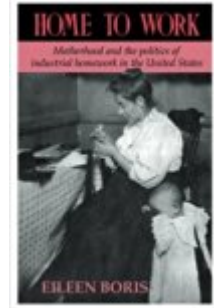


Eileen Boris. *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States.* Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 1994. \$29.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-45548-0.



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Just what is industrial homework? Is it an exploitative labor system and thus a social problem, or is it a creative effort to balance women's productive and reproductive activities in an alternative to unsympathetic forms of industrial activity indifferent to the demands of the latter? These arguments have supported and stymied the opponents and proponents of homework for more than a century. As Eileen Boris indicates in her new book, there is--and can be--no resolution to this tension until we reevaluate our assumptions that there are distinct spheres of "home" and "work" for women (in particular) and develop policy alternatives integrating both in ways that acknowledge the crucial contributions of women to the political economy. Her work is an ambitious attempt to explain how this often virtually invisible form of predominantly female labor is at the center of a complicated gendered nexus relating to "assumptions about the family economy, mother care of children, women's and men's relation to the wage system, the position of women in society, and attitude toward the labor contract, freemarket, and state responsibility for social welfare." (p. 3). She suggests that the viability of homework

as an alternative economic strategy cannot be properly assessed within a labor system that uses women's maternal responsibilities as an excuse to ignore their status and rights as workers.

The subject is timely because there has been a resurgence of home-based work in recent decades due to decentralization and deskilling trends in our increasingly internationalized, service-based economy. Boris is primarily interested in three important issues: how homework reveals gendered assumptions about the family, state, and economic processes; how these affect organizational and reform efforts and subsequent policy decisions; and how the homeworkers themselves develop economic strategies and evaluate their activities. After noting how the availability of female, homebound labor in earlier decades was crucial in the transition to an industrial economy, Boris traces these themes through a detailed history of homework beginning in the 1880s with the first regulatory efforts. Home-based manufacturing is generally labor-intensive and highly competitive because it requires low fixed capital, thus it was well-suited to take advantage of the extra-

ordinary influx of new immigrants into American cities in the late nineteenth century. Of course, much of that enterprise, particularly in the garment industry, resulted from the entrepreneurial activities of the immigrants themselves. Boris includes women who became contractors, and describes how homeworkers organized networks of their own to coordinate production strategies and support services. Observing that these blurrings contribute to the difficulty of analyzing the constraints the system placed on all participants, she specifies that her study does not address either home production for personal use or independent entrepreneurship, but rather the situation of women who are employees working in their homes for wages. She makes this clarification precisely to emphasize how alternative arguments relating to maternalism or personal initiatives, while relevant, can be used to obscure this relationship and perpetuate the system.

The book is divided into four sections. In Part One, Boris explores how the application of the judicial freedom of contract doctrine blocked efforts to legislate restrictions on homework. In the first major instance, New York City cigarmakers under Samuel Gompers helped pass a state law in 1884 prohibiting tenement house manufacture, only to see it nullified in 1885. In the *In re Jacobs* decision, the New York Supreme Court affirmed that a man should be free to perform his work where he pleases and where he can continue to supervise his family, even (or especially) if they are working with him. As Boris notes, however, "The irony was that this doctrine [right to contract] developed out of a case that, by sanctioning wage earning within the home, exposed such dichotomies as 'home' and 'work,' 'private' and 'public,' as mere constructions." (p. 44). Boris sees this decision as a critical determinant of subsequent activism and policy in its limitation of reform options. After this defeat, Gompers became disillusioned with legislative strategies and shifted to the voluntarism which characterizes his later career as president of the AFofL. The demands of working-

class men for a "family wage" linked masculine identity to their ability to support women in separate domestic worlds. From this perspective, (most) skilled working men were not interested in organizing unskilled, largely female homeworkers, in spite of indications that at least some of the latter would be receptive. Instead, labor's position became one of exclusion of these workers from unions or, in later years, from industries through contractual agreements with manufacturers.

These failures altered the rationales for reform and generally left the field open to women activists. Middle-class persons who were largely concerned about health and safety standards (read racist-nativist fears about dirt and disease associated with immigrant-ethnic labor) joined with working-class women to form organizations like the National Consumers League. Under the sagacious leadership of Florence Kelley, this organization shifted from a relatively ineffective label tactic (which they borrowed from the labor movement) to campaigns for far-reaching labor standards, including hours limitation and minimum wages for women. Boris clearly believes that these reformers developed a relatively effective strategy by arguing that if the home had become a workplace, then it could be regulated by the state as such. Practically, this approach promised to eliminate many of the incentives that sustained exploitative home labor by equalizing conditions between home and factory production in a given industry. Boris also describes these women's progressive interpretations of "women's rights": "As workers, women had the right to non-exploitative labor, the eight hour day, decent wages, and homes that were not factories. As women, workers had the right to a healthy womanhood and motherhood." (p. 80). There were two major problems inherent in this approach, however. The first was the prescription of a separate, domestic role for women as the ideal, with wage labor as an unfortunate anomaly, an assumption that most of these women continued to share with the rest of society. The second was that the courts

continued to limit the power of the states to regulate working conditions except to protect basic public health.

So female reformers had to shape their strategies accordingly. Initially they won limited regulation on sanitary grounds, but were thwarted when they tried to implement broader labor legislation. Most notably, in the 1890s Kelley and her associates won factory laws for women in Illinois only to see them struck down by the application of an "equal rights" version of freedom of contract discipline (*Ritchie v. People*). This decision illuminates how a supposedly-gender neutral principle could actually act to the detriment of women by ignoring the connection between their inferior position in the workplace and their familial obligations. In 1908, the *Muller v. Oregon* decision again altered the legislative environment by sustaining arguments for regulation of women's work by identifying a public interest in protecting the health of present or potential mothers. This victory was a mixed blessing, reinvigorating attempts to pass protective measures for women, but reinforcing traditional views of motherhood as women's primary avocation. Boris notes that as result, Progressive reformers became less committed to organizing women as workers, and emphasized instead the victimization of mothers forced by economic need to toil under the exploitative homework system.

Part Two traces the beginnings of government intervention in industrial relations that would come to fruition in the New Deal. In one chapter, Boris describes how World War I led to the establishment of standards for women in war industries, an important preliminary step. Simultaneously, however, "discourses of patriotism and citizenship" often encouraged homework, even by the federal government, in order to increase productivity. Opponents reversed this argument by arguing that factory production was far more efficient and economical, a rationale that they would also use during World War II. Of equal, if not

greater significance, was the emergence of a network of female reform professionals on both the federal and state levels. Through alliances with organized groups on the national, state, and local levels, they were able to continue to push for legislation and enforcement even during the unsympathetic decades of the 1920s. This phenomenon has been described in detail by other scholars, including Kathryn Kish Sklar, Robyn Muncy, and Theda Skocpol. These legislative histories are important, but they do contribute to an already very dense text.

Part Two also includes a chapter examining homework from the workers' points of view, a perspective often ignored by reformers and historians alike. One of the major strengths of this book is its consistent effort to integrate the actual workers into the broader policy history. For an earlier period, for example, Boris re-examines the classic photographs of Jacob Riis to reveal messages about the dignity of immigrant families at work that were often obscured by reformist manipulation for propaganda purposes. She also condenses information contained in her earlier book of essays, coedited with Cynthia R. Daniels (*Homework: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor at Home*, 1989) to present the varied experiences of different groups of women, including African-American women in Chicago and Latinas in the Southwest, among others. For the most part, however, the present work remains focused on the Northeast and Midwest.

Part Three traces the treatment of homework under the New Deal. With female government officials well in place, and the ambience of the time much more supportive toward labor in general, reformers were successful in winning outright bans on some forms of homework in the National Recovery Act of 1933 (NRA) and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA). They preferred prohibition because the experiences of the previous decades had demonstrated the ineffectiveness of regulation as a strategy, largely due to enforce-

ment problems in the absence of strong trade unions, women's organizations, or employer cooperation. Yet these difficulties continued to plague the new laws, especially because of their confusing piecemeal application to particular sectors. Boris observes that most New Dealers were hostile to industrial homework because it "curtailed factory employment, undercut wage and health standards, and lowered family purchasing power--impeding the recovery effort. Equally important for the Women's Bureau, such labor commercialized the home, undermining the 'normal demands of home and children upon the housewife and mother.'" (p. 201) Thus while they offered rights-based arguments justifying female economic independence and struggled mightily to improve conditions for women in industry, reformers did not challenge the artificial division between the two intimately related realms of women's work.

In this context it is also important to note Boris's argument that failure to link the two (by policymakers as well as by subsequent analysts) has affected understandings of the gendered development of the welfare state. Descriptions of a two-tiered system, in which men receive entitlement programs based on their work identities, while women received government charity based on their roles as mothers, are inadequate because they do not integrate the redistributive and the regulatory aspects of the state. For the most part, analysis of labor law does not deal with welfare measures, or vice versa. This very important point is beyond the scope of any single book, but the time is clearly ripe for such a task of interpretive reintegration.

The post-World War II period is the subject of Part Four. Initially, the successes of reformers and bureaucrats in either prohibiting homework or defining it as employment subject to factory regulations did apparently diminish its attractiveness and thus its frequency. New variations on old themes appeared after the war, however, combin-

ing with economic and demographic trends to generate a major resurgence in recent decades. Boris notes that rising numbers of middle-class suburban women began to do clerical work at home for additional income in a family strategy reoriented toward consumerism rather than subsistence. In the 1950s, employers eagerly tried to generalize this image of homeworkers as primarily mothers and housewives to obscure the exploitation of less fortunate workers and prevent regulation of the industry. In the 1980s, under the Reagan Administration, they were successful in partially overturning some restrictions, as well as impeding enforcement, by cynically echoing the logic of the Ritchie decision and perverting contemporaneous feminist rhetoric into a justification of women's equal rights to work in their homes if they choose. Many homeworkers also opposed restrictions by defining themselves as independent entrepreneurs and small producers and emphasizing how these arrangements allowed them to combine their home and family responsibilities. Homework was also proposed as an alternative to welfare dependency. Opponents have great difficulty refuting these arguments because this defense of homework recasts traditional practices in ways that seem to meet the needs of some workers in the new, decentralized service economy. Ironically, Boris notes that as an academic doing most of her writing at home, she is also a homeworker, although an extremely privileged, atypical one. Most homeworkers still receive low piecework wages in sex-segregated jobs that they must do while trying to care for children at the same time, which complicates the performance of both tasks.

The weakness of overreliance on labor standards becomes even more obvious in the present globalized economy filled with temporary workers, immigrants, and foreign competition. The rhetoric of liberal reformers in the United States has expanded to include calls for child care, but they still generally emphasize victimization and exploitation and avoid a careful critique of the

deeply embedded gender assumptions that support such a system. As Boris states, "By maintaining home and work as separate spheres, anti-homework liberals sought home free from homework but not from the unwaged labor that remained the cornerstone of power inequities between the sexes." (p. 350) In describing the effectiveness of renewed organizational efforts by women on an international level, Boris reiterates that such strategies are necessary to guarantee women's rights as workers. Nevertheless, she also advocates a wholesale reevaluation of how "Work in the family, as well as power relations among family members, not only becomes a crucial factor--along with class and race--in shaping positions in the labor market but is itself contingent on public policies, from taxation and immigration to welfare." (p. 356) In Boris's view, homework can never become a beneficial source of autonomous, well-paid, creative labor unless and until these inherent inequities are rectified and women face free rather than seriously constrained choices.

Thus this book is extremely ambitious in its undertakings, but in the end offers little hope for amelioration of the situation under the present circumstances. Despite her emphasis on the individual agency, opinions, and adaptive strategies of the homeworkers themselves, one wonders whether there is not the suggestion that at least some of them labor under a form of false consciousness that can only be overcome by organizing initiatives. Since such measures must arise endogenously to be successful, contemporary reformers may find themselves in a situation parallel to that of early twentieth-century activists, that of prescribing solutions to other people's problems. Perhaps this dilemma is unavoidable, considering the unlikelihood of a comprehensive social revolution in the near future. This book, so full of unsettling historical echoes, warns us to consider carefully the assumptions about women

and work that current public policy debates may reinscribe.

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