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Book Reviews

The Declining Significance of Gender?

Francine D. Blau, Mary C. Brinton, and David B. Grusky, eds.
New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006. 296 pp. \$39.95.

Is gender inequality and the gender pay gap old news? Hardly, according to this engaging volume edited by Francine Blau, Mary Brinton, and David Grusky. Assembled from a series of lectures on gender inequality presented at Cornell University by leading economists and sociologists in the field, this collection offers fresh insight into the composition, history, and persistence of gender inequality over the past half-century. While the volume's primary focus is to provide an up-to-date assessment of the status of the gender pay gap, its other central aim is to evaluate whether the elimination of inequality can be anticipated in the foreseeable future.

The volume is organized into three parts. Part I, the Introduction, lays out the book's scope and provides a thorough and highly readable appraisal of the contributions that the perspectives of economics, organizations, political science, and culture bring to understanding the wage gap and the persistence of gender inequality. This excellent overview by Blau, Brinton, and Grusky reveals that most analyses of gender inequality focus on proximate mechanisms of change and stability and overlook, for the most part, the macro-level forces that lead to change in those mechanisms or the repercussions of those changes. By juxtaposing the range of scholarly fields that speak to the specification and measurement of the gender pay gap, the editors are also able to clarify how each draws on distinctly different constellations of proximate mechanisms, as well as the substantive contributions and explanatory limitations of each. This is an invaluable synthesis.

The second part of the book, "Making Sense of Change and Stability in Gender Inequality," consists of analyses by leading economists, each of whom presents a different but equally intriguing appraisal of the origins and causes of the gender wage gap. Blau and Kahn's lucid discussion covers important findings by fellow economists on the effects of education, experience, industries, occupations, and union status, and the bedeviling, persistent gender gap that is less easily accounted for. Pointing to the role of the wage structure and rising wage inequality for the workforce as a whole as the culprits illuminates recent fluctuations in the narrowing of the unexplained gender wage gap, opens up additional avenues for consideration, and offers firmer ground for anticipating the future.

The other chapters in this section fill out themes raised by Blau and Kahn and flesh out the goals for the volume as set forth by its editors. Goldin's chapter analyzes intriguing historical and firm-level archival evidence from the early part of the twentieth century to 1940 to demonstrate the lasting effects of the kinds of jobs that predominated in the economy of the early 1900s, when women began to enter the paid labor force in earnest. Women's entry took place when so-called "brawn" jobs dominated the economy and were defined categorically, and lastingly, as sexed. In the absence of the so-called "brain" jobs in the economy that an educated female

Book Reviews

workforce could arguably more readily fill, women's options were constrained early on by incomplete information about their productivity, and jobs became effectively gendered in ways that have been all but impossible to eradicate even under favorable economic circumstances. Goldin's proposed "pollution theory" model of discrimination updates the repercussions of her "brawn-brain" dichotomy and points to the corrosive consequentiality of incomplete information about women's productivity to gender inequality.

The contributions of the life-cycle human-capital model for understanding gender inequality are the focus of Polachek's chapter, in particular how expected lifetime labor-force participation affects men's and women's incentives to obtain marketable training. Polachek points to the combination of gender specialization in the household, cultural norms about women working, and government labor-market and tax policies that blatantly favor men as the harsh realities that deter women from attachment to lifetime work. According to life-cycle human-capital theory, these factors undermine women's incentive to invest fully in marketable schooling and on-the-job training. Such investments would align male and female lifetime work expectations and reduce the gender wage gap. Polachek asserts that so-called "societal" discrimination (in contrast to "market" discrimination) is largely to blame, a form of discrimination that is rooted in entrenched norms about household division of labor and childrearing, which compete with incentives to invest in human capital.

Picking up where Polachek left off, Hartmann, Rose, and Lovell offer an analysis of data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and a long-term measure of the earnings gap to demonstrate that women are actually worse off than the current gender wage gap indicates. Even as men's and women's work careers have become more similar, women's total earnings are still dramatically affected by how many hours they work, where they work, and what they are paid when they are working. Building on the known consequences of occupational sex segregation on women's earnings, Hartmann and her colleagues report that even after taking equivalent educational preparation into account, female-sector jobs pay less than male-sector jobs. The impact of the gender gap in earnings is profound—it has an insidious effect on families' life choices and poverty rates, older women's retirement security, and on single mothers' ability to provide for their children over and above the perverse internal logic it perpetuates in the form of a rigid division of labor in the workplace and in the home.

How do concerns about gender inequality apply to the very top levels of organizational hierarchies? To answer that question, Milgrom and Petersen study the factors that perpetuate the glass ceiling. Employing comparative data from Sweden, where progressive family policies exist, they find that whereas the persistence of the glass ceiling in the U.S. is largely due to a "frozen pipeline" of qualified female candidates, in Sweden the ceiling is sustained by persistent (although lessening) employer discrimination against more-senior women and the long-term consequences of skewed educational choices by men and women. In their assessment of the sta-

tus of gender inequality at this level, Milgrom and Petersen raise useful concerns about the interaction between employers' perceptions and unanticipated repercussions of educational choices and early career work adaptations to the perpetuation of the glass ceiling here and abroad.

The third part of the book considers "Possible Futures of Gender Inequality." Given gender inequality's apparent entrenchment, Jackson's argument that it will eventually erode altogether is informative, but according to England and Ridgeway, the authors of the two remaining chapters, his exclusive focus on trends at the level of social structure warrants serious challenge. Both authors nonetheless effectively build on his conclusion that long-term progress by employers and governments toward a more egalitarian distribution of power and interests is inevitable. England agrees with both Jackson and neoclassical economists who make an analogous argument that the logic and structure of modern bureaucratic organizations undercuts men's interest in women's subordination. As England subsequently argues, however, this line of reasoning, along with other modernizing trends, has failed to undermine the far greater tenacity of gender as an organizing principle of household and family behavior or men's resistance to embracing traditionally female responsibilities in the household. Brines' (1994) elegant analysis of the significance of gender displays as signals of resistance to household labor comes to mind here. Without change at this level of asymmetry, asserts England, gender inequality at home and at work will persist even if discrimination in hiring and promotion disappears altogether.

Ridgeway's contribution elaborates the reasons for gender's inexorable hold on society and how it so forcefully compels the continuous reproduction of gender inequality. In short, sex categorization, which is so fundamental to the social enactment of heterosexuality and reproduction, gives primacy to gender (along with race and age) as a framing device for the social relations making up all social institutions, including the labor market. Thus sex and gender's pervasiveness in the enactment of social relations embeds (and continuously re-embeds) itself in the inequalities associated with status positions in political, economic, and familial institutions. Less certain, though, are her prognostications for the persistence of this mechanism as society continues its move toward egalitarianism, as elaborated by Jackson. Also less clear is its viability as a template that reproduces gender bias in less bureaucratically organized work-related contexts. Recent findings reported by Smith-Doerr (2004) on flatter organizational forms that are emerging in the new knowledge economy raise questions about this, although clearly work remains to be done on whether on-the-job culture and organizational practices in these newer types of firms also translate into a reduction in gender inequality. These interesting developments, when coupled with Ridgeway's healthy skepticism about Jackson's projections, open up intriguing new avenues for research by scholars seeking to broaden disciplinary boundaries and subspecialties and willing to take on tough and increasingly complicated questions about the persistence

Book Reviews

and form of the wage gap and its contribution to gender inequality.

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