas Politics*, Chandler Davidson gives a vivid example of this diversion of blame from elected officials to poor people of color. Davidson describes a conversation between two working-class men standing waist-deep in the swimming pool of a Houston, Texas, apartment building:

Bob stared at his beer can for a moment, and then savagely, to no one in particular, he said, "That son-of-a bitch Reagan put me out of a job. That's who did it."

Al stiffened. "Wa-a-a-it a minute," he said. "You're talking about my man, now. You're talking about my man."

"I don't care if he's your man. That son-of-a-bitch is the reason I'm standing in this goddam pool tonight, drunk on my ass. . . ."

"Just a minute," he said. "You don't talk about the president like that."

"To hell with the president!" . . .

"Listen, Bob," Al said, suddenly calm. "You've got it wrong. You've got it all wrong. You want me to tell you who's taken your job away? You really want to know?"

Bob glared at him.

"It's the goddam niggers, who'll work for lower wages. And it's these goddam wetbacks. That's who's taken your job. You can't blame that on Reagan."

Bob was silent for what seemed like a long time, staring straight at Al. "Now you're talking sense," he said, finally. "Now you're talking something that I can relate to. You've put your finger on something now."¹⁸

This pitting of the middle class and the working class against the poor, whites against people of color, native-born Americans against immigrants,

straight against gay, and virtually everyone against poor single mothers has become the overriding theme of the final decade of the twentieth century.

Life for these women was not easy when they were interviewed in the mid-1970s; today I suspect it would be considerably more difficult. But their strength and resilience, as well as their commitment to those they love, remain inspiring examples of the fortitude and courage of so many women across the country.

The final paragraph of the original edition calls for creating “a more humane environment—one that will provide satisfying, secure jobs; adequate human services; safe neighborhoods in which residents can share a sense of community; and a more equitable distribution of wealth and power. . . .” In many respects we are even further from these goals than when these women spoke out. Perhaps we can learn from their words and from the complexity and texture of their lives the necessity of resisting those who attempt to divide us and recognize that we must find ways of working together if we are to bring about a truly just and caring society. If their experiences move us closer to that goal, they will have left us a valuable and lasting legacy.

Notes

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18. Chandler Davidson, *Race and Class in Texas Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 222–23.

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Introduction

A muffled explosion at about 4:30 in the afternoon was the first warning anyone had that March 25, 1911, would be different from any other Saturday in industrial history. Smoke billowed from the eighth floor of the Asch Building on Greene Street and Washington Place, the middle floor of the three which housed the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. One passerby saw what he took to be "a bale of dark dress goods" being thrown out of a window. Another who saw it thought the factory owner was trying to save his cloth from the fire. But then the screams began. It had not been a bundle of cloth, but a human being, leaping from the window. Then came another, and then another.¹

The Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire of 1911 was an unforgettable tragedy in the history of the American working class and particularly in the history of American working-class women. One hundred and forty-six workers, most of them girls and women, suffocated, were burned, or jumped to their death that day. The doors to the factory had been locked to "keep the women in and the organizers out"; there was no sprinkler system; no fire drills had been held; and the doors opened inward rather than out.²

Nearly sixty-five years later Pauline Newman, a long-time organizer and education director of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, described the working conditions in the garment industry at the turn of the century that led to the "Uprising of the 20,000" (the historic strike in 1909–1910 of New York shirtwaist workers), and ultimately to the tragic fire:

I went to work for the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in 1901. The corner of a shop would resemble a kindergarten because we were young, eight, nine, ten years old. It was a world of greed; the human being didn't mean anything...

Most of the women rarely took more than \$6.00 a week home, most less. The early sweatshops were usually so dark that gas jets burned day and night. There was no insulation in the winter... Of course in the summer you suffocated with practically no ventilation...

The condition was no better and no worse than the tenements where we lived...

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We wore cheap clothes, lived in cheap tenements, ate cheap food. There was nothing to look forward to, nothing to expect the next day to be better.

Someone once asked me: "How did you survive?" And I told him, what alternative did we have? You stayed and you survived, that's all.³

As Newman stated, "... that world . . . has no resemblance to the world we live in today,"⁴ but working-class women in New York City are still struggling three-quarters of a century later to build satisfying lives for themselves and their families, and many are indeed still struggling to survive. The forms of the city's inhumanity have changed; child labor is no longer a fact of life, and working and living conditions have improved dramatically. But working-class women today are often faced with other forms of inhumanity: routinized, insecure jobs that pay salaries barely sufficient to feed and clothe a family; frequent periods of unemployment, particularly for members of minority groups; deteriorating neighborhoods in which physical safety is a primary concern; and inadequate, often insensitive, human-service institutions. Yet they, like the shirtwaist workers of the early 1900s, must stay and survive.

Working-class women generally do not have the opportunity to describe their lives, their daily reality, their hopes, and their fears without an intermediary, an interpreter who is invariably from a very different social class. What I have tried to do in this book is to give eight working-class women an opportunity to communicate with us directly about the problems of survival in the city today.

According to Andrew Levison, three-fifths or sixty percent of the population of the United States are members of the working class.⁵ The myth of the United States as a middle-class mecca of suburban homes, station wagons, and summer vacations has been gradually exposed during the past decade.⁶ If we define *working class* as that "giant mass of workers who are relatively homogeneous as to lack of developed skill, low pay, and interchangeability of person and function"⁷ and add the characteristic of simplified, routinized work that does not require independent judgment, it appears that many of the workers who have been labeled "middle class" (particularly clerical workers, service workers, and sales workers) are more appropriately included in the working class. Even if we use a more traditional definition of working class (i.e., "those engaged in the production and distribution of material goods and services who do not own or control the object of their labor or its uses"⁸) we arrive at the same conclusion—that craftsmen, clerical

workers, operatives, sales workers, service workers, and nonfarm laborers are, as Harry Braverman claims, “unmistakably” part of the working-class population.⁹

If, indeed, sixty percent of all Americans can be described as “working class,” then the lives and concerns of working-class women have been singularly neglected in the recent outpouring of books on women. There are, of course, significant exceptions to this malignant neglect¹⁰ but, for the most part, the lives and concerns of the middle class, the upper-middle class, and of superstars—women who because of birth, marriage, or achievement are deemed worthy of our special attention—have dominated the literary scene.

Moreover, while some recent writing about working-class women has been sensitive and has attempted to portray their lives from their perspective, many earlier works about the lives of the working class in our society have been, I believe, deeply flawed. These “studies” which have invariably been written by members of the upper-middle class are frequently tainted by a pervasive class bias that masquerades as scholarship. Patterns that vary from middle-class norms are subtly, and often not-so-subtly, scorned. Researchers investigating marital relationships often describe working-class couples as “slow to see conflict” or as having a “trained incapacity to share,” or they depict “less educated husbands” as having “deficient skills of communication”; other researchers more concerned with social and political issues frequently portray members of the working class as conservative, racist “hard-hats” who are attempting to turn back liberal reforms designed to improve the lot of the poor. These portrayals are often drawn from the vantage point of the liberal academician or writer, safely ensconced in a nearly all-white suburb, whose children attend excellent, often model, schools.

Although I am surely subject to all of the class biases just described, I have attempted in this book to minimize class barriers and my own misperceptions by using the technique of oral history. Largely in their own words rather than through those of an intermediary we are given a glimpse of the lives of selected working-class women—women who have sufficient income to provide a basic level of food, clothing, and housing for themselves and their families; women who have sufficient education to be able to cope with our complex society, but not enough to establish themselves as part of the middle class; and women who continue to live in urban areas largely deserted by the middle class, often surrounded by the very poor and the very rich. I have tried to examine with these women the texture, the fabric of their lives, how