Working Women: Separate and Not Equal--A Review Article

Laurel A Grotzinger, Western Michigan University

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Each of the titles under review deals with women, their emergence as workers in the business/professional marketplace, and the circumstances surrounding those factors, with special reference to the period ending the nineteenth century and the first two to three decades of the twentieth. While reviewing the titles, it was impossible not to notice the number of additional current articles and books that make reference to the question of women's advancement in the working world as well as society as a whole. Assorted commentaries on the fearsome thought of Hillary Clinton's potential power as a professional woman who would also be the wife of the president are augmented by other, more grimly realistic references to the actual success factor that awaits such women. Among them was a recent commentary in Newsweek titled "Giving Women the Business: Does the M. in M.B.A. Stand for Men Only?" [1]. As the article noted, "Few women have shattered the glass ceiling . . . [and] because

1. Special acknowledgment is given to Ernst Breisach, professor, Department of History, Western Michigan University, who provided a summary translation and commentary on Leidenschaft und Bildung by Helga Lüdtke.

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0024-2519/93/6303-0004$01.00
they generally don't earn as much as men and are less likely to end up in a corner office, lots of women say the sacrifice [to earn an M.B.A.] just isn't worth it" [1, p. 98].

This is not to suggest that the titles reviewed here, either singly or in tandem, are intended to be feminist histories or analyses, as for example, might characterize Christina Baum's recent study, *Feminist Thought in American Librarianship* [2]. Baum examines the different aspects of feminism in the field of librarianship through a detailed analysis of the literature of the field and uses standard methods (citation analysis, content analysis) to identify the present state of "library" feminism. She concludes [2, p. 126] by quoting B. A. Ivy's 1987 challenge: "Our future . . . lies now with getting rid of the anger and hostility generated from the frustrations [and] slowness of change that we perceived, and beginning to find openings within the walls and barriers" [3, p. 44]. In a very different type of discussion of women's history, Rosalind Rosenberg, in her latest book, *Divided Lives: American Women in the Twentieth Century* [4], opens with an even stronger statement—that is, despite "extraordinary strides" made by women since the turn of the century, "they remain lesser members of the family, the economy, and the polity" [4, p. ix]. Her study articulately reviews ninety years of women's evolving roles and expectations and the impact these factors have had on the social structure. None of the books described in the following paragraphs has attempted that same longitudinal approach, but each contributes a valuable but smaller piece to the total historical perspective. In addition, the breadth, scholarship, and essential nature of the works deviate significantly from one another although there are many common themes and conclusions.

Sharon Strom's suberbly documented volume adds to the growing number of valuable research studies published by the University of Illinois Press that focus sharply on women in American history, especially during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Each of the titles represents the controversy that was engendered and the discrimination faced by the working woman as she moved outside of her traditional role as nurturer and housewife. Strom's keen analysis not only adds to the historical universe that the Illinois series is addressing but also provides a broad philosophical base for those readers who may not be aware of the issues involved in gender and work at the turn of the century.

The thesis that undergirds the structure of *Beyond the Typewriter* proposes that the impact of Frederick Taylor's theory of scientific management was as revolutionary in the office setting as it was on the factory

3. For notable studies already published in this series, see [5–9].
floor. In turn, as women flooded the offices to help achieve the accountability and efficiency that was the outcome of the application of the theory, certain unanticipated results occurred. Strom identifies two basic questions: Was the woman office clerk "taking advantage of new opportunities for the working woman or . . . [was she] just another version of exploited female labor? The premise of this book is that the answers to both questions are 'yes'; a pivotal ambiguity structured the self-identity of women who entered office work in the three decades before the Great Depression" (Strom, p. 2).

The book is, however, far more complex, thoughtful, and informative than such a brief quotation can suggest. Its two major sections, "Part 1: Economic and Cultural Origins of the New Office: Gendered Hierarchies of Management" and "Part 2: The Office and the World Beyond: Office Workers and Office Culture," are made up of copiously footnoted chapters that articulate a variety of subtheses. The volume would, however, benefit from a full bibliography since there are multiple sources of considerable value to the reader. For example, other researchers might well want to know that Strom considered her volume to be built on four earlier studies.4 One of them, Margery Davies's Women's Place Is at the Typewriter, attempted a decade ago to examine the history of women's movement (1870–1930) into the business office, the resulting feminization of the clerical labor force, and seemingly inevitable discrimination in salary and/or advancement. Her analysis also included a relatively limited discussion of scientific management and interrelated it to the emerging technology—at that time, the typewriter. The strength of Strom's work vis-à-vis, for example, that of Davies is her extensive research and comprehensive interpretation as opposed to the somewhat simplistic, inadequately documented, and theoretically questionable earlier study. From the opening history of the use of scientific management principles within the office setting through the distinctions that quickly arose between the gendered office occupations to the resulting feminization of certain parts of office work, Strom illustrates the fact that "segmentation—or the division of workers into different categories of class and status—was as acute in office work and among women workers as it was in the workplace at large" (p. 6). Although the office is a long professional mile from the laboratory, readers will hear echoes of Margaret W. Rossiter's seminal 1982 study Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940 [14], while assimilating Strom's discussion. Rossiter, of course, also addresses the additional factor of

4. Strom, in her introduction, states, "Important studies of white-collar work, first by C. Wright Mills, and then by Margery Davies, Harry Braverman, and Robert Howard, have concluded that scientific management techniques were applied as extensively to the office as to the factory floor" (p. 5). Her footnote cites [10–13].
the invisible woman scientist who existed but was never openly admitted to the masculine world. However, her discussion of the concept of gender segmentation is one identified in Strom as well as in the Rury volume. Hildenbrand, in a 1983 review of Rossiter [15], summarized the situation: “Rossiter identifies two kinds [of segmentation]: the hierarchic, which limits women to lower levels within occupations, and the territorial, which excludes or sharply reduces the entry of women into certain specialties within an occupation” [15, p. 479]. Strom tellingly comments, “What many career-minded women had really failed to perceive was that the new vistas of scientific management, of corporate organization, of high finance, were adventures not so much closed to undedicated women as they were adventures reserved for men” (Strom, p. 357). Thus territory and hierarchy emerged early in the office environment. However, it is also important to point out that Strom also emphasizes the fact that not all women were equal among women: “Labor segmentation in the office reflected important differences of class, marital status, and age as well as of gender” (p. 8). This important point is further articulated in Rury's study discussed later.

After addressing the overall premise of “gendered hierarchies” in the five chapters that constitute the bulk (part 1) of the work, Strom concludes the volume (part 2) with chapters that describe the result of educational preparation on women's advancement, the additional difficulties imposed by age, and, finally, the office work culture of “flappers and feminists” that had developed by the 1920s. Such a summary, however, still does not adequately represent the many related topics that are intermingled with and often inextricable from the overarching theme of the origins of the woman office employee—whether clerk, secretary, accountant, stenographer, personnel manager, or so on. Among them are bittersweet analyses of the “sexual purity” retained in fields such as engineering and business administration, the tendency of women to gravitate to positions that involved the “human” factor, the insidious impact of the “marriage bar” on all women in all work-related areas, the movement of women with working-class backgrounds from the factory floor to the commercial (and, at least at first, more desirable) world of the office—to note a few examples. Also interspersed are anecdotal sketches of some of the women of the period who illustrate the success (or failure) of the changing office milieu. The book is not a compendium of tables, but those included clearly support the associated commentary. For example, in the chapter “Gender and the Masculine Business Professions,” table 4 (p. 66) contrasts the numbers and percentages of females in selected professions between 1900 and 1930—a table that also sharply emphasizes the women's professions versus the men's professions; for example, in 1930, 91 percent of the librarians but only 2
percent of the lawyers were women. A selected number of black-and-white photographs illustrating women in the workplace during the first three decades of the century are incorporated between parts 1 and 2 following page 270. As noted above, a comprehensive bibliography is not included; each chapter contains its own detailed references—both citations and commentary.

As suggested, Strom's research is a remarkable tour de force of the feminization of the office—at least when one counts the clerical staff and certain positions (for example, employment management) that were considered to have feminine characteristics. For those familiar with the growing literature relating to women in the workplace, the rationale for how and why this occurred is not surprising. Regardless of the level of the occupation, once gender became involved, certain responses occurred. Real and artificial barriers developed, and, as women sought new working opportunities, labor segmentation became a solution in order to assure domination by the white male. Unfortunately, Strom does not conclude that the future may be different. “Women in office work, whatever their class or race, face common problems . . . Unionism and feminism offer strategies for solving the problems of women clerical workers, but woman managers and women clerks, despite their common workplace problems, may find themselves increasingly at odds over the implementation of these strategies” (pp. 406–7). As suggested in the opening paragraphs, studies, such as the one by Rosenberg noted earlier, of the contemporary situation readily confirm her comment and the continuing existence of “glass ceilings” and, even more unfortunate, the “feminization” of poverty as well as selected professions.

*Beyond the Typewriter* is a comprehensive social history that weaves together many disparate factors as women came into and eventually numerically dominated clerical positions in American offices. One thread that is part of the whole is found in chapter 6, titled “High School, Office Work, and Female Ambition: Race, Class, and the Limits of Personal Choice.” This particular thread is the entire focus of the study by John L. Rury, *Education and Women’s Work*. Rury’s publication, as is true of Strom’s, is one of a series of volumes directed to missing segments in our historical heritage about working women.5

*Education and Women’s Work* is the result of a massive effort to document, especially with numerical data, the educational experiences of American women for six decades, 1870–1930, and to relate those experiences to women’s roles in our society. The result is a compendium of tables and narrative that provide extensive support for the major prem-

5. The SUNY Series on Women and Work, another university press initiative, includes, among others, [16] and [17].
ise that, indeed, there is a clear and direct relationship, during the period under consideration, between women's education at the secondary level and their increasing participation in work outside of the home. Certainly, the premise is not unexpected, but few researchers have provided such extensive documentation to prove the point. This is, in contrast to the largely narrative, documentary style of Sharon Strom, a data-filled volume including thirty-nine tables and five figures ranging from simple distributions to complex regression analyses. The origins of the study as a dissertation still tend to dominate the style. Rury precisely states what he is going to do, provides extensive data, and then summarizes, at various stages in the text, what he has demonstrated through his tables and explanatory narrative. Thus he states:

Women's education and work were indeed related in the years between 1870 and 1930, but their relationship shifted profoundly as both women's work and the nation's educational institutions changed. The later nineteenth century was a period of ferment about the idea of women's education but also a time when women attended high schools to receive an education generally equivalent to that given young men. When middle-class educated women entered the labor force in large numbers, however, the nature of women's education changed. . . . By 1930 the high school remained a largely middle-class institution, but one that responded remarkably well to the vocational interests of its students. Because of this, and because of the efforts of educators to use schools to reinforce existing sex roles, American secondary schools became guardians of the general sexual division of labor in society. [P. 10]

This is an accurate summary of the volume as a whole, which, in the pages that follow it, supplies the extensive documentation that validates his statement. Also, although the focus is on the changing nature of the educational experience, Rury's analysis clearly notes that it was the white, middle-class females who most often were able to gain employment in new areas, specifically clerical areas, although there was significant movement to the "professional" (and increasingly feminized) fields of teaching, social work, and nursing.

The organization of the text falls into seven parts, an introduction, five topical chapters, and the conclusion. Each of the chapters reflects a particular facet of the main thesis as to the relationship between education and role. The first chapter describes the "feminization" of the schools between 1870 and 1900 when ever-growing numbers of females were permitted to obtain a secondary education and attend college. By the conclusion of the chapter, the numerical domination of girls (as well as their competitive scholarship) in the public school system and their encroaching involvement in colleges and universities is unquestionably demonstrated. Once these facts are established, the narrative turns to some key questions concerning "who went to school and why." The conclusion supports other studies of that period—at least if the young
woman were from a middle-class family—in that, for the most part, the women's intention was not to prepare for a specific occupation. As Rury concludes his second chapter, the remainder of the volume's thesis is set: "It would take a dramatic set of changes in women's work, and a correspondingly rapid change in the curricular orientation of high schools, to bring these disparate aspects of women's lives together" (p. 89).

The next two chapters introduce the key factors that provide a portion of the rationale for Beyond the Typewriter. In "Women at Work" and "Vocationalism Ascendant," Rury details the dramatic schism that occurred along with women's working opportunities—that is, clerical and professional positions brought with them gender, ethnic, and class-related divisions of labor. Although the concept of scientific management is not a part of his discussion, Rury demonstrates that the high school curriculum was purposefully adapted to prepare females for a selective and sexual division of labor in contrast to the decades prior to 1900 when boys and girls were given the same course of studies. Specifically, "vocationalism was accompanied by a growing sexual differentiation within the high school curriculum that matched the division of labor in society at large" (p. 173). It should be noted, however, that the final chapter does point out that there were exceptions to the concept of vocationalism as a dominant factor in the work force. After a painstaking (but admittedly limited) analysis of females, ethnic groups, and different cities, Rury concluded that geographical, specifically "intercity differences in social and economic development were decisively linked to the growth of secondary education for women" (p. 209). This factor, of course, relates to his study's subtitle in which he notes that his data are focused on "urban" areas, and, as his analysis showed, the northeast was uniquely supportive of the premise.

As in the case of Beyond the Typewriter, a selective summary of a work can be deceptive, an instance of missing the forest for a view of a single tree. In this case, however, the conclusions of the two researchers often complement each other. Strom, in her chapter on high school and office work, noted that educators who advocated a separate curriculum—not only by gender but also class and race—perpetrated even greater job and salary discrimination. As a result, "immigrant and black children [were directed] into home economics and manual training programs; . . . working-class students (likely to be English-speaking, white, and native-born) could be given a chance to improve themselves by taking commercial courses" (Strom, p. 278); and "women should be steered toward two-year courses in stenography and typing while men should complete four-year courses in general business" (Strom, p. 281). As Rury also concluded, "once large numbers of young women began working, how-
ever, voices were raised in favor of specialized training in domestic science and other particularly "female" studies, so that future American families would not be jeopardized by the spectre of working women" (Rury, p. 212). Moreover, Rury continues—in phrases not unlike Strom's—"The growth of women's education has also aggravated the existing social division of labor, highlighting the distinctions between men's and women's work and providing additional opportunities for a select strata of women—while limiting them for others" (p. 216). Inevitably, both authors reaffirm the fact that, across the working women's class, discrimination for a variety of reasons reduced (and even negated) opportunities for specific professional positions, established differential and punitive salary distinctions, relegated women with certain ethnic and working-class backgrounds to ghetto-type jobs (for example, domestic services), and/or restricted all working opportunities for women to those positions that were characterized by routine, nonscholarly, and socially insignificant duties.

In turning to the third volume under review, a potential complication emerges. The themes found in Beyond the Typewriter and Education and Women's Work serve to amplify and explicate the larger issues of women in American society. They complement each other as well as extend one's understanding of theses related to gender, division of labor, and culture. Ideally, the last volume would provide a more intensive look at a profession, librarianship, that reflects the causes and effects delineated in Strom's and Rury's analyses. Unfortunately, while that might be partially true, the final volume is not about a distinctively female profession as it developed in the United States but is, instead, about female library workers in a country that has been influenced and shaped by differing economic, social, and cultural events. On the other hand, Helga Lüdtke's work on the history of women workers in libraries in Germany does provide an introductory description of the opportunities and limitations that faced women as they began the practice of librarianship at the turn of the century. Library history in any form, but especially as it relates to women, is limited, and this volume constitutes the first effort to document that experience in Germany.

The editor's approach is similar to the volume compiled by Kathleen Weibel and Kathleen M. Heim, The Role of Women in Librarianship, 1876—1976 [18], in that the German work is also a collection of papers, recollections, and biographical sketches. Even more fortunate, some of the patterns related to the role of women in libraries in America appear to be found within Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, it would be a mistake to assume that Germany's history is similar to all international patterns with respect to working women or, as seen in this case, librarians. When this study is compared
to the work done by Mary Niles Maack [19] on the feminization of French libraries, there are important differences that may apply to other countries as well. France was apparently slower to accept women (in any role) in libraries until after World War I—the second decade of the twentieth century—whereas women became involved in libraries in both Germany and the United States in the later half of the nineteenth century. Of course, when women did become part of the library work force in France, restrictive assignments and responsibilities based on gender, education, and perceived capabilities occurred. However, Maack also argues persuasively that French librarians did not continue to follow the American (or German) pattern and that women attained and maintain positions equivalent to men. In addition, "The combination of economic, social, and cultural factors that impelled women to enter the library field after World War I also proved conducive to a series of reforms that resulted in a more positive image of librarianship as a profession" [19, p. 444]. This conclusion is not one that can be drawn from the Lüdtke material and does not represent the view held by many who are knowledgeable about the feminization of American libraries. Yet, Lüdtke's history does suggest that there were similarities between our two countries, Germany and the United States. Can one accurately assume the existence of certain social, cultural, and educational patterns in both the United States and Germany that explain the similarities in, at least, part of their mutual library development? This question cannot be answered well here and will only be resolved when more studies analyzing women's role in the library history of other countries are available—as well as a more comprehensive German study.

Leidenschaft und Bildung: Zur Geschichte der Frauenarbeit in Bibliotheken (Passion and education: history of working women in libraries) is divided into four sections with the first two emphasizing chronological development, specifically 1895–1920 and 1921–45. A third section contains recollections of women librarians, and the last two articles are written by Americans, Dee Garrison and Suzanne Hildenbrand, whose respective (and differing) perceptions on the feminization of librarianship have been well-articulated in our own publications.⁸

The analytical sections of the work attempt to provide a systematic overview of the role of women in German libraries—especially public libraries—and, in so doing, address selected issues. As depicted in these narratives, the German woman librarian (as seen by her contemporaries) appears to be patterned on the nurturing, "mothering" model that is often suggested as a basis for women's work in early public libraries in the United States. The prevailing perception is that of the "public

6. See [20, 21].
housewife” who cares for the library and its constituencies as the homemaker cares for her family. Thus, the librarian’s characteristics are similar to those of the matriarch who is dedicated, diligent, sensitive, and adaptable. This was especially true when the librarian served in a Volksbücherei (a public library that served the blue-collar or less well-educated patron).

This role was acceptable, if not inevitably welcomed, by women in Germany due to reasons suggested by the research of, for example, Garrison [22] in her analysis of the “apostles of culture” who brought about the feminization of American libraries. As Garrison phrased it, “Librarianship was quickly adjusted to fit the narrowly circumscribed sphere of women’s activities, for it appeared similar to the work of the home, functioned as cultural activity, required no great skill or physical strength, and brought little contact with the rougher portions of society” [22, p. 174]. Until well into the twentieth century, women were not admitted to German (or many American) universities; the vast majority of the administrative positions were held by men who had the acceptable prerequisites in education and scholarly experience. Women, however, could be recruited for the clerical, routine library activities that required less education. Moreover, German women sought out and found (as Rury noted about American women) the opportunities even though many were well-educated, middle- and upper-class women. They were seeking those “careers” that permitted them both freedom and access to an acceptable world other than the home. And, since they did not hold appropriate educational credentials, the women assumed subprofessional positions with correspondingly lower remuneration. Lüdtke’s compilation of articles eventually concludes the evolution of women’s work in libraries in Germany (up to 1945) without identifying many definitive changes in status and professional recognition—that is, a few women advanced in ranks, but the overall working environment for women did not dramatically improve.

For the historian, there is information about library experiences during the Nazi regime and attempts to develop special support organizations for women librarians—the first dating back to 1907. As noted earlier, the third section contains six biographical essays or recollections, and, finally, possibly as an incentive, there are the two papers by American feminist authors that were noted earlier. As a first attempt to address the developing role of female library workers in Germany, this volume, of course, has its limitations. Lütke’s own commentary is helpful, but the degree to which the selected articles are representative is not known. Since few Americans have the language skills to understand the articles, a careful translation would be immensely useful. Individual chapters have valuable footnotes and a number of tables provide back-
ground data. Black-and-white photographs illustrate library settings and women librarians, and there is an annotated bibliography that cites over one hundred articles and books published in Germany. Users would undoubtedly find an index helpful for locating specific facts and ideas, but none is provided.

Each of the three titles reviewed here makes a contribution to our understanding of women's history. None is especially easy reading, though each for a different reason. Strom is rigorously comprehensive, Rury is heavily data-oriented, and Lüdtke is in another language and a format—individually crafted articles—that does not lend itself to a smooth, logical development of the topic. Each deals with a subject(s) not researched adequately or effectively in the past. Each is hampered, to a degree, by the nature of its goal and the magnitude of the details that are or should be presented in support of its purpose(s) and in answer to the questions that emerge as the facts are revealed; in some ways Strom and Rury are miniature reference sources. Each, with Lüdtke as an exception, has a degree of repetitiveness that causes some reader frustration. As stated at the beginning, no one of the volumes is a feminist history per se, but the pervasive impact of feminism is unquestionable and is both implicit and explicit in each text. Ultimately, each study as well as the totality brings a clearer understanding of a period that produced unique social change as the working woman searched for her professional fulfillment—and failed to achieve equality.7

REFERENCES

6. Readers who wish additional references to sources that would further assist in an understanding of the period from 1900 to 1980 as well as the next sixty years should refer to the superb “Bibliographical Essay” in [4, pp. 257–78]. The essay identifies dozens of studies, chronologically and thematically organized, beginning with an “overview of American women’s history and modern gender problems” (p. 258) and concluding with “American women at the end of the [twentieth] century” (p. 277).
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