



“Summary of article by Claudia Goldin: The Political Economy of Gender *and* Economic Progress and Gender Equality” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 5: The Political Economy of Inequality. Island Press: Washington DC, 2000. pp. 266-270

**Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being**

## **“Summary of article by Claudia Goldin: The Political Economy of Gender *and* Economic Progress and Gender Equality”**

Although occupational segregation and the wage gap between men and women have been decreasing, they persist, and progress remains vulnerable to shifts in cultural, political and economic realities. Historically, workplace discrimination and a gendered division of labor were rationalized by social norms defining activities appropriate for men or women. The rebirth of the women’s movement in the 1960s exposed these norms to critical examination and produced an ideology of equality capable of giving voice to women’s aspirations and frustrations. Ironically, some of the most stubbornly persistent obstacles to workplace equality were regulations put in place to protect women from oppressive working conditions.

The first of the two chapters summarized here examines the historical relationship between economic policy and the position of women in the workplace. The second chapter sums up the record of economic progress as it influences the economic position of women.

### **HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS OF PUBLIC POLICY**

Politics and public policy play an important part in defining women’s status in the workplace. Even before women were a significant part of the paid labor force, working women received attention from policy-makers. However, women themselves only became a major political force in shaping the rules of the workplace long after they gained the vote. Alexander Hamilton and other 18th century economic leaders encouraged women to take jobs in manufacturing, hoping to tap this underutilized labor force in order to build the industrial strength of the nation.

By the late 19th century policies regarding women and work tended to protect women against exploitation. Two groups of working women received particular attention. Young women from small towns and rural areas moved to the cities to work, living on their own without parental guidance or support. Many other young women did live with their parents, turning over their earnings to the family, gaining little from their own labor, and suffering a loss of leisure and schooling. In either case the vulnerability of their youth and their exposure to exploitation drew efforts by reformers to regulate their working conditions.

### **WORKING HOURS**

Reform efforts were complicated by motivations aligned with the interests of men rather than women. Some men felt threatened by competition from women, particularly during times of

high unemployment, and supported regulation to restrict where and when women could work. In other cases men wanted reforms of their own working conditions, particularly reduced working hours, but were thwarted by the courts. They hoped that instituting protective legislation for women and children, to which the courts were more sympathetic, would force employers to apply the same reduced hours over the whole workforce. Research indicates little or no reduction in women's employment from restrictions on working hours, and then mainly in industries where women were rarely employed. In manufacturing and sales, the effect may even have been positive, possibly because work became "more pleasant, convenient and compatible with household duties." [197]

## **PROTECTION VS EQUALITY**

After World War I the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor developed policies concerning women's work, and began to draw attention to the needs of women with families. The Women's Bureau promoted the legitimacy of women workers based on their need to support families, and defended them against charges that they took jobs from men. The bureau also advocated protective legislation regulating maximum hours, night work, minimum wages and workplace safety. But by the 1920s, the goals of protection and equality for women began to diverge. "A woman's right to a job, equality in pay, and occupational opportunity were all antithetical to her being singled out for protection." [189] However, protective legislation was firmly entrenched. Until the 1960s, "[l]iberals continued to define the female labor force ... as young, poor, transient, and unorganizable women workers who needed protection more than they needed equality." [199] Support for protective legislation delayed the fight against discrimination by defining women as marginal workers and opposing real equality.

Women's role within the family, particularly with respect to the care of children, also seemed to justify differences in the workplace for women and men. Until the middle of the 20th century women who sought higher education usually forfeited marriage and women who did marry were barred from many firms. Powerful social forces discouraged deviance from accepted gender roles and gendered occupations. But discontent among women became more evident, particularly as larger numbers of women gained a college education only to confront limited opportunities for employment and advancement.

## **MOVEMENT FOR EQUALITY**

By the 1960s the struggle for equality was at the forefront of a renewed feminist movement and a number of remedies for inequality emerged - affirmative action, comparable worth, civil rights and equal employment opportunity legislation. In 1963 the report of the President's Commission on the Status of Women presented clear evidence of discrimination against women in public and private sector employment. It found that restrictions on hours of work hindered women in professional and managerial careers; and laws prohibiting night work affected others. Also in 1963 the Equal Pay Act required equal pay for equal work. A year later Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibited "discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in hiring, promotion, and other conditions of employment." [201]

Because of the extent of occupational segregation by sex, the Equal Pay Act was not sufficient to address wage inequalities. Men and women rarely performed exactly the same work. Women began to demand equal pay for jobs of comparable worth as measured by characteristics of jobs such as the level of skill required or responsibility exercised. Although the courts have not been sympathetic to the extension of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act to cover comparable worth, several local and state governments have enacted comparable worth provisions for their own employees. The increased power of women in the labor market and increased presence of unions in the public sector played an important role.

## **ECONOMIC PROGRESS AND GENDER EQUALITY**

Although many observers believe that economic progress has not resulted in fully equal treatment for women and that the progress that has been made is vulnerable to reversals, there is reason for optimism. The ratio of women's earnings to men's has been narrowing since 1981 after remaining stable from 1950 to 1980. Occupational segregation is also diminishing.

However, there is concern that women are losing ground in the home. Women still bear the primary responsibility for the care of home and children. The time women spend in unpaid work in the home has not dropped enough to offset the increase in hours of paid work. Increasing divorce and paternal default on child support combined with lower earnings for women mean that women are 1.5 times as likely as men to be in poverty.

Economic progress is often ambiguous. When white collar employment expanded, women's labor force participation rose. "Office work, teaching, and other white-collar employment offered women better working conditions, shorter hours, and higher pay than manual labor." [214] But formal barriers to women's employment, such as prohibitions against working after marriage arose in office work rather than in manufacturing. Progress may be hidden under seemingly regressive trends. For example, when women who had left the workforce to marry and have children returned to work in the 1950s and 1960s after their children were grown, their lack of skills and experience reduced the attainment of women in the aggregate. However they contributed to the rise in women's labor force participation.

Although reversals of fortune are unpredictable, signals for the future can be read in the situation of young women today. "The young initially receive the fruits of economic progress, through, for example, advances in education, training, revised expectations, and greater control over fertility." [214] The wage gap between men and women is smaller among younger cohorts. Women are also closing gaps in college graduation and post graduate education, choice of major and entrance into professions. Women with children are increasing their rates of labor force participation, continuity of employment and full-time employment. And younger women are developing more realistic assessments of the skills needed for employment. All these trends imply greater equality between men and women in the future.