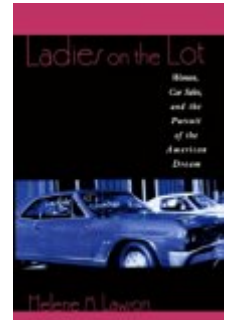


Helene M. Lawson. *Ladies on the Lot: Women, Car Sales, and the Pursuit of the American Dream.* Lanham and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000. v + 147 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8476-9863-9.



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Published on H-Women (July, 2001)

An Unbelievably Bad Deal!: Women Sales Agents and Car Dealerships in America

What happens when women begin working in the highly masculinized field of car sales? Why do women sell cars, and do they sell them differently than men? These questions form the focus of sociologist Helene M. Lawson's longitudinal study of forty-nine women in car sales from 1987 to 1999. Unfortunately, Lawson reveals that car dealerships are not just as bad as you thought they were; for women on the sales floor, they are much, much worse.

With one chapter entitled "Pinches, Pats, and Pokes: Negotiating the Hostile Environment of the Sales Floor," it is clear from the outset that selling cars is no picnic for women. Over the period of her study, the percentage of women in car sales inched from five percent to eight percent. Overt sexism certainly plays a part in keeping that figure low. Colleagues initiated one woman who moved from the office to sales in the following manner: "So they invited me to a sales meeting...first time ever! And I felt like I had really made it. I go to this back room and all the guys are

sitting around laughing. The local prostitute is up on the table doing a strip, shaking her ass, and they're looking at me for my reaction" (p. 2). One woman's manager would "torture" her: "He'd say, 'Want me to close this deal for you? Well, what are you gonna do for me if I close this deal for you?' And, oh, my God, while he was harassing me, I would see my customers leaving!" (p. 38). Lawson relates several vivid examples of sexual harassment, which appears to be nearly universal in the car sales business.

Muckraking is not Lawson's primary purpose. This is a sociological study of women who work in a particular business. As such it is heavy on direct quotes and description. The author logically organized her material into three multi-chapter sections: "Behind the Scenes," "On the Lot," and "Off the Lot." The first section, "Behind the Scenes," describes the various ways in which women became sales agents and variations in dealerships. It turns out that several women were recruited by management. This seems to contradict the pervasive sexism her study reveals, but some managers believe that women customers prefer women sales

agents. Other women actively sought car sales, lured by the promise of fat commissions. Once hired, women's experiences were shaped by the kind of dealership that employed them. The worst were the aggressive "'Slam-Dunk-Em' Stores" that heavily advertise medium-priced cars, get lots of walk-in customers, and put tremendous pressure on their sales force with little training. The calmer, small-volume suburban "Country Clubs" were better. Best were the one-price (e.g. Saturn) "'Girly' Stores" that paid a flat salary and sold to more women than men.

In her second section, "On the Lot," Lawson reveals the miserable conditions for most women in car sales. Male coworkers assumed that women were inadequate to the job, were more likely to quit because of family obligations, and did not belong on the sales floor. Lawson asserts that "men blocked them at the door and managers stationed them at a safe distance from the expensive models" (p. 69). New women sales agents were isolated by their male colleagues. Since training was inadequate at most stores, new employees relied on informal apprenticeships with co-workers. Always problematic in a situation in which colleagues are also competitors, this was even more treacherous for women, who were ignored or deliberately misinformed more often than new male sales agents. Once established on the sales floor, did these women sell cars differently than men? It appears that the answer is a qualified "yes." They exploited gender assumptions that hold that women are less aggressive and more nurturing than men to hook timid buyers. Indeed, women reported that they had to use this "relational approach" because if they behaved like their more aggressive male colleagues they were labeled "bitchy" or "pushy" by male customers. Some feigned ignorance to win the confidence of customers, while others disarmed defensive buyers with coffee and empathy (the "ladies" of *Ladies on the Lot*).

Lawson added that some male sales agents used the same techniques, but most "bragged

about controlling customers with intimidation." Indeed, one of the most interesting observations Lawson makes is in regard to language: "Some of the newer men I spoke with said they wanted to 'let customers go easier' but were shamed by co-workers for these feelings. They were called 'wimps,' 'losers,' and 'wussies'" (p. 75). Lawson suggests that women's relational approach is a positive influence on the car dealership and may be the wave of the future.

Lawson's last section, "Off the Lot," was the most disturbing. Though a few of her subjects enjoyed the thrill of the sale and a few were satisfied with the money they made, most were chasing an elusive dream of autonomy and economic sufficiency that was just out of their grasp. Some made substantial sacrifices. "Karen," convinced she was on the management track (exceedingly rare for women), gave up custody of her children so she could spend nearly all her waking hours on the lot. (In a depressing epilogue that summarized the careers of each of her subjects, Lawson revealed that a year later "Karen" was demoted to the sales floor in a "massive reorganization.") Even for those women who remained in sales, the frequent twelve hour days made child care extremely difficult. Long hours also meant that having any kind of social life was nearly impossible, unless one socialized strictly with coworkers. Again, this was even more difficult for women. Men were able to overcome their competition on the sales floor to go out for a few beers after work, but the reputation of any female coworker who dared to accompany them would suffer.

In the brief but suggestive conclusions at the end of her study, Lawson asserted that women who did well sold expensive cars, had family in the business, and "gave up family and social life in the present and dreamed of a wonderful social and family life in some distant future" (p. 115). But they also had to lie. At the beginning of her study, Lawson noted that "researchers who have studied the field agree that car sales agents who

keep their jobs and are successful must learn to become 'wheeler dealers': fast-talking, fast-moving liars who will resort to almost anything to close a deal" (p. 23). At the end, Lawson subtly suggests that this is more problematic for women than for men.

To succeed, sales agents "need to have a healthy distrust for co-workers and customers because they have to be able to pit themselves against customers who are armed with bluebooks and management and co-workers who want to take away their commissions any way they can. Women car sales agents must be self-centered and concerned with making money above all else. And, they are not particularly liked for this behavior. The public does not want to believe this about women, and men customers do not want to duel with women. They expect women to be easy to deal with, innocent and honest" (pp. 115-116).

Lawson made several interesting asides to related sociological studies in her endnotes, and I was frustrated that these ideas were not developed in the text. On the other hand, a clearly written, jargon-free text under 200 pages is just the ticket for classroom use. Indeed, the matter-of-fact manner by which Lawson describes example after example of outlandish sexism may shake up undergraduates who believe such behavior is a thing of the distant past. But I also wished that Lawson had availed herself of the historically informed literature on gender and work pioneered by fellow sociologist Ava Baron and historian Angel Kwolek-Folland. This, of course, is tantamount to expecting her to write a different book. In fact, it is a testament to her study that it richly suggests other avenues of analysis.

I would like to see her brief gender analysis of language broadened and the connections between the car dealership's masculinized triad of male fantasy, technology, and raw capitalism explored. Lawson alludes to the fact that automobiles have specific meanings for men, and she relates that women are understood as technological-

ly ignorant and inappropriate for the hard bargaining that typically takes place between customer and salesperson. But to unpack the gendered meanings of these transactions requires a deeper, historically informed understanding. Masculine fantasy and capitalist pugilism merge in the modern car dealership, where negotiation over trade-in values and price can escalate into a kind of masculinized economic brinksmanship rarely seen today at the retail level (and which perhaps echoes the hurly-burly capitalism that emerged during the nineteenth-century market revolution, when genteel women were defined as unsuited to the public sphere).

To summarize, Lawson's *Ladies on the Lot* is a revealing and disheartening look at women working today in a masculinized field, and an ugly inside view of the car dealership. The next time I buy a car, I will ask for a female sales agent-not for coffee and empathy, but for sisterhood.

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Citation: Karen Ward Mahar. Review of Lawson, Helene M. *Ladies on the Lot: Women, Car Sales, and the Pursuit of the American Dream*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. July, 2001.

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