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REDEFINING “WOMEN’S WORK”: THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOR IN THE AUTO INDUSTRY DURING WORLD WAR II

RUTH MILKMAN

INTRODUCTION

Feminists have deliberately idealized the experience of women workers during World War II, challenging the ideology of “woman’s place” which obliterated women’s wartime contribution to industrial production from public memory. The stunning imagery of female strength and versatility captured in photographs of women industrial workers in the 1940s has become a mainstay of contemporary “feminist realism.” Ultimately, our vision of social change encompasses more than securing equal access for women to alienating jobs in capitalist industry: work itself must be fundamentally transformed — for both women and men. But in the meantime, so long as women workers are excluded from basic industry and ghettoized in low-status, poorly paid jobs, the woman war worker will remain a resonant symbol.

A closer look at the actual experience of women industrial workers during the war years, however, suggests that the retrospective feminist construction of their place in history is apocryphal. Women were hired to do “men’s jobs” during the war on a scale unparalleled before or since, but this was in no way the result of a feminist campaign. In basic industries like auto, employers were initially quite resistant to the idea of hiring women for war work. They did so only when the supply of male labor had been completely exhausted because of military conscription on the one hand and the rapid expansion of demand for labor to produce military hardware on the other. It was not a change in management beliefs about women’s capabilities in industry that led to their incorporation into jobs previously considered suitable only for men, but rather the male labor shortage

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WOMEN WORK

WOMEN VOTE



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INTERNATIONAL UNION, UNITED AUTOMOBILE, AIRCRAFT AND AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENT WORKERS OF AMERICA (UAW-CIO)

Courtesy United Automobile Workers.

during the war years which led to the change in management's beliefs.

Once women were drawn upon to meet the need for labor in war-bloated "heavy" industries, moreover, they were not randomly incorporated into "men's jobs" as vacancies occurred. Instead, *new* patterns of occupational segregation by sex were established "for the duration" within sectors of the economy previously monopolized by men. So Rosie the Riveter did a "man's job," but more often than not she worked in a predominantly female department or job classification.¹

The wartime experience of women in industry is a fruitful object of feminist analysis, then, but for reasons opposite to those generally presumed. The economic mobilization led to a shift in the location of the boundaries between "men's" and "women's" work, not the elimination of those boundaries. The persistence of segregation during the war, in the face of a massive influx of women into the labor force and a dramatic upheaval in the previously established sexual division of labor, poses quite starkly the fundamental problem of explaining how and why job segregation by sex is maintained and reproduced over and over again throughout the history of capitalist development.²

The underlying forces that continually reproduce segregation within the supposedly "impersonal" wage labor market remain obscure if the problem is approached at the level of the individual employer or firm. Once women have been introduced into the paid labor force at a lower cost than men, one would expect that the relentless efforts of capital to maximize profits would lead employers to substitute women for men whenever possible, at least until the costs of female and male labor power are equalized. It appears quite irrational for management to differentiate rigidly between women and men workers, as if they were truly noninterchangeable sources of labor power. But the ideology of sex typing and the job segregation it legitimates do serve the *class* interest of capital, despite the countervailing pressures impinging on individual capital.

Collectively, capital benefits from the existence of gender divisions within the working class in that they — like racial and other intraclass cleavages — foster political disunity within what might otherwise be a stronger source of opposition to capital.³ In addition, and crucially, segregation by sex within the wage labor market helps to secure the daily and generational reproduction of the working class through the unpaid household labor of women,

by denying female workers a living wage and maintaining their economic dependence on men and on families. At the same time, the sexual division of labor in the household is exactly what constitutes women as a source of “cheap” and expendable labor to begin with.⁴

Of course, not only collective capital but also male workers benefit from job segregation by sex, at least in the short term. Not only do men receive higher wages than women within the wage labor market, but the concentration of women in poorly paid, insecure jobs ensures that women will perform personal services for men in the household even if they also work for pay. While capital, not the male work force, generally controls the process of job definition and allocation, insofar as men mobilize themselves to maintain the subordination of women within the wage labor market, the interest of collective capital in a gender-segregated labor market is reinforced.⁵

But if male workers pursued their *class* interest, rather than seek to maintain their position as a privileged gender, they would mobilize *against* job segregation by sex. Male workers have a class interest in working-class unity. Job segregation by sex, even as it reinforces male power over women, threatens at the same time to undercut the bargaining power of male labor vis-à-vis capital, precisely because of the “cheapness” of female labor. In short, the class interest and what might be called the gender interest of male workers directly conflict with one another. Historically, the apparent domination of men’s gender interest over their class interest in shaping their relationship to job segregation by sex must be explained, not presumed from the outset as inevitable or “given.” It is crucial for feminists to understand the specific historical conditions under which male workers’ class interests might predominate over their gender interests, if we are to have any hope of successfully eliminating job segregation.

Unions, which historically have been disproportionately controlled by men, have often served to maintain the gender privileges of their male members. But there are also historical instances in which the class interest of male workers instead has prevailed in the policy and practice of unions. For example, fear of female substitution, jeopardizing the labor market position of male workers, may lead male-dominated unions to struggle for equality between women and men in the labor market, in spite of the immediate benefits the male gender enjoys as a result of job segregation.

For the class interest of male workers to prevail over their gender interest in a sustained way, however, an oppositional ideology must be generated which challenges the legitimacy of the elaborate and deeply rooted ideology of gender division. The most thoroughgoing such oppositional ideology, namely, feminism, has had remarkably *little* influence on the American labor movement. But there have been moments in the history of industrial unionism when an ideological commitment to nondiscrimination and class unity has galvanized male workers and their organizations to struggle against rather than for job segregation.

Failing this, the interest of collective capital is reinforced by the gender interest of male workers in job segregation by sex and its rationalizing ideology of occupational sex typing. Both these interests are served by the maintenance of the family as an institution of social reproduction based on unpaid female labor. Women's participation in wage labor on equal terms with men would ultimately undermine the unequal sexual division of labor in the household. Access to an individual wage, even on terms unequal to men, erodes the structure of women's economic dependence on men and on families. This is precisely why, rather than disappearing as women's labor force participation increases, occupational sex typing persists and indeed becomes ever more important: it constructs women's "primary" commitment as devotion to home and family, whether or not they also work for pay.

This interdependence between the circumscribed roles of women in the family and in the labor market, which has been observed in a wide range of circumstances by feminist scholars, helps explain the particular case of the reconstruction of job segregation by sex within the mobilized economy of the early 1940s. During the World War II years, married women and mothers poured into the labor force in massive numbers for the first time, posing an unprecedented threat to family stability.⁶ Thus, far from being rendered unnecessary by the exigencies of the war emergency, job segregation was more crucial than ever before at this juncture. The sex typing of the jobs newly opened to women "for the duration" reconciled women's new economic situation with their traditional position as guardians of the hearth. This was manifested in the pervasive wartime propaganda image of "woman's place" on the nation's production lines, which portrayed women's war work in industry as a temporary extension of domesticity.

The World War II experience not only reveals the resilience of the structure of job segregation by sex and of the *general* ideology of sexual division which legitimates it, but it also renders completely transparent the specific *idiom* of sex typing, which is flexibly applied to whatever jobs women and men happen to be doing. Jobs which had previously been cast in terms suggestive of the very quintessence of masculinity were suddenly endowed with femininity and glamour “for the duration.” The propaganda newsreel *Glamour Girls of '43*, for example, suggested:

Instead of cutting the lines of a dress, this woman cuts the pattern of aircraft parts. Instead of baking cake, this woman is cooking gears to reduce the tension in the gears after use They are taking to welding as if the rod were a needle and the metal a length of cloth to be sewn. After a short apprenticeship, this woman can operate a drill press just as easily as a juice extractor in her own kitchen. And a lathe will hold no more terrors for her than an electric washing machine.⁷

Virtually any job could be labeled as “woman’s work” in this way.

Idioms of sex typing are unified in the global presumption that “men’s work” and “women’s work” are fundamentally distinct, but they also vary among sectors of the economy, specific industries, and even individual firms. In “pink collar” service and clerical sector jobs, the skills and capacities presumed to be developed by wives and mothers, such as nurturance, solicitousness to emotional and sexual needs, and skill in providing personal services, are the central reference point of the idiom of sex typing. Sex segregation in the manufacturing sector speaks a different language, rooted less in women’s family role than in their real or imagined biological characteristics. No one pretends that being nurturant or knowing how to make a good cup of coffee are important qualifications for “female” factory jobs. Here the idiom centers on such qualities as manual dexterity, attention to detail, ability to tolerate monotony, and, of course, women’s relative lack of physical strength. Analogies to domestic labor are present in both the pink collar and blue collar idioms, but the physical tasks comprising housework are paramount in descriptions of women’s manual labor outside the home, rather than the psychological tasks stressed in relation to women’s paid “mental” work.

If the underlying logic of job segregation by sex is rooted in the collective interest of capital, reinforced by the gender interest of

male workers, in preserving the sexual division of labor within the family, this still does not adequately explain the *specific* location of women in the wage labor force at a given point in time. Once established, idioms linking women's paid and unpaid work tend to acquire a certain ideological stability, in the form of "tradition." In practice, such "traditions" often guide the actual hiring and placement policies pursued by management. Yet, as suggested by the flexibility with which the idiom was readjusted during the war, the ideological construction of the sexual division of labor obscures the economic and political forces that help shape the particular configurations of sex-specific employment.

Employers must take account of a range of economic considerations in their hiring decisions: not only the available supplies of female and male labor and their relative costs, but also such factors as the proportion of a firm's capital outlays made up by wages, and the ease with which labor costs can be passed on to consumers. There are also political constraints which limit, or potentially limit, management's freedom in allocating jobs to women and men. For example, the greater the actual or anticipated male resistance to feminization, the less likely an employer may be to attempt it. Managerial initiatives affecting the sexual division of labor may become objects of political struggle for women and/or men workers, especially when the sex-specific supply-and-demand equilibrium in a labor market is disrupted — which occurs quite regularly in a dynamic capitalist economy. Usually these struggles are over marginal changes in the sexual division of labor, but there are times when more dramatic shifts in the structure of the labor market take place, presenting political opportunities for a broader challenge to the sexual division of wage labor as a whole. The large-scale economic dislocations associated with the mobilization for World War II and the subsequent postwar reconversion presented one such historical opportunity.

The rest of this article explores the dynamics of job segregation by sex in the automotive industry during the 1940s. It examines the way in which the idiom of sex typing was implemented and readjusted in the face of a dramatic change in the economic constraints on the sexual division of labor, and the ensuing political

struggles over the redefinition of the boundaries between “women’s work” and “men’s work.” The upheaval in the sexual division of labor precipitated by the wartime mobilization was particularly dramatic in basic manufacturing industries such as auto. While women’s labor force participation increased by 50 percent in the economy as a whole between 1940 and 1944, in heavy “war industries” the number of women rose 460 percent during that period, and in the auto industry the increase was an astounding 600 percent.⁸ Clearly the auto industry was by no means typical of the economy as a whole in regard to the changes that occurred in the sexual division of labor. Yet, precisely because the shifts in the position of women were so extensive and so rapid, the auto industry experience is especially revealing. It offers a magnified view of the reproduction of job segregation by sex, a process that is always occurring.

Politically, the situation in the auto industry in the 1940s is also of special interest. The young auto workers’ union, the United Automobile Workers - Congress of Industrial Organizations (UAW-CIO), was the largest union in the country during the war, boasting over 1 million members in 1945, 28 percent of whom were female.⁹ It was also one of the most progressive unions on questions of discrimination — although this was saying very little, and there were certainly instances of UAW-management collusion at the expense of women workers. Still, in the absence of an organized feminist movement during this period, the UAW became a crucial avenue for political challenges to management on sexual division of labor issues. The union set up a Women’s Bureau in 1944, and prior to that it was instrumental in several precedent-setting cases involving the issue of “equal pay for equal work.” The auto industry was quite unusual in this respect as well, but here again its very atypicality is illuminating: it suggests the limits and possibilities of political challenges to the managerial construction of the sexual division of labor in this period.

“WOMEN’S WORK” IN THE PREWAR AUTO INDUSTRY

Automotive manufacturing relied on an overwhelmingly male work force in the years before World War II, with women accounting for less than one-tenth of its labor force throughout that period. The revolutionary organization of production around the moving assembly line laid the basis for auto’s development as a high-wage, capital-intensive industry, in which employers had

relatively little incentive to substitute female labor for its more expensive male equivalent. While the representation of women in the industry was abnormally low, women auto workers were concentrated in a relatively small number of jobs and in particular branches of the industry, consistent with the broader pattern of job segregation by sex found throughout the nation's economy. Although small numbers of women could be found scattered through many departments of the plants, they were clustered primarily in the upholstery or "cut-and-sew" divisions of body plants, and in small parts assembly.¹⁰

Although women auto workers earned wages higher than those available in most other fields of female employment, throughout the industry women's wages were far below men's. In 1925, the average hourly earnings of female workers in the auto industry were forty-seven cents, compared with a seventy-three cent average for men.¹¹ Although there were occasional incidents of women being substituted for men, and at lower pay, what is much more striking is that management was never particularly interested in pursuing a policy of large-scale feminization. The supreme lever of control over labor in the industry was machinery, and especially the assembly line — centerpiece of the Fordist revolution. Mechanization was carried forward to such a degree that wages became a relatively small component of costs. The announcement of the legendary Five-Dollar Day by the Ford Motor Company in 1914 quickly established the industry's reputation as a *high-wage* industry. Under these conditions, female substitution had little to recommend it.¹²

Jobs were clearly defined as "male" or "female" during this period, with none of the subtlety with which segregation by sex would later come to be disguised in the face of challenges to the legitimacy of discrimination. "It is customary," wrote one authoritative commentator on labor relations in the auto industry in 1940, "for management to draw a sharp line of demarcation between male and female occupations."¹³ Even the aggregate data on the occupational distribution of women through the industry in this period reveal a high degree of sex segregation. A 1925 government survey of motor vehicle manufacturing found women in only 22 of the 110 occupational groups enumerated for the industry, and over two-thirds of the women were working in just four of these classifications. When a similar survey was conducted fifteen years later, the situation was virtually unchanged. Women were found in but 15 of the 84 job categories listed in

1940, with 72 percent of them clustered in the four largest occupations.¹⁴

The idiom in which the sexual division of labor in the prewar auto industry was cast stressed the suitability of women for "light" or "delicate" work in accounting for their concentration in particular job classifications. "In finishing, polishing, and upholstery, where much hand work is required," wrote one observer in 1929, "they [women] are considered fast workers." In another typical rendition, it was suggested that women were especially well represented in the parts branch of this industry "since they are adept at assembly of light units."¹⁵ These were the characteristics associated with "women's work" in the manufacturing sector generally, in the prevailing idiom of sex typing: "light," "repetitive" work, demanding manual "dexterity."

Yet the actual sexual division of labor in the prewar auto industry bore at best a limited relationship to such factors. The majority of jobs done by both women and men in the industry were repetitive operations, and most required some degree of manual "dexterity." There were also some "women's jobs" which required substantial physical exertion. And firms varied to some degree in the way in which they constructed the sexual division of labor, despite an overall similarity in the organization of production. It seems that whatever jobs women were assigned to in a given plant came to be viewed as requiring a feminine touch, although exactly the same positions might be deemed suited only for men elsewhere in the industry. Thus in 1926 the *Wall Street Journal* reported that women crane operators at the Hudson Motor Company who lifted motors and carried them to the chassis were "more sensitive and accurate than men," while at other auto firms this was an exclusively male occupation.¹⁶

Once firmly established, the sexual division of labor in the auto industry remained remarkably stable during the years before the war. Even during the economic depression of the 1930s, when the auto industry underwent a severe profitability crisis, there was surprisingly little change in the sexual division of labor. Although there were occasional efforts to substitute women for men to save on labor costs, in general the ideology of sexual division reigned supreme even in the face of the extraordinary economic circumstances of the depression decade. While the incentive for substituting female labor for male was more compelling than it had been previously, so was the social ideology that decried the employment of women so long as men were

unemployed. The ideology of the "family wage," together with the established idiom of sex typing, continued to set limits on the extent to which employers would attempt female substitution during the depression.

The 1930s brought a political transformation to the auto industry as well as changed economic circumstances. In the second half of the decade, management's recognition of the UAW profoundly altered the character of labor relations in the auto industry, where unions had never been able to establish a foothold before. For the UAW, as for other CIO unions in this period, it followed from the logic of industrial unionism that the minority of women production workers should be organized along with the much more numerous male work force. The CIO also had a serious commitment to opposing all forms of employment discrimination, although it lacked any special commitment to challenging sexual inequality as such. This reflected the weakness of feminism in the interwar period, as well as the hardy tradition of male domination within the labor movement itself.

Women auto workers still benefited enormously from unionization. Women's average hourly wages in the industry jumped from fifty-four cents in 1936 to sixty-five cents two years later, while men's rose from eighty-one to ninety-eight cents over the same period.¹⁷ And the institutionalization of seniority systems gave women workers some protection from sexual favoritism and sexual harassment for the first time, although frequently there were separate seniority lists for women and men.¹⁸ Yet the UAW's main concern in this period was with consolidating its organizational gains generally, and issues concerning women specifically were rather low on its list of priorities. In the 1930s, the union never mounted a serious challenge to the sexual division of labor in industry or to the pervasive social ideology of "woman's place" which supplied it with such a compelling rationale.

Indeed, to the degree that the UAW became involved in conflicts with management affecting the sexual division of labor at all, the primary result was the consolidation of the existing pattern of female employment, not the dissolution of the boundaries between "women's work" and "men's work." When management did attempt female substitution, male workers could now resist it more effectively than before the introduction of collective bargaining. Sex differentials in wages and separate seniority systems, established by management in the preunion era, were

now institutionalized in many local contracts. Although the principle of nondiscrimination embedded in the new industrial unionism provided the basis for a challenge to sex discrimination, it would be many years before such a struggle materialized.

During the 1930s, then, the auto industry remained predominantly male with a clearly demarcated “woman’s place” in its various divisions, essentially unchanged in this respect from the nonunion era. It was not the political forces unleashed with unionization, but the economic impact of World War II that exploded the traditional sexual division of labor in the auto industry.

REDEFINING “WOMEN’S WORK” IN THE WARTIME AUTO INDUSTRY

The immediate impact of U.S. entry into World War II on the auto industry was a complete shutdown of production. Consumer production of cars and trucks was banned shortly after Pearl Harbor, and in February 1942 the last car rolled off the assembly line. There followed massive layoffs of auto workers, as the industry retooled for war production, and “conversion unemployment” was particularly pronounced among women auto workers. The number and proportion of women in the industry therefore dropped in the first part of 1942, but this was followed by a sudden rise in the representation of women as demand for labor outstripped the available supply of men. In April 1942, only one of every twenty auto production workers was a woman; eighteen months later, one out of four workers in the industry’s plants was female.¹⁹

Initially, women war workers in the auto industry were employed only in jobs that had long before been established within the industry as “women’s work.” Although a U.S. Employment Service survey of war work in early 1942 found that women could capably perform the tasks required in 80 percent of job classifications, UAW woman-employing plants showed women in only 28 percent of the classifications, on average, in July of that year. “The chief classifications on which they were employed,” the UAW reported, “were assembly, inspection, drill press, punch press, sewing machines, filing, and packing.”²⁰ Such positions had long before been associated with women.

Even as the supply of male labor was being depleted, auto employers were loath to forsake their prewar hiring preference

for white male workers. "As long as the employers can hire men," Ernest Kanzler, the head of the Detroit office of the War Production Board (WPB) pointed out in 1942, "they don't talk about hiring women." Ultimately the federal government intervened, setting male employment ceilings and giving the War Manpower Commission (WMC) the power to enforce them. "Over our strenuous objections," Detroit WMC director Edward Cushman recalls, "the Ford Motor Company began hiring 17, 18 and 19 year old men. And we kept drafting them."²¹ Women, as well as blacks and other industrial minorities, were only incorporated into the automotive labor force when there was no longer any possibility of continuing to hire white men.

Management footdragging applied doubly to black women. "The [black] men are o.k. on unskilled jobs," reported one government representative, summarizing the attitude of auto industry employers toward black workers in mid-1943, "but the women are a drug [sic] on the market." Geraldine Bledsoe of the U.S. Employment Service in Detroit complained publicly in October of 1942 that over one thousand black women had completed vocational training courses, "and yet they go day after day to the plants and are turned down." By mid-1943, the WMC estimated that twenty-eight thousand black women were available for war work in Detroit, but that most war plants would employ them only as janitors, matrons, and government inspectors. By the war's end, Detroit auto plants had hired black women in substantial numbers, but this was only after all other sources of labor had been fully exhausted.²²

The auto firms had always actively recruited male labor from the South, and they continued to do so during the mobilization period. But Detroit, where the vast bulk of the industry's production took place, could not accommodate male in-migrants and their families on the scale that the rapid wartime expansion of the industry would have required. Housing and transportation facilities were limited, and with wartime restrictions on construction and rationing of scarce materials, the deficit could not be met. Moreover, the entire nation was facing a male labor shortage. It was these circumstances that generated government pressure on the auto firms to hire women. The WPB threatened to withhold additional war contracts from Detroit manufacturers, and even to remove existing contracts if in-migration to the Motor City was not stemmed. The alternative to continued in-migration, the WPB urged in mid-1942, was recruiting women for war work:

The recruitment of local women who are not now in the labor market is free from the disadvantages or limitations of the other methods of meeting the labor deficit. Local women workers will not require new housing, transportation or other facilities. They do not create a possible future relief burden. Each woman who is recruited will reduce the necessary in-migration correspondingly and thus reduce or eliminate the need for transferring contracts elsewhere.²³

The government pressured the auto firms to hire women, but made no effort whatsoever to influence their placement within the industry once management let them into the factory gates. The U.S. Employment Service routinely filled employer job openings which called for specific numbers of women and men, and while ceilings were imposed on the number of men who could be allocated to each plant, employers had a free hand in placing women and men in particular jobs within this constraint.²⁴ Although the UAW sometimes contested the sexual division of labor after the fact, the initial decisions about where to place women within the plant job structure were left entirely to management.

Women were not evenly distributed through the various jobs available in the war plants, but were hired into specific classifications which management deemed "suitable" for women and were excluded from other kinds of jobs. Sometimes management conducted special surveys to determine the sexual division of labor in a plant; probably more often such decisions were made on a less systematic basis by individual supervisors.²⁵ Although data on the distribution of women throughout the various job classifications in the wartime auto industry are sketchy, there is no mistaking the persistence of job segregation by sex. A 1943 government survey of the industry's Detroit plants, for example, found over one-half of the women workers clustered in only five of seventy-two job classifications. Only 11 percent of the men were employed in these five occupations.²⁶

Job segregation by sex was explicitly acknowledged in many automotive plants during the war. In 45 percent of the plants with sexually mixed work forces responding to a survey conducted in mid-1944 by the UAW Women's Bureau, jobs were formally set up on a "male" and "female" basis.²⁷ And it is extremely unlikely that women were more fully integrated into the range of job classifications in the other 55 percent. A case in point is the Ford River Rouge plant. The available data do not offer a very detailed breakdown, yet a great deal of segregation is apparent. In December 1943, when women's employment in the industry was

at its wartime peak, women made up 16 percent of the work force at the Rouge plant. Over one-half of the occupational groups listed in the company's internal factory count included women, but 62 percent of the women workers were clustered in just 20 of the 416 job categories. And nearly two-thirds of the job groups were at least 90 percent male.²⁸

Management was quick to offer a rationale for the concentration of women in certain kinds of jobs and their exclusion from others, just as it had done in the prewar period. "Womanpower differs from manpower as oil fuel differs from coal," proclaimed the trade journal *Automotive War Production* in October 1943, "and an understanding of the characteristics of the energy involved was needed for obtaining best results." Although it was being applied to a larger and quite different set of jobs, the basic characterization of women's abilities and limitations was familiar. "On certain kinds of operations — the very ones requiring high manipulative skill — women were found to be a whole lot quicker and more efficient than men," reported the article.

Engineering womanpower means realizing fully that women are not only different from men in such things as lifting power and arm reach — but in many other ways that pertain to their physiological and their social functions. To understand these things does not mean to exclude women from *the jobs for which they are peculiarly adapted*, and where they can help to win this war. It merely means using them as women, and not as men.²⁹

Repeatedly stressed was the lesser physical strength of the average woman worker. "Woman isn't just a 'smaller man,'" the industry's organ pointed out.

Compensations in production processes must be made to allow for the fact that the average woman is only 35 per cent muscle in comparison to the average man's 41 per cent. Moreover, industrial studies have shown that only 54 per cent of woman's weight is strength, as against man's 87 per cent, and that the hand squeeze of the average woman exerts only 48 pounds of pressure, against man's 81 pounds.³⁰

This emphasis on the physical limitations of women workers had a dual character. Not only did it provide a justification for the sexual division of labor, but it also served as the basis for increased mechanization and work simplification. "To adjust women's jobs to such [physical] differences, automotive plants have added more mechanical aids such as conveyors, chain hoists and load lifters." Although production technology was already quite advanced in auto relative to other industries, the pace of change ac-

celerated during the war period. This was due at least as much to the combined impact of the labor shortage and the opportunity to introduce new technology at government expense as to the desire to make jobs easier for female workers, but the latter was particularly stressed by the industry's spokespersons.³¹

There was a contradiction in the management literature on women's war work. It simultaneously stressed the fact that "women are being trained in skills that were considered exclusively in man's domain" and their special suitability for "delicate war jobs."³² The link between these two seemingly conflicting kinds of statements was made primarily through analogies between "women's work" in the home and in the war plants. "Why should men, who from childhood on never so much as sewed on buttons," inquired one manager, "be expected to handle delicate instruments better than women who have plied embroidery needles, knitting needles and darning needles all their lives?"³³

Glamour was a related theme in the idiom through which women's war work was demarcated as female. As if calculated to assure women — and men — that war work need not involve a loss of femininity, depictions of women's new work roles were constantly overlaid with allusions to their stylish dress and attractive appearance. "A pretty young inspector in blue slacks pushes a gauge — a cylindrical plug with a diamond-pointed push-button on its side — through the shaft's hollow chamber," was a typical rendition.³⁴ Such statements, like the housework analogies, effectively reconciled woman's position in what had previously been "men's jobs" with traditional images of femininity.

Ultimately, what lay behind the mixed message that war jobs were at once "men's" and "women's" jobs was an unambiguous point: women *could* do "men's work," but they were only expected to do it temporarily. The ideological definition of women's war work explicitly included the provision that they would gracefully withdraw from their "men's jobs" when the war ended and the rightful owners returned. Women, as everyone knew, were in heavy industry "for the duration." This theme would become much more prominent in the immediate aftermath of the war, but it was a constant undercurrent from the beginning.

Women had always been stereotyped as temporary workers in any case, and the sex typing of jobs prior to the war had helped to ensure that even if they were gainfully employed, women would

continue to view themselves as women first, workers second. Now this aspect of the relationship between women and paid work took on new importance, because the reserves of "woman-power" drawn on by the war industries included married women, and even mothers of young children, in unprecedented numbers. A study by the Automotive Council for War Production noted that of 12,000 women employed during the war by one large automotive firm in Detroit, 40 percent were married with children, and another 28 percent were married without children. Another study by the WPB in 1943 also found that 40 percent of the 150,000 women war workers employed in Detroit were mothers. "With the existing prejudice against employing women over forty, the overwhelming majority of these women workers are young mothers with children under 16."³⁵

This was exactly the group of women least likely to have been employed in the prewar years. "In this time of pressure for added labor supply," the U.S. Women's Bureau reported, "the married women for the first time in this country's history exceeded single women in the employed group."³⁶ The representation of married women in the auto industry was especially large, probably due to the vigorous effort to recruit local female labor in Detroit. Some firms went so far as to make a deliberate effort to recruit the wives and daughters of men whom they had employed prior to the war. The Detroit Vickers aircraft plant, for example, had a policy of hiring "members of men's families who have gone to forces so that when these men come back there will be less of a problem in getting the women out of the jobs to give them back to the men."³⁷

This dramatic rise in employment of married women in the war mobilization period raised the long-standing tension between women's commitment to marriage and family and their status as individual members of the paid work force to a qualitatively different level. Prior to the war, unmarried women; young wives with no children; and self-supporting widowed, divorced, and separated women had comprised the bulk of the female labor force. With the inclusion of married women and mothers in this group during wartime, the ideology of occupational sex typing which linked women's roles in the family and in paid work, far from disintegrating under the impact of the war emergency, was infused with new energy.

The wartime idiom of job segregation by sex combined such familiar prewar themes as women's dexterity and lack of physical

strength with a new emphasis on the value of women's multivariated experience doing housework and an unrelenting glamourization of their new work roles. That the construction of a "woman's place" in the wartime auto industry was achieved so quickly and effectively owed much to the power of this elaborate ideology of occupational sex labeling. Although the initiative came from management, neither unions nor rank-and-file workers — of either gender — offered much resistance to the *general* principle of differentiation of jobs into "female" and "male" categories. Nor was the idiom of "woman's place" in the war effort ever frontally challenged. There was a great deal of conflict, however, over the location of the boundaries between the female and male labor markets within the wartime auto industry, and over wage differentials between these newly constituted markets.

AMBIGUITY AND LABOR-MANAGEMENT CONFLICT OVER "WOMEN'S WORK"

"Will you please advise me on our particular job as to what is considered as major assembly and what is considered as minor assembly?" inquired the President of UAW Local 249 of Mauro Garcia, an international representative of the union's Ford Department, in July 1943. "We cannot agree down here [Kansas City, Missouri] as to where we should draw the line Also, what is considered a light drill press and what is considered a heavy drill press?" Garcia in turn wrote to the Ford Motor Company's Rate Department with the same questions, saying, "I do not know what method you use in determining these classifications."³⁸

This is one example of a dilemma which pervaded the auto industry, and other war industries as well, in the aftermath of conversion. How to go about classifying the new sets of jobs which had come into existence "for the duration" was ambiguous not only for management, but also for workers themselves — both female and male. There was of course some resemblance between many of the new war jobs and their predecessors in the peacetime auto industry, but the conversion process with its attendant technological changes and the dramatic shifts in the composition of the labor force combined to create tremendous disarray in what had before the war been a relatively stable system of job

organization. Although in this example the issue of gender was not explicitly broached, distinctions like “heavy” and “light,” or “major” and “minor” more often than not coincided with the sexual division of labor in this period. The problem of ambiguity in job classifications was not limited to the dilemma of where to assign sex labels, but this issue was central to the more general case illustrated here. It is also clear from this example that the UAW viewed these matters as management’s province, at least initially.

Not only in classification systems but also in actual job content, “heavy” and “light” tended to differentiate women’s and men’s jobs. Yet where the line should be drawn between the two was always ambiguous, and its arbitrariness — along with that of the accompanying wage differentials — became completely transparent in this period. “Except that there is a division as to what’s heavy and what’s light, there’s no difference in men [sic] and women’s jobs,” Irene Young remarked at a UAW Women’s Conference in February 1942.

This is a carry-over from procedure they have had years ago. They just decide what our [sic] women’s jobs and what are men’s jobs. Men get all the way from ten to 20¢ more on the same job. We have many women doing similar types of work — I have seen a lot of men working alongside women and getting more pay for the same work. It is that sort of thing that has caused a certain amount of the split between women and men.³⁹

Moreover, Young pointed out, there were many women in the plants whose jobs were physically taxing, protective legislation notwithstanding. “We have today any number of women who are doing heavy work, who lack safety devices,” she said.

I’ve worked in any number of plants in Detroit where women worked on high production rates and lifted and were forced to carry packs of stock. They were forced to do this if they were to make a decent day’s wage. This kind of hard work they were under for years The plant where I am from, all of our stock had to be gotten out of box trucks. It necessitated leaning over and pulling and hauling on box trucks.⁴⁰

Eleanor Brenthal, another delegate at the conference, explained that women often accepted such working conditions because they feared that their very right to employment was at stake. “Women are to blame in some cases,” she said. “We decided this work was very heavy. When the shop committee came to agree that this work was too hard for us, we denied it. We were afraid that if we couldn’t do this particular heavy work we were afraid

we'd be put out on the street. We said we agreed to do that work, but it was too heavy." Clearly women's placement in the industry's labor force was by no means consistently linked to their physique — and Brenthall for one would have been more satisfied if it had been. "Someone should point out to us just what work we are suited for," she concluded.⁴¹

Young and Brenthall were speaking on the basis of their prewar experience in the auto industry. But it was obvious to everyone at the conference that the war presented a situation where such problems would be compounded. Many delegates expressed uncertainty as to which jobs were suited for women. "How would you determine whether a job was too difficult . . .?" Bernice Cut wanted to know. "If they asked me to work on a lathe machine — would you label that as a man's job?" another delegate inquired. Yet a third woman pointed out, "Some of our sisters are stronger than others — they could handle jobs that would about kill some of our other sisters in one or two days. How will we manage to distinguish this?"⁴²

In response to such comments as these, UAW Secretary-Treasurer George Addes articulated the union's policy on this issue at the conference. He said that

First of all under this program you train the women for a particular job and machine. If said employer should assign women to jobs that are strenuous, too difficult because of the heaviness of the work; or materials that are detrimental, then it becomes a problem for the local union negotiating committee and the management to determine the type of work they should be placed on for the time being. Of course, when the male help is gone and these jobs must be filled it must be decided which jobs women are capable of performing — the jobs must be classified.⁴³

Again, it was the union's official policy to leave initial decisions on such matters to management, and then to negotiate any necessary adjustments. None of the women at the conference objected to the idea of using some system of job classification arrived at in this way — on the contrary, they hoped it might protect them from assignment to overly strenuous jobs. Evidence that such abuses had occurred in the prewar period only served to reinforce the women's support for a more systematic classification of jobs.

This view, however, was soon proven naive. The union historically had developed other principles of job assignment which conflicted with the notion that women should be placed on the lighter jobs. There were numerous charges that manage-

ment was manipulating the sexual division of labor in the mobilization period in ways calculated to undermine the seniority-based job preference rights of the prewar (that is, predominantly male) labor force. George Romney, testifying before the U.S. Senate hearings on "Manpower Problems in Detroit" in 1945 in his capacity as head of the Automotive Council for War Production, cited such a case:

On September 13, 1943, company Y tried to discontinue the placement of men on jobs that women would be able to handle. Since that date, the company has tried on numerous occasions to effect this policy but each attempt has been met by positive union resistance. On May 26, 1944, a survey of the company's plants revealed that over 400 jobs then being held by men could be performed by women. Again the management requested, and the union refused, the replacement of these men by women, even though the management offered to guarantee the rates of the men so transferred To date the union has not granted such approval.

The types of jobs to be vacated by men and filled by women were varied, but all were considered to be light enough for women to fill. The union's reasons for not granting approvals seemed to be that the men, for the most part, had worked long periods of time to acquire these lighter jobs, and did not feel that they should be removed from them just so the jobs could be filled by women.⁴⁴

There were also numerous grievances of this sort filed by the UAW against General Motors (GM) in late 1943 and early 1944. "When female employees were brought into the plant and assigned to various jobs," according to the Umpire's summary of one set of such grievances concerning the Chevrolet Gear and Axle Plant,

complaints arose from the male employees who were on the so-called "waiting lists" pending possible promotion to higher rated classifications. These male employees complained that the placing of women in the jobs above them in rate prevented the male employees from gaining the promotions to which they would ordinarily have been entitled.⁴⁵

What provoked these union challenges was not a belief that the idiom of sex typing (on which all parties seemed to agree) had been incorrectly applied. Rather, the central concern was that management was undercutting the seniority principle as a factor in job placement. Thus the evolution of the sexual division of labor in the war years became entangled with political and economic conflicts which involved a range of other issues. The ways in which management, the union, and rank-and-file workers defined and sought to advance their respective interests in relation to the sexual division of labor were determined in the larger context of labor relations and shop floor politics.

What was the role in these struggles of the women workers whose position in the auto industry was directly affected by their outcomes? Many of the key wartime conflicts over the sexual division of labor took place before many women had even entered the auto industry and were essentially fought out between male workers and management. The new women workers, most of whom had no factory or union experience, scarcely had time to get their bearings, much less develop the political resources they needed to participate effectively in struggles over job classification, during the short period when the wartime sexual division of labor was established. Those women who did take an active role at this stage were the minority with prewar experience in the industry and the union, but they were rarely able to mobilize other women into an effective constituency.

For the majority of the new women auto workers, the chance to work in a unionized basic industry, in virtually any job category, meant an enormous improvement in their economic circumstances. For example, 68 percent of the women employed at the Ford Willow Run bomber plant earned at least three times as much in their war jobs than in their prewar jobs, while this was true for less than 15 percent of the men.⁴⁶ This dramatic improvement in their wages was not the result of any political effort on the part of the women who got war jobs in the auto industry, but it reflected the historical development of the industry as one paying relatively high wages. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that most women were relatively indifferent to their placement within what was in any case a completely new and unfamiliar system of job classification.

As Nancy Gabin's article shows, the situation would be very different in the immediate postwar period, when the gains women had made in the war years were directly threatened. Women would be the protagonists in the battles that ensued over the sexual division of labor in the course of postwar reconversion. But during the mobilization period, the struggles were generally waged between management and the predominantly male prewar labor force, and the interests of women workers lacked any politically effective vehicle for their expression.

The explicit struggles waged by the UAW (generally on behalf of its prewar, predominantly male, membership), in opposition to managerial initiatives affecting the sexual division of labor, effectively incorporated the interests of men into the process of defining boundaries between "women's work" and "men's work." In

addition, the way in which management initially constructed the wartime sexual division of labor reflected the differential in political power between the sexes, and the anticipation that any opposition to the specific pattern of job placement by sex would come from men rather than from women. Thus, beneath the idiomatic construction of the sexual division of labor in terms of "heavy" and "light" jobs, and so forth, a set of political principles can be discerned according to which the allocation of jobs by gender was organized. In the wartime auto industry, women were excluded from positions where they supervised men or directly proceeded them in the flow of work. Indeed, this was the case throughout the economy, and not only during the war: *job segregation* coincides with a *gender hierarchy* within the labor market.⁴⁷

Management then, controls the day-to-day process of assigning women and men to jobs, but it does so with a view to minimizing friction within the work force which might potentially disrupt social relations among workers and impede the smooth flow of production. That women were relatively powerless within the auto industry during the mobilization period meant that management had an interest in constructing hierarchies within the internal labor market to coincide with this gender difference in power. It was only when management failed to do so that the political dimension of the sexual division of labor took the form of explicit struggle, as in the instances previously described.

But what are the interests of men vis-à-vis the sexual division of labor in industry? On the one hand, they benefit from sexual inequality in wages and from male monopolies of positions of power within the shops, in that this reinforces their power as a gender, both in the workplace and in the family. On the other hand, as workers, men have an interest in unity with women workers vis-à-vis capital. The ideology of industrial unionism and the principle of nondiscrimination which it includes reflects this latter interest. The political posture of male auto workers and of the UAW in the 1940s in relation to the sexual division of labor vacillated between these two opposing sets of interests, and indeed shifted quite markedly as the particular circumstances facing the auto industry were altered by the exigencies of the mobilization for war.

THE VARIABILITY OF MALE INTERESTS: FROM EXCLUSION TO "EQUAL PAY"

On the eve of U.S. entry into the war, in October 1941, there was a strike at a newly built defense plant owned by the Kelsey-Hayes Wheel Company in Plymouth, Michigan. Although it took place before anyone could fully comprehend the unprecedented scale on which female labor would have to be incorporated into the auto industry, this strike clearly posed the issues which would have to be confronted in establishing the wartime sexual division of labor. "The issue, raised in its present form for the first time since defense production got under way," commented *Business Week*, "promises to become one of the most dangerous and troublesome ones Washington will have to meet."⁴⁸

The two-day work stoppage was the culmination of a conflict between the company and the union which had been the subject of negotiations for some weeks prior to the October 28 walkout. On October 15, the UAW had filed a strike notice against Kelsey-Hayes demanding a wage increase and "the removal of all girl employes from machine work which, it [the UAW] contends, is a man's job." Negotiations over these issues were continuing when workers discovered that two women had been hired on the night shift, and walked out at midnight in protest, because the company had agreed to hire no more women pending the outcome of the negotiations. Significantly, "the strikers had no objection to women being hired, ordinarily on other jobs in the plant." But because women in the plant received a maximum of eighty-five cents per hour, while men earned one dollar per hour, "workers feared the company would replace men with women workers in order to reduce labor expenses."⁴⁹

The strike was successful. The union and the company settled upon the following working arrangement:

It was agreed by the Company that girls would not be used on any Screw Machine Operations, nor would they be used on Profiling operations. The Company would use them, however, on Filing wherever possible, on Inspection (Bench) where they can be utilized, and on small assemblies wherever they can be utilized.

Female employees at no time will exceed 25% of the total.⁵⁰

Thus the main object of the walkout was achieved: the exclusion of women from "men's jobs." The union did not object to women being employed at lower wage rates than men's, providing they were confined to "women's jobs," as stipulated in

this agreement. Indeed, the maximum pay rates negotiated for the female job classifications established after the strike were 88¢ for women with two years' seniority or more, and 85¢ for those with less than two years. Men's maximum rates under the new agreement, in contrast, ranged from \$1.01 to \$1.13 in the various classifications they occupied.⁵¹

In this case, the effect of the union's action in clarifying and then enforcing the system of job segregation by sex is obvious, but the circumstances behind the strike make the matter more complex. In the face of a shortage of male labor, management sought to take advantage of the lower wages historically paid to women by breaking down the existing pattern of job segregation by sex. It was this assault on their own wage standards which provoked the strike in defense of the extant sexual division of labor. The immediate point of contention in the dispute, in short, was wage rates, not the pros and cons of job segregation, and yet because it was so tightly intertwined with the wage issue, the sexual division of labor was directly shaped by the outcome.

The demand to exclude women from what had previously been regarded by everyone as male job classifications was male labor's first line of defense in the mobilization period — as it had been in many earlier historical episodes of this type, particularly in the craft union era. After the no-strike pledge, there were wildcat strike actions opposing the hiring of women, and although their illegal status gave them a different character, they expressed the same impulse as the officially sanctioned strikes such as at Kelsey-Hayes.⁵² And there were other ways to pursue the objective of excluding women from particular jobs besides going on strike, notably refusing to break in new workers properly, or actively obstructing their work.

The various exclusionary tactics male auto workers employed, while at times successful in the short term (as at Kelsey-Hayes), became less and less viable as the rising demand for labor and the rapid exhaustion of the male labor supply forced a break with the old sexual division of labor. Once it became clear that resistance to the inclusion of women in the industry's male preserves was doomed to failure, a new set of tactics emerged. These were of two basic types. First, the union undertook various efforts to ensure that women's employment in "men's jobs" would be limited to the period of the war emergency — by such means as separate seniority lists, special agreements providing for the integration of women "for the duration" only, or by giving the new hired

workers "trainee" status, with limited seniority rights. Such arrangements affected the sexual division of labor in the industry not during the war but in the postwar period, however. It was the second set of tactics that had the greatest impact on the wartime sexual division of labor: the various efforts to protect the wages and working conditions won in the prewar period from managerial attacks which sought to take advantage of the upheaval in the sexual division of labor to erode labor's past gains.

Job classification grievances like those already mentioned, protesting the transfer of women into highly rated "light" jobs which had been previously reserved for high-seniority men, were one important form of this second type of struggle. But once the exclusionary impulse of the transition was abandoned, the demand for "equal pay for equal work" became the central focus of the struggles shaping the wartime sexual division of labor. This demand was not a new one in the 1940s — it had been the UAW's standard defense against the actual or potential replacement of men with women. But before the war, actual incidents of such replacement had been relatively rare. It was only with the disruption of the sexual division of labor in the mobilization period that the union's long-standing fears of large-scale female replacement really materialized. Worse, there was every reason to fear that any wage cuts made while women occupied any given position would affect men after the war, when the job reverted to them. And the wartime wage freeze meant that equal pay demands were one of the few avenues of any kind for the pursuit of substantial wage increases.

Some companies readily agreed to adopt a policy of equal rates for women, without a protracted struggle (though perhaps in anticipation of one if women were paid less on "men's jobs"). Ford's recruitment handbills for the giant Willow Run bomber plant advertised the firm's policy: "Women paid same rates as men," and Ford as well as Studebaker and Vultee signed national contracts with the UAW which had equal pay clauses.⁵³ Because a great deal of war production was done under "cost-plus" war contracts, under which the wage bill was passed directly on to the government, and because the expectation was that women's war jobs would revert to men after the war in any event, "equal pay for equal work" was a sensible policy for many managements.

But there were also numerous disputes over the question of equal pay in the wartime auto industry. The most important was a

WLB case the UAW brought against GM in 1942. The board's decision in this case was widely regarded as a milestone in the development of government policy on the issue, and it firmly established the equal pay principle in board practice. "Wages should be paid to female employees on the principle of equal pay for equal work," the September 26, 1942, decision stated. "There should be no discrimination between employees whose production is substantially the same on comparable jobs." The WLB ordered GM and the UAW to include an equal pay clause in their contract as well, and they did so.⁵⁴

Subsequently, however, major disputes developed over the implementation of the equal pay principle as embodied in the contract, and when negotiations failed to resolve the matter, the UAW requested arbitration in June 1943. At three GM plants, hearings were held before WLB arbitrator William Simkin, who issued a decision on July 31, which was later sustained by the National WLB. The issue in this case, typical of equal pay disputes, was whether or not jobs being done by women were "comparable in quantity and quality" to those jobs done by men. The union contended that the jobs in question were new ones, established in the conversion period, and were comparable to jobs previously performed by men. The company, in contrast, insisted that the jobs were of the sort that had always been "women's jobs," although due to the peculiar circumstances of the conversion period some of them had been performed by men during a brief "experimental" period. In all three plants, there had been local wage agreements including female job classifications explicitly designated as such prior to the initial WLB ruling in September 1942, and the issue now was whether the various war jobs being performed by women fit into those female classifications or not.

Simkin baldly acknowledged the ambiguity surrounding the assignment of sex labels to the jobs in question in a section of his decision aptly entitled, "WOMAN'S JOB OR MAN'S JOB?" He noted that "exact and certain allocation of a specific operation to a given type is by no means easy."⁵⁵ But ultimately he accepted, at least in part, the arguments put forward by GM which detailed why all the jobs in question were appropriate for women and distinct from the "men's jobs" to which the union insisted they were comparable. GM's case was cast entirely in terms of the idiom of job segregation by sex, stressing that women did physically "light" work and had fewer responsibilities than men,

as well as insisting that most of women's war jobs resembled their prewar jobs. Typical was the statement that "it is not possible to assign to a woman all the duties that over a period of time can be assigned to a male janitor because of her physical capacity. Often the janitors are called on to do heavy work such as moving furniture" ⁵⁶

The arbitrator ruled that the existing wage differentials were too wide to be justified by the variation in content between "men's" and "women's" jobs, but also perpetuated what had been sex differentials in wages in a new, if thinly disguised form: as differentials between "light" and "heavy" work. "The only solution consistent with the 'equal pay' clause [in the union contract]," the decision stated, "is to wipe out the sex designation of the . . . jobs and establish . . . rates for various types of work which reflect only the type of work performed." ⁵⁷ The detailed opinion issued by the Regional WLB drew out the implications of this ruling even more sharply:

Under the principle of equal pay for equal work, sex differentials are no longer proper. The principle . . . however, is consistent with differences in rates which are based upon differences in job content. It is upon this basis that the arbitrator *substituted* for the classifications "Inspection — Receiving — Male" and "Inspection — Receiving — Female" the classifications of "Inspection — Receiving — Heavy" and "Inspection — Receiving — Light" and fixed the rate for the former at \$1.14 per hour and for the latter at \$1.04 per hour. Roughly, the new classification "Inspection — Receiving — Heavy" corresponds to the former classification "Inspection — Receiving — Male" and the "Inspection — Receiving — Light" to the former classification "Inspection — Receiving — Female." *Rates of each classification imply whether the employees are men or women.* ⁵⁸

Thus was the sexual division of labor recodified "for the duration."

The primary motive behind the UAW's opposition to distinctions between "heavy" and "light," or "men's" and "women's" work, was its concern about the postwar implications of cases like this for men's wages. The union's position, however, amounted to advocating the abolition of the sexual division of labor in the job categories at issue, in sharp contrast to the stance it had adopted in situations like the 1941 Kelsey-Hayes strike. There it had been the company which purported to be interested in eliminating the sexual division of labor (although without altering wage differentials). The shift in the form of what was essentially a struggle — in both instances — between management and the union over the wage bill thus reversed the "interests" of each,

in relation to the sexual division of labor. In both instances, as well, male auto workers had an interest in perpetuating women's subordination in industry so as to preserve their power as a *gender* both inside the wage economy and in the family. The crucial difference was that, in the Kelsey-Hayes case, fear of permanent displacement generated an exclusionary impulse to preserve the male monopoly of the bulk of the jobs; while during the war, when women's presence in the industry was unavoidable, the same employment insecurity led men to define their interest as residing in the elimination of sex discrimination in wages. The contrast illustrates the variability of male workers' interests under different sets of circumstances. The gender interests of male workers, rather than being located outside the wage labor market and inexorably transcending the forces operating within it, could either prevail over or be subsumed by the class interests of male workers in challenging sex discrimination. Struggles between male workers and management could thus work for or against women workers, according to the particular situation.

But if the demand for equal pay challenged wage discrimination by sex, it did so in a very limited way. The very formulation of the issue as "equal pay for equal work" precluded from the outset the general equalization of work between women and men. The struggle was explicitly confined to determining whether women within a relatively small spectrum of occupational categories were indeed engaged in "men's work," or work similar enough to "men's work" to merit similar compensation. Although the ensuing debate revealed the arbitrary aspect of the sex labeling of jobs, at the same time it reinforced the legitimacy of the sexual division of labor as a whole. Indeed, the previously established pattern of job segregation was elevated into the reference point for determining the legitimacy of particular claims for equal pay, at the margin between "women's" and "men's" jobs. A more radical formulation of the issue, as in the struggles being waged today for "equal pay for comparable worth," would have to not merely challenge the pay rates of those jobs at the margin, but also put forth a critique of the entire structure of job segregation and the systematic undervaluing of women's work.⁵⁹ Although it certainly benefited those women employed at the margin, the UAW's more narrow formulation of the issue really offered no possibility of fundamentally altering the sexual division in paid work.

CONCLUSION

The changes in the sexual division of labor in the auto industry during the mobilization for World War II illustrate the way in which job segregation by sex can be reproduced in the face of dramatic changes in the economic setting. Although neither the war period nor the auto experience is typical in women's labor history, that job segregation was reconstituted under such extreme circumstances — in a high-wage industry and in a situation in which women's incorporation into basic industry's work force was construed as temporary — suggests the resilience of the ideology of sex typing and the job segregation it enforces. The auto experience during this period reveals the way in which that ideology, as constrained by a particular set of economic exigencies and political forces, provided the basis for automotive management to construct a new sexual division of labor "for the duration."

In the absence of an organized feminist movement or consciousness, the only vehicle for political struggle over the sexual division of labor in this period was the labor movement. The UAW did challenge managerial initiatives in this area during the mobilization, most importantly in the form of demands for "equal pay for equal work." Here the conflict was essentially between male auto workers and management, as women were new to both the industry and the union and were not yet a politically effective force. In addition, just securing access to "men's jobs" in the auto plants brought such a dramatic improvement in women workers' status and pay that the sexual division of labor *within* the wartime industry understandably did not preoccupy them.

During the postwar reconversion, when these gains were threatened and when women had accumulated some political experience, they would mobilize in opposition to management's effort to return to the prewar sexual division of labor in the auto industry. In the mobilization period, however, women and men alike generally accepted as legitimate the overall idiom of the sexual division of labor in that industry. The struggles which took place focused on where the boundaries between women's and men's work should be drawn, without questioning the existence of such boundaries, as the equal pay example well illustrates. Ultimately, then, despite the dramatic upheaval in women's position in the work force during the war, the ideology of sex typing retained its power for both workers and management in the auto industry. In the absence of either a more fully developed class

consciousness or a feminist movement, there was really no political basis for a sustained challenge to job segregation and the ideology of gender division which underpins it. Rather than romanticizing the wartime experience of women workers, we need to specify the kind of consciousness, of both class and gender, that might make it possible to dismantle the sexual division of paid labor and to transform work itself.

NOTES

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¹Karen Skold has documented the wartime pattern of job segregation by sex in the shipbuilding industry in her article, "The Job He Left Behind: Women and Shipyard Workers in Portland, Oregon During World War II," in *Women, War, and Revolution*, ed. Carol R. Berkin and Clara M. Lovett (New York: Holmes, Meier, 1980). Evidence is offered below for the automotive industry case. My dissertation presents a more detailed account of the situation in the auto industry and also documents wartime job segregation in the electrical manufacturing industry. See Ruth Milkman, "The Reproduction of Job Segregation by Sex: A Study of the Changing Sexual Division of Labor in the Auto and Electrical Manufacturing Industries in the 1940s" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1981).

²To be sure, the existence of a clearly defined sexual division of labor is not peculiar to capitalist societies — quite the contrary. Yet the persistence and reproduction of job segregation within capitalist relations of production presents a distinct theoretical problem — and an especially paradoxical one. Indeed, the development of capitalism was expected by friend and foe alike eventually to eliminate such "ascriptive" characteristics as sex (and race) from the process of allocating people to places within the social division of labor, and above all in the wage labor market. Both Karl Marx and Max Weber predicted this in the nineteenth century, and the same expectation has been expressed by many twentieth-century Marxist writers and by mainstream social scientists. Today it is impossible to defend the view that capitalism is incompatible with a rigid sexual division of labor outside the home. Such a thesis is instantly falsified by even a superficial glance at the situation in the United States and other advanced capitalist countries. Yet an adequate theoretical account of the continuous reproduction of job segregation by sex in capitalist societies has yet to be developed. The perspective frequently put forward by Marxist feminist theorists — that male domination exists as a "system," usually called "patriarchy," which is separate from and preceded capitalism, and is theoretically irreducible to it — while a possible starting point for such a theory, by itself offers no way out. This simply *presumes* the persistence of gender inequality within capitalism in general, and the capitalist labor market in particular, rather than *explaining why* it persists, which is hardly self-evident.

³This consideration is stressed in the literature on "labor market segmentation" developed by Marxist economists. See, for example, Richard Edwards, Michael Reich,

and David Gordon, eds., *Labor Market Segmentation* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co., 1975), especially the Introduction. However, this literature fails to distinguish between the class interests of capital and the interests of individual capital, missing a critical aspect of the problem altogether.

⁴This dynamic has been discussed extensively in Marxist feminist literature. See especially Veronica Beechey, "Some Notes on Female Wage Labour in Capitalist Production," *Capital and Class*, no. 3 (Autumn 1977), pp. 45-66; and Heidi Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex" in *Women and the Workplace: The Implications of Occupational Segregation*, ed. Martha Blaxall and Barbara Reagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

⁵This is the main emphasis in Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation." She neglects, however, to consider the potential for class interests prevailing over gender interests for male workers, as discussed below. Instead, she asserts the supremacy of the interests of "men as men" in maintaining a gender-stratified labor market, and takes this to be a primary underpinning of job segregation. This is a specific version of the problem discussed more generally in note 2.

⁶The war years produced a "family crisis" with many parallels to that of our own time and aroused many of the same concerns among contemporaries. This is discussed indirectly in Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations and the Status of Women in World War II* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), chap. 3.

⁷The transcript of this newsreel was made available to me by the Rosie the Riveter Film Project, Emeryville, California. Additional examples of the wartime idiom are cited below.

⁸U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, *Changes in Women's Employment During the War* (1944), Special Bulletin No. 20 p. 15; and U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Women in Factories* (1947), p. 7.

⁹U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, *Women Union Leaders Speak* (1945), p. 32. (Mimeographed.)

¹⁰Statistics on the representation of women in the auto industry for this period are scattered and not entirely consistent. The 1930 Census reported that women were 7 percent of all workers employed by the industry, and the 1940 Census enumeration produced a figure of 9 percent. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Population*, 5:468; and *Sixteenth Census of the United States 1940: Population*, 3:180. William McPherson reported in 1940 that women made up about 5 percent of the wage earners in auto assembly plants, about 10 percent of those in body plants, and about 20 percent of those in parts plants. See his *Labor Relations in the Automobile Industry* (Washington: Brookings Institute, 1940), pp. 8-9.

¹¹U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Wages and Hours of Labor in the Motor Vehicle Industry: 1925*, Bulletin No. 438 (1927), pp. 2-3.

¹²Even in the depression decade, when wage cuts were endemic throughout the economy, the weekly earnings of auto factory workers averaged 24 percent above the average for all manufacturing industry. See Andrew T. Court, *Men, Methods and Machines in Automobile Manufacturing* (Detroit: Auto Manufacturers' Association, 1939), p. 9. For discussion of Fordism, see Keith Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford* (New York: Rinehart, 1948); and Martha May, "The Historical Problem of the Family Wage: The Ford Motor Company and the Five Dollar Day," in this issue of *Feminist Studies*.

¹³McPherson, *Labor Relations in the Automobile Industry*, p. 83.

¹⁴Computed from data in Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Wages and Hours of Labor*, pp.

2-3; and U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Wage Structure of the Motor-Vehicle Industry*, Bulletin No. 706 (1942), pp. 23-24. In 1925, 11 percent of the male workers were in the four classifications employing the most women; while in 1940 less than 10 percent of the men were in the four largest female job categories. In both years, women were 2.5 percent of the work force in the motor vehicle plants surveyed.

¹⁵Robert W. Dunn, *Labor and Automobiles* (New York: International Publishers, 1929), p. 74; William McPherson, "Automobiles," in *How Collective Bargaining Works*, ed. Harry A. Millis (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1942), p. 576.

¹⁶*Wall Street Journal*, 22 November 1926, cited in Dunn, *Labor and Automobiles*, p. 74. For evidence that this was generally an exclusively male occupation, see Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Wages and Hours of Labor*.

¹⁷"Annual Averages of Hourly and Weekly Earnings and Average Hours per Week for Male and Female Wage Earners in the Automobile Industry," 28 June 1944, in UAW Research Department Collection, Wayne State University Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Detroit, Michigan (hereafter cited as WSUA), Box 10, Folder 10-19: "Employment, Detroit, 1941-1947."

¹⁸See U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Seniority in the Automobile Industry," by Jonas Silver and Everett Kassalow, 1944, pp. 25-27. (Mimeographed.)

¹⁹On conversion, see Barton J. Bernstein, "The Automobile Industry and the Coming of the Second World War," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 47 (June 1966): 22-33; and Alan Clive, *State of War: Michigan in World War II* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), pp. 18-42. The best statistics on the changing representation of women in the industry are those published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Women in Factories*, from which the following table is drawn:

**FEMALE AND TOTAL EMPLOYMENT IN THE AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY,
1940-1947**

Month and Year	All Production Workers	Female Production Workers	% Female
October 1940	533,300	30,400	5.7
April 1941	585,200	31,600	5.4
October 1941	577,500	28,300	4.9
April 1942	429,200	20,600	4.8
October 1942	576,000	69,700	12.1
April 1943	670,200	121,300	18.1
October 1943	775,900	199,400	25.7
April 1944	746,000	185,000	24.8
April 1945	706,000	158,000	22.4
August 1946 (VJ Day)	577,000	101,600	17.6
April 1946	646,000	61,400	9.5
April 1947	807,000	76,700	9.5

²⁰"Women in War Industries," *UAW Research Report*, 2 (September 1942) p.1.

²¹"Meeting for Discussion on Labor Supply and Future Labor Requirements," 26 June 1942, Detroit, Michigan, pp. 30-31 of transcript, in Records of the War Production Board — Record Group 179, National Archives (henceforth RG 179 — NA), Box 1016, Folder: "241.11R Labor — Women — Recruiting Drive"; Edward Cushman Interview with the writer, 25 June 1981, Detroit, Michigan.

²²Memorandum from Anthony Luchek to Joseph D. Keenan, 14 July 1943, "Degree of Utilization of Negro Workers . . .," in RG 179 — NA, Box 1017, Folder: "241.3 Labor Negroes"; "Women Seek Factory Jobs," *Detroit News*, 26 October 1942, in UAW Public Relations Department Collection, WSUA, Box 14, Folder: "Women."

Black employment in the Detroit auto industry rose from about 4 percent in the prewar period to 15 percent of the labor force in 1945. See Robert Weaver, *Negro Labor: A National Problem* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1946), p. 285; August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 213.

²³On prewar recruitment by auto firms, see Blanche Bernstein, "Hiring Policies in the Automobile Industry," Works Projects Association National Research Project (1937), marked "not for publication," copy in the W. Ellison Chalmers Collection, WSUA, Box 1. On wartime migration and the problems associated with it, see Clive, *State of War*, pp. 94-95, 172. The government report cited is an "Outline of Proposed Drive to Recruit Women for War Work in Wayne County Area," attached to memorandum from Ernest Kanzler to John L. Lovett, 3 July 1942, in RG 179 — NA, Box 1016, Folder: "241.11R Labor — Women — Recruiting Drive."

²⁴U.S. Congress, Senate, *Manpower Problems in Detroit*, Hearings before a Special Committee Investigating the National Defense Program, 79th Cong., 1st Session, March 9-13, 1945, pp. 13534, 13638.

²⁵Reference to such a survey made "to determine those operations which were suitable for female operators" is made on pp. 2-3 of the Summary Brief Submitted by Buick Motor Division, Melrose Park, General Motors Corp., In the Matter of GM — Buick, Melrose Park, Ill., and UAW, 14 June 1943, pp. 2-3, in Walter Reuther Collection, WSUA, Box 20, Folder: "WLB, GM Women's Rates." A survey of this type was also conducted at Willow Run; see the section on "Training of Women" in Willow Run Bomber Plant, Record of War Effort, vol. 2, pt. 2, January-December 1942, Ford Motor Company (notebook), p. 30, La Croix Collection, Acc. 435, Ford Archives, Box 15.

²⁶Computed from data in U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Division of Wage Analysis, Regional Office No. 8-A, Detroit, Michigan, 3 December 1943, Serial No. 8-A-16, "Metalworking Establishments, Detroit, Michigan, Labor Market Area, Straight-Time Average Hourly Earnings, Selected Occupations, July 1943," (Mimeographed.) Copy in UAW Research Department Collection, WSUA, Box 28, Folder: "Wage Rates (Detroit) Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1943-5." Women were 22 percent of the labor force surveyed here. If these data are compared to those in the 1940 Bureau of Labor Statistics survey cited in note 10, the degree of segregation by sex in the auto industry during the war is put into better perspective. In 1940, women were only 2.5 percent of the labor force, and two occupational groups accounted for one-half of the women in the industry. In 1943, five groups accounted for 51 percent of the women, which, given the much greater representation of women in the auto work force, does not indicate a significant decline in the degree of segregation.

²⁷Computed from the questionnaires from this survey by the writer. The questionnaires (unprocessed) are in the UAW War Policy Division — Women's Bureau Collection, WSUA, Series I, Box 5, Folders 5-10, 5-11, and 5-12.

²⁸Computed by the writer from "Ford Motor Company — Rouge Plant, Factory Count, December 14, 1943." This is one of several years worth of weekly "Factory Counts" in Acc. 732, Ford Archives, Box 1.

²⁹"Engineers of Womanpower," *Automotive War Production* 2 (October 1943): 4-5 (emphasis added). This magazine was published monthly, starting in March 1942, by the Automotive Council for War Production.

³⁰"Provisions in Plants for Physical Differences Enable Women to Handle Variety of War Jobs," *Automotive War Production* 2 (September 1943): 7.

³¹*Ibid.* Also see "Technological Advances in Automotive Plants Help to Combat Growing Manpower Crisis," *Automotive War Production* 2 (September 1943): 3; and "Automotive Industry Reducing War Costs Through Improved Production Techniques," *Automotive War Production* 2 (March 1943): 3.

³²"Women Work for Victory," *Automotive War Production* 1, (November 1942): 4; "Engineers of Womanpower," p. 4.

³³"Engineers of Womanpower," p.4.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p.4.

³⁵"New Workers," Manpower Reports No. 10 (Published by the Manpower Division, Automotive Council for War Production), p. 4; and "Problems of Women War Workers in Detroit," 20 August 1943, p. 2, by Anne Gould of the Office of Labor Production of the War Production Board, in RG 179 — NA, Box 203, Folder: "035.606 Service Trades Division, WPB Functions."

³⁶Women's Bureau, *Changes in Women's Employment*, p. 18.

³⁷"Report of Mrs. Betty Sturges Finan on Cleveland Detroit Trip, February 9-17 (1943) Inclusive," pp. 3-4, in Records of the War Manpower Commission — Record Group 211, National Archives, Box 977, Series 137, Folder: "Consultants — Betty Sturges Finan." See also the discussion of this in Helen Baker, *Women in War Industries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1942), p. 15.

³⁸Gene Minshall to Mauro Garcia, 29 July 1943; Mauro Garcia to DeWitt Patterson, 9 August 1943, in UAW Ford Department Collection, WSUA, Box 13, Folder: "Patterson, DeWitt, Ford Motor (Rouge)."

³⁹Transcript of 7 February 1942, Women's Conference, Detroit, Michigan, p. 27, in UAW War Policy Division — Victor Reuther Collection, WSUA, Box 2, Folder: "Conferences."

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴⁴*Manpower Problems in Detroit*, Hearings, p. 13595. See also Example No. 29, pp. 13594-95, for another example of this type of controversy.

⁴⁵Umpire Decision No. C-139, 29 November 1943, "Hiring of Women," *Decisions of the Impartial Umpire Under the October 19, 1942 Agreement between General Motors Corporation and the International Union, United Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Implement Workers of America — Congress of Industrial Organizations*, vol. 1 (privately published, Detroit: General Motors Corporation and United Automobile Workers), pp. 465-67.

⁴⁶"Work and Wage Experience of Willow Run Workers," *Monthly Labor Review*, 61, (December 1945): 1086.

⁴⁷I have not uncovered evidence of this specific to the auto industry, but the wartime literature on managerial policy toward women war workers generally is replete with insinuations that women make "poor supervisors" and the like. See for example, American Management Association, *Supervision of Women on Production Jobs: A Study of Management's Problems and Practices in Handling Female Personnel*, Special Research Report No. 2 (New York: AMA, 1943). For a general discussion of this issue, see also Joan Acker and Donald R. Van Houten, "Differential Recruitment and Control: The Sex Structuring of Organizations," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 19 (June 1974): 152-63.

⁴⁸"Labor 'Dilution,'" *Business Week*, No. 636 (8 November 1941), p. 59.

⁴⁹"Strike is Threatened at Kelsey Hayes Plant," *Detroit News*, 28 October 1941; "Workers Reject Plea for Truce," *Detroit News*, 29 October 1941, both in Joe Brown Collection, WSUA, Scrapbook No. 21, p. 85.

⁵⁰"Clarification of Female Work," 5 November 1941, enclosed in letter from Caroline Manning, Industrial Supervisor with the U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau to J.H. Wishart, Research Director, UAW-CIO, 17 November 1941, in UAW War Policy Division — Victor Reuther Collection, WSUA Box 11, Folder: "U.S. Dept. of Labor."

⁵¹"Kelsey Hayes-Plymouth Plant, Productive Rates," 5 November 1941, UAW Research Department Collection, WSUA, Box 9, Folder: "Dept. of Labor, U.S., 1940-2."

⁵²Nelson Lichtenstein, *Industrial Unionism under the No-Strike Pledge: A Study of the CIO During the Second World War* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1974), pp. 366-67.

⁵³"Sample handbill announcing arrival of company employment representatives to interview recruits for Willow Run," in *Willow Run Bomber Plant: Record of War Effort* 2, Notebook 2, p. 8, La Croix Collection, Acc. 435, Ford Archives, Box 15; "History of the Support of the Equal Pay Principle by Official Federal, State, and International Action, and by Unions and Management," Exhibit A submitted by Frieda Miller of the Women's Bureau, in U.S. Congress, Senate, *Equal Pay for Equal Work for Women*, Hearings on S. 1178, Senate Subcommittee of a Committee of Education and Labor, 79th Congress, 1st Session, October 29, 30, and 31, 1945, p. 34.

⁵⁴Bureau of National Affairs, *War Labor Reports* 3, pp. 355-56. For discussion and analysis of this and other equal pay decisions, see National War Labor Board, *The Termination Report: Industrial Disputes and Wage Stabilization in Wartime, Jan. 12, 1942 -Dec. 31, 1945*, pp. 290-97; Ella J. Polinsky, *National War Labor Board Policy on Equal Pay for Equal Work for Women*, National War Labor Board, Program Appraisal and Research Division, Research and Statistics Report No. 32 (Washington, D.C., 1945).

⁵⁵"Arbitrator's Decision — Women's Rates at Buick Division — Melrose Park, Ill.; Buick Division — Flint, Mich.; Chevrolet Division — Bay City, Mich.," In the Matter of General Motors Corporation and United Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Implement Workers of America — C.I.O., Case No. 125, 31 July 1943, pp. 5-6, in UAW Research Department Collection, WSUA, Box 32, Folder: "Women — Statistics and NWLB Cases 1943-5."

⁵⁶"Summary Brief Submitted by Buick Motor Division, Melrose Park, General Motors Corporation," In the Matter of General Motors Corporation, Buick Motor Division, Melrose Park, Ill., and International Union, United Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, C.I.O., 14 June 1943, pp. 7, 8, and 12, in Walter Reuther Collection, WSUA, Box 20, Folder: "WLB, GM Women's Rates," and "Summary Brief Submitted by Buick Motor Division, Flint, Michigan, General Motors Corporation," In the Matter of General Motors Corporation, Buick Motor Division, Flint, Mich., and International Union, United Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, C.I.O., 17 June 1943, pp. 11, 14, in Walter Reuther Collection, WSUA, Box 47, Folder: "WLB, GM Women's Rates." These five examples are only a small selection from the many such contained in the two briefs.

⁵⁷"Arbitrator's Decision — Women's Rates," p. 6.

⁵⁸"Opinion Explaining Directive Order," NWLB Region XI, Case 125, stamped 9 October 1943, in Walter Reuther Collection, WSUA, Box 47, Folder: "WLB — GM Women's Rates" (emphasis added).

⁵⁹This more radical formulation of the equal pay issue did emerge in the 1940s, but not in the auto industry. The United Electrical Workers Union did bring a case to the War Labor Board against General Electric and Westinghouse in 1945, which foreshadowed the "comparable worth" strategy being pursued by feminists in the labor movement today. The case may be found in *War Labor Reports* 28, pp. 666-92. For discussion, see Milkman, "Reproduction of Job Segregation," pp. 192-201.