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978-0-521-88063-3 - Gender, Work and Wages in Industrial Revolution Britain

Joyce Burnette

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Gender, Work and Wages in Industrial Revolution Britain

A major new study of the role of women in the labor market of Industrial Revolution Britain. It is well known that men and women usually worked in different occupations, and that women earned lower wages than men. These differences are usually attributed to custom but Joyce Burnette here demonstrates instead that gender differences in occupations and wages were largely driven by market forces. Her findings reveal that, rather than harming women, competition actually helped them by eroding the power that male workers needed to restrict female employment and by minimizing the gender wage gap by sorting women into the least strength-intensive occupations. Where the strength requirements of an occupation made women less productive than men, occupational segregation maximized both economic efficiency and female incomes. She shows that women's wages were then market rather than customary wages and that the gender wage gap resulted from actual differences in productivity.

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Preface

Once upon a time women were largely missing from economic history. Economic historians somehow managed to make claims about the standard of living without examining women's wages. Happily, that has now changed, thanks to the efforts of pioneering feminists who made the case for the importance of including women in economic history. Since the value of studying women as well as men is now well established, I do not feel a need to justify the existence of this book. The subject matter is contentious, but it is my hope that the book will stimulate, not an all-or-nothing debate about the existence of gender discrimination, but a nuanced discussion of where, when, and how gender discrimination may have operated, and of the relationship between discrimination and markets.

This book began fifteen years ago as a PhD dissertation at Northwestern University. The origin of the project was a paper I wrote for Joel Mokyr's European Economic History class on the correlation between male and female wages in the "Rural Queries" of 1833. This paper got me thinking about how the labor market treated women, a process which eventually led to the ideas expressed here. I am grateful for the input of Joel Mokyr, my dissertation advisor, and Rebecca Blank and Bruce Meyer, the labor economists on my committee. A grant from the Mellon Foundation supported a year of dissertation research, and a Northwestern University Dissertation Year Grant supported the purchase of microfilm from the archives.

After receiving my PhD, I published parts of my research as articles, but otherwise put the dissertation aside while I concentrated on collecting data from farm accounts. I continued to think about the issues raised in this book, but did not begin to revise it until my sabbatical in 2002–3. I spent that academic year as a visitor at the London School of Economics, supported partly by Wabash College and partly by a Sabbatical Fellowship from the American Philosophical Society. Most of the revisions to the

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manuscript were accomplished in the spring of 2005, during a one-semester leave funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation (Grant no. 0213954). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this book are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation. I thank Dan Newlon for working with someone who didn't understand the grant process very well.

I am thankful for the many comments I have received from colleagues when I have presented portions of the material. Colleagues who have been especially helpful are Greg Clark, Jane Humphries, and Andrew Seltzer, who have commented on my work multiple times over many years. I am especially grateful for critics of my work who have forced me to think more carefully about specific claims. I thank James Henderson for teaching me to love economics as an undergraduate at Valparaiso University. Last but not least, I am thankful for the support of my husband Patrick, both for helping me with my prose, and for running the household when I was doing other things.