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## Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women (NBER Series on Long-Term Factors in Economic Development)

*Claudia Goldin*

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**Claudia Goldin : Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women (NBER Series on Long-Term Factors in Economic Development)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women (NBER Series on Long-Term Factors in Economic Development):

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. I don't like writing reviews  
By Libertarian Heretic  
I don't like writing reviews. I really don't have the training or patience to do a good job. But in this case I felt it was my responsibility to say something. Actually I would honestly rate this book 4 stars. However the negative 1 star review is so dishonest and unfair I feel I need to help bring the aggregate average up from 3 stars. This book has much to commend it. Out of the last few econometric heavy monograph I have read this was the best. There was no finding in this book that beggars belief (perhaps compared to the claim in William Darity's "Persistent Disparity" that college educated whites make 2500% the annual income of high school drop out blacks) which is a major flaw of many books in this genre (I'm looking at you Surjit Bhalla). I was surprised to learn in the 19th century USA there existed economic opportunities for uneducated young women that allowed them to make more money than similarly situated males. And it was likewise a new thing to learn that the skyrocketing labor force participation rates of women in the last half of the 20th century were in part only making up ground for lost employment that started in the 1920's and 1930's. If you have a political axe to grind this book will not whet your appetite. This is a prosaic survey of all the hard measurable facts attached to female employment. Yes you will learn a great deal about the effects of race, marital status, generation, education and immigration status on women over the last century. You will look at longitudinal statistics on employment and hear what that means about lifestyle choices people made in the past. You will see tables of sex ratios by industry. You will hear what reasons employers give for the decision they make respecting their female employees. You will look at ingenious attempts that try to calculate the fraction of the gender gap that can be attributed solely to sexism what fractions is accounted for by other factors and how they change (or don't) over time. You will see how labor laws and labor unions hindered or advanced the cause of pay equality. But of course for some (like our negative reviewer) that is not enough. I'm sure for that crowd a book written with support of the National Bureau of Economic Research with the phrase "An Economic History of American Women" in the title would satisfy more if it included a number of those classic one lines of the hard feminist left like "We live in a Patriarchy", "Motherhood is slavery" and the ever classy "All men are responsible for rape". So I just wanted to point out misrepresentations by our negative reviewer. 1) She says "She is attempting to address a socio-economic and politicized issue but is in fact only reiterating the history of women in the work place." Actually the closing chapter of the book is a gigantic tip of the hat to the political struggle for women's rights. While I don't have the book next to me to quote from now Goldin makes it clear there are problems outside the realm of economics like gender stereotypes and prejudice that must be dealt with in a political arena for progress to be made. 2) She says "Any student that paid attention in class knows the fluctuation in labor force participation rates in women. The average person knows that females to this day are not making the same income of their male counterparts. They know that during the World Wars, increasing numbers of women left the kitchen to go to work and, after the war, were sent right back to their job as homemakers." Which makes me wonder if she paid attention while reading. One of the counter intuitive findings that goes against this stylized fact is that the largest bump in female employment wasn't at the time of Rosie the Riveter. The large and continuous growth rate in female employment started after 1950 and has been continuing ever since. But I will agree with our negative reviewer on one point. It is one of two reasons I think the book \*HONESTLY\* deserves 4 stars. It labors its points too much. It is redundant. The other fault I find is the data are often ambiguous or unhelpful in telling a narrative. Economics is after all a social science. Narrative counts for a lot. Ask any politician who quotes a statistic. Otherwise a fairly interesting book. Not complete with respect to the entire history of the experience of women in America. I won't be able to wax poetically about why women may feel unfairly treated but it didn't advertise to be such a thing in the first place. And anyway that story about the status of women like all stories we tell about ourselves are emergent and living. No such book can exist. 4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. This book does what it says it does  
By Jen  
I have to disagree with the other reviewer here, in that it seems she was looking for a book of another genre--perhaps one written by a feminist or political scientist. But Goldin is a mainstream economist and is a positivist, and her book is very good for its genre. She describes and analyzes (from an economist's perspective) historical data about women and work in the United States and she does this quite well. The book is very thorough, and to the extent data are not available to explore certain aspects, she says so. Giving this book a bad review because it is the wrong genre is about the same as my giving a poor review to a mystery when I would have preferred comedy. One really should look a bit into the author's background before choosing to read a book if the reader is looking for a particular type of analysis. And, while the other reviewer seems to basically say, "Everybody knows this stuff," I'd argue (as a professor of economics) that is definitely not true, and this book is an excellent education in the facts. 9 of 27 people found the following review helpful. Forced to read... would never touch it again  
By Jenn  
I was forced to read this book for my Macroeconomics class and it honestly sounded somewhat interesting. But then I opened to the first chapter and realized I had made a major mistake in choosing this book for my outside reading assignment. Goldin is correct in her analysis of women in the workplace, but she is very redundant. She is attempting to address a socio-economic and politicized issue but is in fact only reiterating the history of women in the work place. Understanding the Gender Gap is merely a more detailed look at United States history. Any student that paid attention in class knows the fluctuation in labor force participation rates in women. The average person knows that females to this day are not making the same income of their male counterparts. They know that during the World Wars, increasing numbers of women left

the kitchen to go to work and, after the war, were sent right back to their job as homemakers. She is not adding sufficient analysis of the economic data to in fact "understand" why such a gap should continue to exist. She does not address those issues faced by women in daily life. Women pay more than males do for nearly everything. Dry cleaning for women is more expensive than for men; car repair work costs more; haircuts, shoes, everyday clothing... That is the gender gap; that is what Goldin should have been addressing rather than summarizing the history of American females. This book accomplishes one goal which is to emphasize the point that women are still not receiving equality in the workplace, but it does not inspire the reader to fight against these injustices which was Goldin's purpose. If anything, it tires the reader of being told the same things over and over again. The book is also poorly organized and frequently jumps around to different eras in American history. Instead of moving chronologically, Goldin may make a reference to industrialization in the 1800's and in the space of a few pages, discuss World War I. She also addresses things she is going to discuss later on in the book. "But survey evidence, presented in chapter 5, shows their forecasts..." (5) is an ideal example. She presents the point, then tells the reader that she plans on discussing it later. It disrupts the flow of the writing and confuses the reader with the constant mentions of different parts of the book, which, in many cases, the reader has not read yet. She also has quite long paragraphs, but they essentially say nothing. I found it thoroughly amusing that I could open to any page of the book, pick a random paragraph, read it, and know exactly what she is talking about. If you are looking for a good read on females in the workplace, this book is most definitely one I would NOT recommend.

Women have entered the labor market in unprecedented numbers, yet these critically needed workers still earn less than men and have fewer opportunities for advancement. This study traces the evolution of the female labor force in America, addressing the issue of gender distinction in the workplace and refuting the notion that women's employment advances were a response to social revolution rather than long-run economic progress. Employing innovative quantitative history methods and new data series on employment, earnings, work experience, discrimination, and hours of work, it establishes that the present economic status of women evolved gradually over the last two centuries and that past conceptions of women workers persist.

"Goes a long way toward the reintegration of labor history into labor economics....Clearly demonstrates the importance of history in understanding the evolution and operation of labor markets...a primer on much of modern labor economics."--Journal of Economic History"An excellent historical overview of women in the labor force. A very challenging but manageable text for undergraduates with a limited economics background."--Hilarie Lieb, Northwestern University"An insightful analysis not available in traditional studies of the U.S. economy."--J. M. Skaggs, Wichita State University"Outstanding....Goldin has painstakingly assembled a long and rich set of consistent data, much of it rescued from dusty archives where it had long languished....Uses fresh, often innovative applications of economic theory and econometric methodology to wrest explanations of puzzling phenomena....Rewarding."--Women Historians of the Midwest Newsletter"A remarkable work of scholarship: it integrates economic theory, econometrics, a vast historical literature, and a deep understanding of institutions and attitudes....A tour de force. Its lucky readers will not only be glad they read it; they will wish they had written it."--Industrial and Labor Relations "Remarkably thorough history and analysis of U.S. women in the workplace....Provides a useful framework to understand the difference in pay and argues from the data that much--but not all--of the gap is due to wage discrimination."--Population Today"A piece of outstanding scholarship based on exhaustive primary research and a high level of economic reasoning which has the courage to attack head-on the three most difficult questions in women's economic history."--Business History"Thorough, detailed and impeccably researched, yet accessible to the undergraduate. A fine effort."--Michael Hauptert, University of Wisconsin, Lacrosse"Pathbreaking....Claudia Goldin combines the quantitative skills of an economist with the investigative skills of a historian in her reinterpretation and adjustment of earlier published data as well as her creative use of previously unanalyzed data from the National Archives."--Population and Development "Goldin's multifaceted exploration of the female labor force over the past two centuries sheds light on the direction for future research."--Journal of Interdisciplinary HistoryAbout the AuthorClaudia Goldin is at Harvard University.