

When Women Didn't Count

Chapter 9 "Occupations Suitable for Women"

The 1940 Census recorded about 1,500 women working for the railroads as engineers, firemen, mechanics, repairmen, and car shop workers. In the published reports they were all counted as "tailors and tailoresses."

Difficulties in recording female occupations in government statistics began a century earlier. One reason seems to be assumptions as to what types of jobs women could, should, or would want to do, and a willingness to make the data fit the theory.

The first census to ask about people's occupations was 1820, but it queried only the head of each household about the number of people engaged in commerce, agriculture, and manufacturing.

The 1850 Census attempted to gather detailed occupational data for men and discovered that classifying the information into hundreds of categories was time consuming and expensive. The next decennial census added occupational data about women; for example, 17 women were listed as working in coal mining.

During the 1880 Census the statisticians began to sort the data about women's occupations in relation to marital status, but it was not until a decade later that useful data on that subject began to be published, and one could learn what percentage of married women held what types of occupations.

Data from 1880 about the clerical field illustrates the difficulty the Office of the Census had in organizing occupation information. A total of 6,618 women were recorded in clerical jobs (not including salesclerks), but the data was not sufficiently detailed to distinguish clerks and copyists from bookkeepers, cashiers, and accountants. The published record arbitrarily assigned about 60 percent to the clerk category and lists the rest as bookkeepers, cashiers, and accountants. Stenographers and typists were hidden among those categories.

The census of 1890 was the first to be tabulated mechanically, using punch cards. The published reports separated occupations into 50 male and 25 female categories. One purpose was to save pages: except for a few occupations with overlap (teachers, clerks, etc.), they needed to list only men or women, not both.

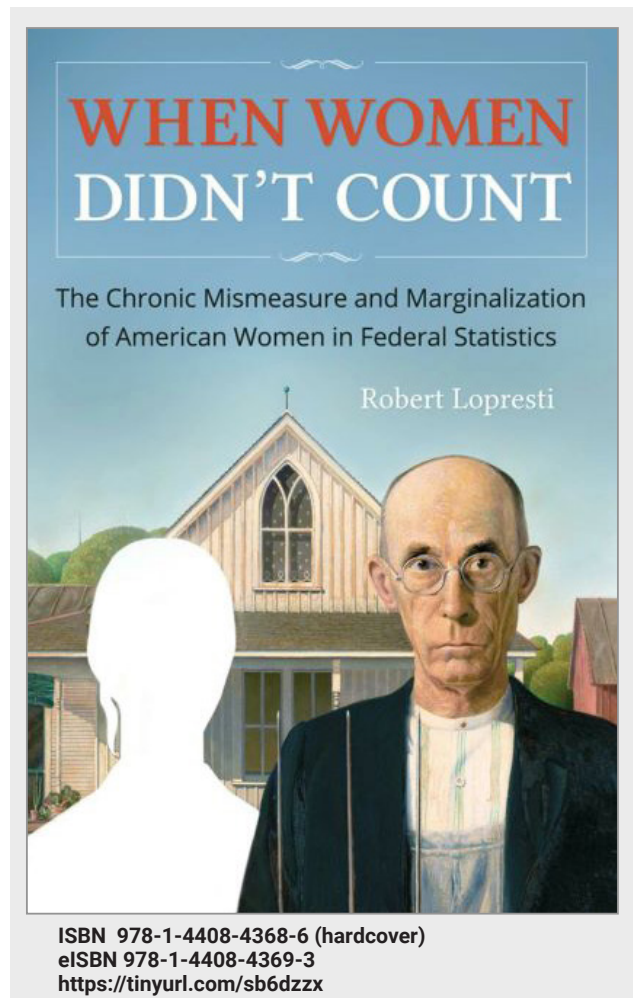
In 1900 the occupations field on the punch cards used a 0 or 1 code to indicate jobs that could be done by either sex; 2–7 were reserved for male-only occupations and 8 and 9 for female-only. By that point the managers were aware of the need to check these results for accuracy. One step was to automatically examine any cards that seemed to show unusual or contradictory data. That meant a manual recheck

of the schedule (original census record) for anyone over the age of 90, women with more than 10 children, single women with more than one child, Blacks living in the North, and so on. Unusual occupations for a given sex also fell into that category.

One modern scholar, Margo A. Conk, pointed out that this system was likely to create a subtle bias:

The punching clerks were aware that their work would be rejected if they coded men into "female" occupations and women into "male" occupations, even if they were true to the schedules. Thus, from the clerk's point of view, it would perhaps be better to use a non-controversial occupation code in the first place and avoid having one's work scrutinized...

The Census therefore did not merely report the sexual division of labor, it also reinforced it by determining that certain answers on the schedules would be considered "wrong."



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Chapter 9 "Occupations Suitable for Women" cont'd.

Conk also noted that while records showing women, minorities, and children in important fields were double-checked for accuracy "it was never 'inconsistent' or 'unusual' for adult native white [sic] males to follow most and especially the high-status occupations."

In 1907 the Census Bureau published its first volume on *Statistics of Women at Work*, based on otherwise unpublished data from the last decennial census. The book noted that women appeared in all but nine of the listed occupations:

Naturally no women are reported as United States soldiers, sailors, or marines; nor were any reported as firemen (in fire department), as street car drivers (though 2 were reported as motormen), as telegraph and telephone linemen, as apprentices or helpers to roofers or slaters, or as helpers to steam boiler makers or to brassworkers. But the reader may note with interest, and perhaps with some surprise, that 5 women were employed as [ship's] pilots, that on steam railroads 10 were employed as baggagemen, 31 as brakemen, 7 as conductors, 45 as engineers and firemen, and 26 as switchmen, yardmen, and flagmen; that 6 women were reported as ship carpenters, and 2 as roofers and slaters; that as many as 185 were returned as blacksmiths and 508 as machinists; that 8 were boilermakers, 31 were charcoal, coke and lime burners, and 11 were well borers. Such figures as these have little sociological significance beyond indicating that there are few kinds of work from which the female sex is absolutely debarred, either by nature or law or custom.

The 1910 Census began a newly critical examination of the occupations in which women were reported. "Extra special agent" Alba Edwards was in charge of occupation statistics for this census and the three that followed. He warned his own clerks that when "classifying an occupational return, always consider in connection with it the other information given about the person, such as the relationship to the head of the family, sex, age, whether an employer or employee, ownership of home, etc."

Edwards was interested in distinguishing between skilled, semiskilled, and unskilled occupations. Unfortunately, one of his criteria for the level of a particular job was the type of person who performed it. As Peter B. Meyer noted, Edwards promoted "the idea that a woman could have a skilled occupation but that an occupation made up mostly of women was not a skilled one."

Edwards explained that "certain specific occupations which, technically, are skilled occupations were classified as semi-skilled because the enumerators returned so many children, young persons, and women as pursuing these occupations as to render the occupations semiskilled, even though each of them did contain some skilled workers."

In spite of these tactics, women were reported in all but 35 of the 572 occupations included in the 1920 Census. Joseph A. Hill, writing in a 1929 Census monograph entitled *Women in Gainful Occupations, 1870 to 1920*, cautioned:

It is true that there is hardly any important branch of industry in which women are not employed in some capacity; but that does not mean that they are doing all or even nearly all the various kinds of work that men are doing. The variety of occupations in the field of modern industry is very great; and the census classification of occupations is necessarily a very summary one, in which many of the designations cover composite occupational or industrial groups, rather than single specific occupations... For example, 2,198 women are classified as laborers in blast furnaces and steel rolling mills. But the term "laborer" as applied to this industry covers a great number of distinct employments, possibly more than a hundred. Just what these women laborers were doing in the rolling mills no one without an intimate knowledge of the industry could venture to say. It is quite probable that many of them were employed in some such occupation as that of "scrubber" or "sweeper..."

No serious significance should be attached to the fact that in successive censuses, a certain small number of women have been reported as carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, plumbers, and even as locomotive engineers. These are sporadic cases, and many of them probably represent errors occurring in the original schedules or in the tabulation of the returns... The newspaper space writer or cartoonist may delight in featuring the woman blacksmith of the census as a village smithy in skirts or knickers working with hammer and anvil under the wide-spreading chestnut tree. But it is safe to say that it is a purely fanciful picture.

The *Index to Occupations* Edwards prepared for the 1930 Census made some changes. It no longer listed the following occupations as peculiar for women: carpenter; deliveryman, bakery or laundry; laborer, charcoal or coke works; laborer, gas works; longshoreman; oiler of machinery; porter; roller or roll hand (metal); and sheriff.

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