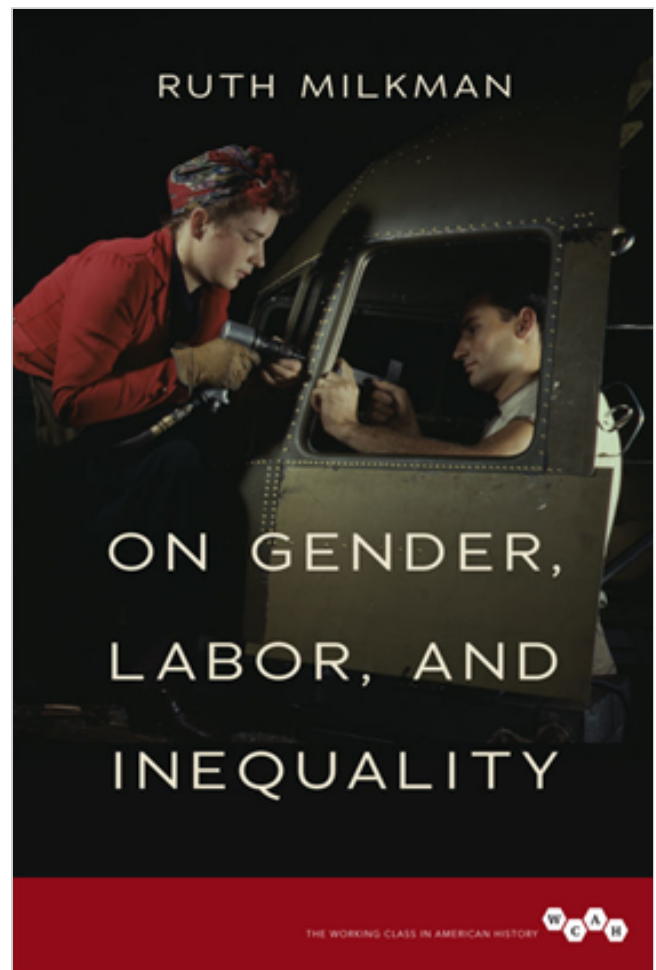


## Why women work: a historical analysis of women in the labor force

*On Gender, Labor, and Inequality*. By Ruth Milkman.  
University of Illinois Press, 2016, 328 pp., \$28.00  
paperback.

Why do women work? Any book attempting to answer this question would inevitably have to be broad in scope, tackling a wide range of issues. One would also expect that a book titled *On Gender, Labor, and Inequality* would offer a comprehensive look at the relationship between women and the labor force, the unequal treatment of female workers, and the variety of labor market outcomes among these workers. For the most part, this collection of essays by sociologist Ruth Milkman will not disappoint the reader. The author presents convincing arguments that often counter traditional economic theories of women in the labor force. This is achieved through historical analysis of systems of power within the business community and labor unions, and the persistence of social norms concerning family roles. However, it is the third promise of the book—the promise to shed light on the variability of outcomes among women—that is less developed than other topics, such as gender, occupational segregation, and the structural influences that determine women’s labor force outcomes. This lack of attention to inequality among women creates an uneven reader experience in what is otherwise a very solid contribution to the discussion of women in the workforce.

The book’s essays span Milkman’s long career. The area in which the book largely succeeds is the historical analysis of the experiences and opportunities of women in specific periods. In the essays presented in the first half of the book, Milkman debunks the theory that women have acted as a reserve labor force, only participating in the labor force



**Patricia Coil**

[coil.patricia@bls.gov](mailto:coil.patricia@bls.gov)

Patricia Coil is an economist in the Office of Employment and Unemployment Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

when there has been an insufficient number of men to take all available jobs. Her analysis of both the formal and informal sectors, including the paid and unpaid labor markets, examines the role occupational segregation by gender played in labor force participation. The analysis suggests that the uneven experiences of men and women in the labor market were due to the change in demand for occupations that disproportionately employed women. To bolster this thesis, Milkman examines women's experiences during the Great Depression, contrasting them with those of men. Essays describing the historical role of women in labor unions, in the automotive industry during World War II, in career choice, in trade unionism, and in the feminization of the workplace also support the argument, while acknowledging the reserve-labor theory. Adopting a sociological perspective, later essays in the collection turn to a contemporary analysis of unionism in the 21st century, focusing on service-industry unions, paid domestic labor, and class disparities in paid family leave policies in California. The final essay, which functions partly as a conclusion, revisits the introductory themes in the context of the Great Recession.

Among the book's essays, those presenting historically focused discussions of the codification of occupations as male or female during World War II present particularly convincing support for Milkman's contention that the segregation of occupations by gender is key to explaining the pattern of female labor force participation. The author specifically notes the incentives of both business management and union leadership to segregate work by gender and then target women's occupations for layoffs at the end of World War II. It was these actions, rather than the supply of male workers, that more fully explain the shift to lower labor force participation rates among women in the first postwar decade.

By focusing her analysis on structural forces within business and labor unions, Milkman leads the reader to engage with the central question of her research: Do women have labor market preferences that are free from structural constraints, or do these constraints lead women to develop preferences different from those of men? For example, is there something innate about women's preferences that lead them to crowd into a particular field such as teaching, or do the barriers of entry to other professions and structural constraints of certain industries lead a disproportionate number of women to select careers in education? Most academic readers will no doubt be aware of the unequal labor market outcomes between genders, but the order of essays presented in the book could help nonacademic readers navigate through the technical arguments explaining this inequality. This layout is supplemented with a thorough analysis of the differences among labor unions (differences due to historical waves of union organizing), the relationship between union members and their leadership, and the role of women within different types of labor organizations. Milkman's meticulous approach of dissecting groups and organizations—as opposed to treating them as unitary actors—adds significantly to our understanding of women's experiences in the labor force. This approach is solidly within the Marxist feminist tradition and could be invaluable for those who wish to analyze the intersection of class and gender in labor market outcomes. Others may find Milkman's perspective too provocative, and will likely remain unconvinced by her arguments.

The book is far from perfect. When Milkman pivots from discussing how historical and social forces have shaped women's work to analyzing women in the labor force over the past 30 years, the strength of her argument slips. By the beginning of the 21st century, social norms had shifted to the point where women were no longer considered a reserve army of labor. Without this theory as a counterpoint, the book as a whole begins to lose its power. In the book's final essays, an attempt to begin a discussion of inequality and class identity never fully materializes in as robust and convincing way as it does in the earlier historical essays. The problem partly lies with Milkman's decision not to update the essays with more recent data. While the book was published in 2016, its data are at least 3 years old, and often decades old. For example, the findings and analyses of Milkman's essay on paid

domestic labor, coauthored with Ellen Reese and Benita Roth, are based largely on 1990 data. This leaves the reader wondering whether the essay's findings are as profound as the authors claim or why Milkman and her editors did not replicate them with 2000 or 2010 data. Even the essay focusing on the aftermath of the Great Recession uses data ending in 2013, 3 years before publication. The book's final essays also mention inequality among women from different economic classes, but then fail to explore this inequality through rigorous data analysis. Despite earlier complaints about the lack of reliable historical data on women, when such information is available, the data analysis is not as convincing as the historical analysis presented in earlier essays.

For the most part, *On Gender, Labor, and Inequality* is a solid collection of essays on women in the workforce. While the book could have benefited from data updates before publication, it remains a convenient compilation of Milkman's body of work. By looking at the historical experiences of women in the labor force with a critical eye, the author questions entrenched economic assumptions and challenges the reader to think about the role of occupational segregation, whether workers choose jobs free from constraints, and whether these constraints inform job choices.