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Alice Kessler-Harris. *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Pursuit of Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 374 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-503835-4.

Reviewed by Rosalind Chait Barnett (Brandeis University)

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In her new book, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Pursuit of Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America*, Alice Kessler-Harris tackles “the problem of women.” Are women to be considered as individuals in the eyes of the law or rather as part of a family unit? Is it in the interest of the state to consider women in the roles of wife and mother or as individuals independent of their marital and family status? How can a woman’s role as childcare provider be reconciled with her individual right to pursue “economic citizenship”? Many of the policies that cause such harm for women in the U.S. today can be traced back directly to old struggles centered on such questions about “women’s place.”

Kessler-Harris reviews the history of legislation and public policy concerning the “woman problem” from the early nineteenth century to the present, with special attention given to the social/economic context. Crucial to understanding her view of this history are “gendered imaginations” of the “normal” family consisting of the independent sole-breadwinner father and the stay-at-home caretaker mother. According to these imaginations, women are defined in terms of their marital status, whereas men are defined as individuals. These imaginations guided the early deliberations that led to the entire body of laws regulating access to and benefits from wage labor. It behooves all people interested in the issue of gender equity to study this book and place their work within the historical context that Kessler-Harris so thoroughly provides.

The author presents detailed and fascinating evidence from the historical record that provides powerful insights into past and current struggles over the legal and social architecture relevant to such topics as social security,

old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, disability insurance, overtime pay, safety laws, income tax rules, differential wages, and sex segregation in the workplace. In her treatment of these topics, she demonstrates a circular self-perpetuating relationship between the gendered notions of the “normal” family and the restricted economic citizenship for women: the gendered notions lead to restricted economic citizenship, which, in turn, reinforces the gendered notions.

Among the policies discussed by Kessler-Harris are benefits, fair labor standards, and income tax regulations. Eligibility for benefits such as unemployment insurance and social security required the accumulation of a certain amount of earnings over a particular time period. Because women often worked irregularly (i.e., seasonally or part-time), they rarely qualified for such benefits even though they had to contribute to these programs through wage deductions.

Provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act also jeopardized women’s economic citizenship. Specifically, the exceptions to the mandated forty-hour work week applied to occupations in which women (as well as Blacks) were disproportionately represented. These exemptions led to the exploitative practice of requiring very long work weeks with no provision for overtime pay in certain occupations. Workers who were not covered by these provisions included teachers and domestics.

Finally, income tax regulations embodied in a quintessential way the obstacles to women’s economic citizenship. Husbands’ wages were subject to progressive taxation such that the rate of tax paid increased with earnings: the first dollars earned were taxed at a lower

rate than the last dollars earned per year. In contrast, wives' wages were treated very differently for tax purposes: even the first dollar earned by a wife was taxed at the highest rate paid on her husband's earnings. Thus, women's after-tax income suffered not only from wage discrimination but also from tax discrimination.

In general, the cumulative effect of the body of legislation reviewed by Kessler-Harris was severely to disadvantage women as workers and to concretize and exaggerate gender differences. Women became more economically dependent on men, less able to secure their own futures, less able to pursue the careers of their choice, and less able to care for their children. Yet women in large number supported these discriminatory laws. Apparently, many women shared the same gendered imaginations that had given rise to this body of legislation.

Just as social-science researchers like myself can benefit from Kessler-Harris's historical perspective, so too, perhaps, can historians and policymakers benefit from the fruits of decades of social science research. Among the most critical findings bearing on issues of employment is that the variation within each sex is greater than

the difference between the sexes. In general, women are as capable of breadwinning as are men, and men, in general, are as capable of caretaking as are women. In addition, research indicates that work and family roles are heavily intertwined. For both men and women, what happens in the family affects what happens in the workplace and vice versa. Of special importance is the fact that married employed women spend a disproportionately larger amount of time in childcare and household tasks than do their spouses. As long as this disparity exists, women will never be able to compete fairly with men in the labor market.

Unless and until such demonstrated facts about our society are more widely recognized and there is a massive change in the public's gendered imaginations, legislation that fully supports working women will not be passed, and it is therefore unlikely that women will be able to obtain full economic citizenship. In light of the strong resistance to change in these gendered notions so dramatically described by Kessler-Harris, quick fixes are unlikely. I fear that a hundred years from now, early in the 22nd century, we will still be reading with dismay about the pursuit of equity.

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