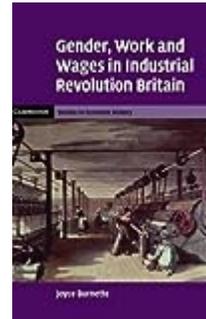




Joyce Burnette. *Gender, Work and Wages in Industrial Revolution Britain.* Cambridge Studies in Economic History Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xii + 377 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-88063-3.



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Occupational Discrimination and the Industrial Revolution: Rethinking the Role of Gender

With this book, economic historian Joyce Burnette adds to the already extensive research on the subject of women and work during the period of Britain's industrialization. Published under the Cambridge Studies in Economic History series, Burnette's study began as a doctoral dissertation completed in 1995, and then expanded with additional research and analysis on women and agricultural labor. In her efforts to determine the reasons for the occupational and wage differences that existed between men and women during the industrial revolution, Burnette utilizes a wide range of primary and secondary evidence, both statistical and anecdotal, including census records, trade directories, government enquiries, personal memoirs, and existing histories of women and work. Each chapter presents a specific element of Burnette's central argument, which successfully unifies this well-written and carefully researched book.

Burnette presents historians of women and gender with a challenging thesis: gender differences in the labor market, which affected occupational and wage discrimination, were not caused by gender ideology, but

were determined, first and foremost, by economic motivations. According to Burnette, previous studies of women's work and the industrial revolution attribute the differences in male and female wages and occupations to gender ideology: social and cultural institutions enforced socially determined gender roles that confined women by custom to low-pay, low-status work.[1]. In contrast to the prevailing ideological explanation, Burnette argues that while ideology is part of the equation in some occupations, women workers were disadvantaged in terms of their pay and occupational opportunities not because of ideological prejudices, but primarily due to the changing labor market of industrializing Britain. For example, hand spinning was a skill that women acquired through their work experience and it employed thousands of women across Britain. The mechanization of spinning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries centralized production in factories, the majority of which were in the northeast of England, thereby reducing the overall number of jobs for women in the trade. Women's traditional skills were devalued by mechaniza-

tion, not because of gender discrimination. In addition, Burnette argues that women often lacked the physical strength and the required skills to do the same kinds of work as men and warrant the same wages paid to men. Another example from the textile industry is the adoption of larger, heavier spinning mules in factories, which eliminated jobs for female spinners because the equipment was too heavy for most women to operate; and even though the introduction of the self-acting mule in the 1830s reduced this reliance on strength, by then, the trade was protected by a union that excluded women. In the competitive labor market, women were also less productive than men, again based on women's reduced levels of skill and physical strength, and also because female earning power was hindered by reproduction, childrearing, and domestic labor, all of which tied women to the home. In a labor market that rewarded strength, men had the comparative advantage, whereas women's role in child raising gave them a comparative advantage in the home-based cottage industry.

With the focus on material experience, Burnette surveys the different kinds of occupations that women undertook, the wages they earned, and the types of work women performed in the areas that employed the most females—cottage industries and textiles, as well as agriculture and domestic service. She develops a broad picture of women's employment during industrialization, which in this study extends from the late seventeenth century up to the mid-nineteenth century. Burnette finds that women were not confined per se to a small number of occupations, and although men and women generally worked in different areas, or performed different tasks when working in the same occupation, in most fields, barriers to women's employment "were not absolute" (p. 71). Except in a few sectors that depended on women's manual dexterity, like lace making or straw-plaiting before mechanization and foreign imports devalued both of those trades, women earned less than men, even when they were paid equal piece rates. Women earned less not because of gender ideology, but due to their lower productivity, as greater skill and strength equaled higher output and better pay. Burnette also explains the wage gap and women's lower productivity by their "lower levels of human capital" (p. 122). Occupational sorting and the division of labor reflected inherent gender differences with men in occupations that required more strength, and usually offered higher wages given the premium paid for both strength and productivity. As human capital, boys received more education and better apprenticeship opportunities because their potential for higher returns

in the labor market justified a greater pre-market investment. Although Burnette concedes that women's limited access to education and apprenticeships were the result of "pre-market discrimination," this same discrimination can still be rationalized by market forces (p. 123).

Burnette concedes that gender ideology, such as the workingman's declared right to a family wage and the domestic ideal that married women should not work outside of the home, was often used rhetorically to justify restrictions on women workers, and gender discrimination increasingly reduced women's employment opportunities throughout the nineteenth century. At the same time, however, the idealization of the Victorian home, and women's special place within it, elevated the social and cultural value of women's maternal role, at a time when rising real wages meant that fewer women needed to work, and more working men could successfully support their families on one income. Gender difference was not the root cause but the justification for women's exclusion from some occupations where male workers resented competition, not just from women but also from all unskilled or uncertified workers who threatened to erode wages and the premium paid for certain carefully guarded skills. Women faced gender discrimination in the professions and skilled trades where men's trade unions and professional associations used gender ideology to justify imposing barriers against women, but according to Burnette, this was driven by economic and not ideological considerations. Furthermore, restrictions on women's access to employment that were based on gender ideology operated most noticeably and successfully in occupations that were not subject to competitive markets, such as the skilled craft, white-collar, and professional occupations, including law, medicine, and the church. Occupations that did not rely on strength and were subject to unrestricted competitive markets were unsuccessful in their attempts to maintain an exclusive trade union that protected the wages and interests of skilled male workers. Burnette uses the case of tailors to illustrate this point: aggressive market competition and the use of women workers to undercut prices and break strikes meant that tailors were unable to successfully unionize to protect their wages, working conditions, and the status of their occupation. From this discussion, Burnette concludes that women and the British economy in general would have benefited from more competitive markets. Competitive markets "protected women against discrimination," and only employers who were shielded from the "discipline of the market," such as those with some kind of monopoly power, could discrim-

inate against women and still remain in business (p. 274).

Burnette makes a persuasive case for a reconsideration of the impact of gender on wages and occupations during the industrial revolution, and her arguments about the fluctuating value of certain skills and the premium paid for physical strength are well taken. That said, and recalling the work of Barbara Taylor and Anna Clark, it is hard to envision women workers in the piece-rate slop trades, deskilled and excluded from the male tailorsâ union, as âprotectedâ in any sense of the word.[2] Furthermore, in her discussion of trade unions and competition, Burnette does not address the subject of female and mixed-gender trade unions, combinations that limited free market competition, but offered female workers some form of wage security.[3]. In addition, readers may also note that it is still difficult to quantify the power of patriarchy with respect to the market value of womenâs domestic labor. Female agricultural workers may have received lower day rates than male farm workers, even when doing the same tasks, because the women worked shorter hours in the fields; however, their working day was extended several hours by domestic chores done before and after their waged labor. Womenâs unwaged domestic work reduced their real earnings, and also enabled men to work longer hours because they did not share that double burden, yet still received the benefits of womenâs unwaged labor in the home. Knowing that some read-

ers will find her conclusions contentious, Burnette hopes that the book will âstimulate a nuanced discussionâ about the relationship between gender and markets, and the operation of gender discrimination during the industrial revolution (p. ix). It is sure to do that, and will enliven the debate on the impact of industrialization on women and work.

Notes

[1]. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women in the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 274; Sonya Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 12-13; Deborah Simonton, *A History of European Womenâs Work* (London: Routledge, 1988); and Pamela Sharpe, "Commentary," in *Womenâs Work: The English Experience 1650-1914* (London: Arnold, 1998), 71-72.

[2]. Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Virago Books, 1983), 83-117; and Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 197-219.

[3]. For example, see Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, 207-209.

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