4. Lives of Labor

Published by

Gabaccia, Donna.
From the Other Side: Women, Gender, &amp; Immigrant Life in the U.S., 1820-1990.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/113366.

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PART II.

Foreign and Female:
Continuities in Immigrant Life
FOUR

Lives of Labor

The women of the other side were accustomed to hard work, although not always as wage-earners. Not surprisingly, all the individual women immigrants we have met in the last three chapters worked after they arrived in the United States, too. But not all worked for wages or outside their homes, especially in the nineteenth century. For those enmeshed in the family economies of subsistence agriculture on the other side, agricultural work often continued in the United States. In the nineteenth century, Ida Lindgren farmed with her family on the prairies of Kansas. She found the fireflies of Kansas enchanting, but she also reported to relatives at home about wolves, droughts, and plagues of large grayish grasshoppers. Having already struggled unsuccessfully to wrestle a living from Sweden's stony soil, a discouraged Ida wrote from Kansas, “Don’t you think, Mamma, that I could bear a little bit of success?” By the late twentieth century, however, work in U.S. agriculture meant waged work and poverty: Isabela Ramírez, who had walked from her scrap of land in the mountains of Guatemala, settled with her family in Florida's Blue Camp, which had been built originally for Mexican migratory laborers in the 1960s. Isabela and her husband and children worked in the fields, harvesting crops for low pay, little stability, and no benefits.

Domestic service, although undergoing far-reaching reorganization from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, also provided work opportunities for large numbers of immigrant women wage-earners from the developing parts of the other side. Norah Joyce, from Ireland, found live-in work as a servant in a Boston household, earning seven dollars a week. Although born into a prosperous Japanese family, Michiko Sato worked as a cook when she reached California; her husband became a farm laborer. More recently, Martha Vásquez de Gómez was first rejected as too young by prospective employers in San Antonio, but was then referred to a bilingual Chicano family looking for “a girl.” With a long life “in service,” Mrs. Rosalyn Morris quickly found day work in private households in New York; she maintained her own home, as she had in Jamaica.

Past and present, a small group of industries have offered employment to the many immigrant women who migrated in family groups and pooled earnings with other members of their families. Beatrice Pollock—who followed her sister to Chicago—immediately found work in a garment shop, sewing pants on a machine; although frustrated in her desires, Michelena Gaetano Profeta had dreamed of doing the same. Today, Asian and Latina
women do much the same work, often under similar conditions, in textiles, garments, canning, and other "light" industries.

Work in family businesses has dominated the lives of many married immigrant women and mothers. At home in Croatia, Rosa Popovich's mother had tended vineyards and raised grain and vegetables. As soon as she arrived in Pennsylvania, this Croatian woman transformed her home into a boarding house and began cooking and cleaning for twelve male miners. Mrs. Bardusky, from Poland, worked first in her brother's grocery store, then in her husband's carpentry shop. In Pittsburgh, Michelena Profeta had to learn the fundamentals of housework from her new mother-in-law; besides caring for her children, she kept her husband's barbershop supplied with fresh linens. More recently, the Cambodian school teacher "Celia" Vann Noup became proprietor of a doughnut shop in Santa Monica, California.

For immigrant women past and present, the combination of paid work with heavy domestic responsibilities has been the norm. In both of these respects, the immigrant women of the nineteenth century led lives more like those of America's racial minorities than those of white women of the American middle classes. Over time, however, the work lives of all these women have converged. Increasing proportions of American women have found employment in white-collar and professional work. More education and less child labor, along with continuous wage-earning from maturity through marriage and motherhood to retirement, has transformed the female waged workforce from "working daughters" to "working mothers." As a result the lives of wage-earning women now seem dictated more by their gender in a sex-segregated job market than by their race, ethnicity, or nationality.

THE WORLD OF WORK AND WAGES:
THE PAST

For most immigrant women of the past, life in the United States meant an ever more inescapable confrontation with the capitalist world of wage-earning, money, and commerce. Foreign-born women and their daughters constituted over half of the American workforce of female wage-earners before 1900, and slightly less than half of all female wage-earners in 1920. They worked in large numbers because few immigrant men earned a family wage; they worked to support families more often than to pursue an independent existence.

Like immigrant men in the nineteenth century, immigrant women found employment mainly at the bottom of the occupational ladder. They worked at jobs held—in earlier decades—by native-born women, not by men of their own backgrounds. As native-born white women withdrew from farming, domestic service, and factory work to feminize formerly male professions (like teaching) or take new jobs in offices, foreign-born women found their own niche in a female occupational hierarchy. Foreigners joined African American women in agriculture and domestic service, while factory work in women's
industries—from which African Americans were generally excluded before World War II—became the most uniquely female and foreign occupational niche in the American job market. As late as 1920, 34 percent of foreign-born females worked in manufacturing and one-quarter in domestic service.4

Labor force participation rates among immigrant women varied somewhat with background, but these differences seem small when compared to large differences in the work lives of married and single women, and in the jobs taken by women of differing backgrounds.5 In the nineteenth century most immigrant servants and factory operatives were young and unmarried, while foreign-born married women of many backgrounds were like African American women in combining intermittent or continuous employment, often at home, with marriage and child-bearing.6

While domestic service was a segregated, female occupation, both immigrant women and men toiled in “immigrant industries” like shoes, garments, and textiles. Gender hierarchies, however, were common: men held the more skilled jobs—cutters and pressers in garments; fixers and weavers in textiles—while women more often became operatives and machine tenders.7 Over time, too, textiles and garments, along with canneries, increasingly feminized as male immigrants clustered disproportionately in industries like steel, chemicals, and construction.

In agriculture, too, both women and men toiled for wages, although often at separate tasks. In Hawaii, sugar and pineapple plantation owners employed Korean, Okinawan, Japanese, and Filipino women as laborers.8 Like peasant women on the other side, Asian women working in agriculture often continued earning wages after marriage and childbearing. About a quarter of Japanese women became agricultural wage-earners in California, while Sicilian women raised family food on Louisiana sugar plantations where their husbands and fathers worked for wages.9

Ethnic and gender segmentation resulted from both immigrant preferences and discriminatory employment practices. Greenhorn women, like men, depended on family and friends to help them find work and to show them the ropes once employed. Such networking meant that an ethnic group might be concentrated in jobs of a certain type simply because the network’s earliest members had happened to find jobs in that field. This was especially true for women—employers rarely expressed strong preferences for women workers of a particular background in the way, for example, that steel industry employers deliberately matched men of different backgrounds to jobs they believed “racially” suited to them.10

Domestic service was a different story. Single immigrant women of every background had called themselves domestic servants when they entered the United States, but women of only a few backgrounds worked extensively as servants in the United States. In 1920, 87 percent of employed Swedish women were servants—a rate almost matched by Norwegian (86%), Irish (81%), and Slovak (86%) female workers. By contrast, only 8 percent of Italian and 7 percent of Yiddish-speaking Jewish women worked as servants.11
The reasons for this disparity are still in dispute. Some scholars argue that immigrant women from Russian Jewish and Italian families avoided domestic service because of their cultural proscriptions against female contacts with outsiders. Others believe instead that Italian, Jewish, and some other women who migrated as parts of families wanted jobs that allowed them to live at home. Still others argue that these groups rejected domestic service because they had more and better opportunities to earn wages in industry, whereas before 1880, Irish, Swedish, and German women seeking work had few options outside of domestic service. But these same women—whether from Ireland or Slovakia—also saw domestic service as a step up from the farm labor they had done at home. Racial discrimination limited options for Japanese and Mexican women, who also worked in large numbers as servants in the West and Southwest. Specific employer priorities also encouraged ethnic segregation. Protestant American housewives worried about Catholic Irish servants corrupting their children, but many hired female Irish immigrants anyway, because they wanted English-speaking servants. Others preferred Germans, Scandinavians, or Finns, who rarely spoke English, but were Protestant, and—having worked in large numbers as domestics prior to departure—may also have brought with them greater familiarity with bourgeois standards of cleanliness.

How immigrant women evaluated domestic service varied with their ethnic background. It certainly had its drawbacks. Domestic servants lived in; they had little control over their own time; they worked irregular and very long hours (enjoying only one half-day free each week) for extremely low cash wages (employers considered room and board the larger part of servants’ pay). Relations between mistresses and their servant girls were unpredictable, ranging from harsh, distant, and exploitative to familial and controlling or warmly friendly. Some servants complained about sexual harassment by male members of families they served; more prostitutes had previously worked as domestics servants than at any other job. Still, as mentioned earlier, Swedish and Irish women saw domestic service as a positive occupational choice, since it provided a kind of domestic apprenticeship and thus was an improvement on agricultural work. For independent single women, work in a middle-class home provided necessary housing as well as a wage.

In the industrializing northeast of the United States, Irish, Germans, and French Canadians pioneered immigrant women’s employment in shoe and textile mills in the 1840s; after 1880, Polish, Italian, and Syrian women joined them. The same groups entered the burgeoning garment factories of New York, Chicago, and smaller American cities. Textiles, garment shops, and canneries all employed ethnically mixed female workforces—Mexican, Jewish, Italian, and northern European women in California canneries; Polish, German, and south Slavic women in the canneries of Pittsburgh. In Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago garment factories, Jews and Italians mingled with smaller numbers of Irish and German immigrants or daughters of these earlier migrations.
The typical factory operative before 1920 was born either on the other side or shortly after her parents’ arrival in the United States. Some Polish and eastern European Jewish young women also migrated independently to factory settings. Most immigrant factory operatives had had some schooling but had left at a young age to work for wages. In the nineteenth century, girls began work between ages ten and twelve; later, child labor and school-leaving laws raised the average age for factory beginners first to fourteen, then to sixteen.

Most immigrant girls worked for about ten years, typically in a variety of short-term, seasonal, and low-paying jobs. Almost all left factory employment upon marriage, or in some cases (Italians, Poles) after the birth of a child. In large cities with a strong demand for female labor in a particular industry, young female workers could build up their skill levels and spend an entire working life in one industry. More commonly, however, young women tried their hand at many trades during their wage-earning years. Seasonal periods of slack production characterized all the major industries employing immigrants, so many women had to change employment regardless of their desires or ambitions: this was an experience they shared with men. But women factory operatives also frequently mentioned sexual harassment as an incentive to seek a new position.¹⁷

Smaller numbers of older immigrant women worked at the same jobs as younger single women. Laundries, too, often employed significant numbers of older women. A few of these workers were independent women who had never married, but older women in industry typically had children to support; they worked because their husbands were deceased, unemployed, disabled, drunken, or absent. Many took night work in order to combine family and child-rearing responsibilities with wage-earning. The exhaustion caused by their double days of labor attracted considerable attention from reformers and resulted in the abolition of night work for women in many states by World War I.¹⁸

Female factory workers earned from one-half to two-thirds of the wages paid to men, which meant few could live independent of a family."¹⁹ Their workplaces were arguably safer than in men’s industries like mining and steel, but few satisfied American notions of female gentility. In laundries and canneries, girls worked in their shifts; many had to stand all day at their work; in many workplaces, employers made no toilet provisions for women workers at all. The Triangle fire, in which over 140 Russian Jewish and Italian girls died, highlighted the dangers of factory work in women’s industries and resulted in the passage of New York State’s first factory regulations.²⁰ But Americans worried almost as much about the moral dangers women faced in factories. Observers derided the “frivolous” dress and manner of factory girls, and their casual flirtations with men; they wrongly assumed that work in the factory led directly to prostitution.²¹

Unlike Asian immigrants or Mexican American and African American wives and mothers who typically worked in domestic service or on the land, married immigrant women from Europe most frequently did industrial work
at home for piece rates. In the Southwest, growing numbers of Mexican American women also worked at home in the 1930s and 1940s. In New York, women produced garments and cigars in small tenement workshops until regulation forced them out of residential buildings. Many then became “outworkers” or “homeworkers” for large-scale manufacturers, working again in their own kitchens or front rooms. Homeworkers completed an enormous range of tasks at piece rates: they packed food into jars, stripped feathers, basted pants, made buttonholes, crocheted slippers, and assembled toys. By working at home, married women combined domestic responsibilities with wage-earning. They also transformed their young children into helpers, learners and (on a pitifully limited scale) wage-earners for the family.22

American reformers and labor activists worked to prohibit homework, and to protect women from exploitation by greedy employers or idle husbands.23 Immigrant women, however, were often relatively uninterested in the exploitation question; they saw their children as the main beneficiaries of their endless, exhausting labors. Reformers’ campaigns to abolish homework progressed slowly, in part because many foreign-born wives saw only impoverishment in their proposals. Homework survived long after night work and child labor fell to state regulations.

In a very different realm, immigrant prostitution attracted even more negative attention than industrial homework. In New York, only French and native-born women worked as prostitutes in numbers disproportionate to their ethnic groups’ weight in the general population. Irish and eastern European Jewish women were the largest groups of foreign-born prostitutes; Germans and Italians rarely prostituted themselves.24 Given the multiethnic population of New York, and its sizable population of southern and eastern European male sojourners, it is unlikely that all the clients of these prostitutes were men from their own backgrounds. The Jewish prostitutes of New York’s Lower East Side red-light district on Allen street, for example, attracted clients from well beyond their immediate Jewish neighborhood. A few prostitutes, working with a multiethnic male clientele, transformed sex work into successful businesses: Polly Adler, who became a sex worker after being raped by a factory supervisor, eventually became a prosperous madam.25 A contrasting and more typical example is the Jewish prostitute Maimie, who entered the sex trade as an unhappy rebel from a loveless home; she eventually left prostitution to enter an equally loveless, but respectable marriage.26 So many Jewish women worked as prostitutes that Jewish Americans organized their own anti-white-slave campaigns.

On the West Coast, ethnic segregation and gender hierarchy characterized prostitution. Large proportions of female wage-earners of all backgrounds worked as prostitutes during the boom years of Western mining; as many as three-quarters of the Chinese women of San Francisco were sex workers in the late nineteenth century. An occasional Chinese woman opened a brothel herself; in fact, one such madam, Ah Toy, became a favorite character in the novelty literature depicting San Francisco’s wild early days.
But male Chinese merchants dominated the brothel business, recruiting and transporting women like Lalu Nathoy to work in low-cost “cribs” providing sexual services to Chinese laborers.27 Although exposed to extreme exploitation and high death rates, some Chinese prostitutes nevertheless were able to meet and marry husbands in the United States, contriving in this way a potential happy ending.

Although far more respectable than prostitutes, immigrant midwives were perceived as threats, too: as American physicians consolidated their monopoly over health care in the late nineteenth century, they portrayed foreign women health providers as backward and ignorant. The effects of these attacks were all the more serious in that midwives were the only female professionals working in large numbers in immigrant communities before 1920. In Chicago, in fact, almost all practicing midwives were foreign-born women. Some immigrant midwives had received professional training in Europe; others more closely resembled folk healers, having received a pragmatic education as apprentices to older female practitioners, or having merely developed a special charismatic talent for assisting women kin and neighbors during birth.28 Some folk healers like the Mexican radical Teresa Urrea acquired regional reputations for their expertise.29 Midwives maintained and continued traditions of Mexican curanderas, Asian herbalists, and other wise women common in European, Asian, and New World folk medicines.30 In the United States, however, they were increasingly forced to operate outside the law, their practices under legal and public attack from both American doctors and female American health reformers.31

Since most immigrant women saw the home rather than the hospital as the proper place for giving birth, they guaranteed immigrant midwives income and influence into the twentieth century. Pregnant immigrant women preferred midwives because they spoke their languages, were usually mature, married women and mothers, and offered familiar home-centered birth, unlike male American doctors and unmarried, childless American women professionals. In New York, however, upwardly mobile Jewish women began to seek birth support from doctors and women’s dispensaries by 1920.32 And today immigrant women sometimes view a hospital birth as one of the advantages migration to the United States makes available.33

By the 1920s, broad patterns of immigrant women’s wage-earning had begun to change. Domestic service declined steadily in importance as an employer of women of all backgrounds from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and homework, as already noted, came under increasing attack from reformers. Nonetheless, the numbers of wage-earning wives increased rapidly after World War I. Industrial employment of foreign-born women peaked in the 1930s and then began a gradual decline as immigration to the Northeast slowed, as African American, Mexican, and Puerto Rican women replaced European-born workers, and as both textile and garment produc-


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Even before the deindustrialization of the United States, immigrant daughters first from northern European and later from southern and eastern European backgrounds were abandoning factory jobs to work in department stores as sales clerks and in offices as white-collar clericals. Between 1910 and 1920, the number of foreign-born clerks increased by over 200 percent; the numbers of stenographers and typists, by over 100 percent. By 1920, foreign-born female clerical workers already outnumbered immigrant women working in family businesses. Yet many clericals had at first found employment in ethnic businesses; after 1920 more moved into English-speaking offices and stores, which required training in a commercial high school or business college. Daughters of artisans, skilled workers, and widows sought training for office employment with special frequency. The depression of the 1930s, with its relatively low rates of clerical unemployment, in turn convinced other immigrant parents reluctant to forego female earnings that it made sense to keep daughters in high school. A daughter working as a sales “girl” or secretary symbolized status and financial security for many blue-collar parents. But immigrant and second-generation clerical workers also remained firmly ensconced in their working-class networks; immigrant clerical workers often had fathers, brothers, or fiancés with blue collars.

For immigrant women from Asia and Mexico, racial discrimination slowed women’s transition to white-collar work. Nisei (second-generation Japanese) women abandoned domestic service more rapidly than African American women, but they worked in larger proportions as domestics than the daughters of European immigrants. For many Japanese American women, furthermore, wartime internment interrupted both education and employment. Mexican American women faced similar difficulties. Over time, however, sales and clerical employment increased even among these immigrant women. Overall, immigrant daughters’ entrance into white-collar work lagged about fifty years behind that of native-born white women, while preceding that of African American women by about thirty years. And the direction of change was the same for women of all backgrounds: proportionately more of them than in earlier periods came to work in clerical and professional fields.

THE WORLD OF WORK AND WAGES: THE PRESENT

Immigrant women today enter the United States with a wider range of skills than their counterparts of earlier decades: they are more likely to have professional training than native-born women (see chapter 7), but they are also more likely than the native-born to have worked at blue-collar tasks or in domestic service prior to migration. Once in the United States, this bifurcation continues to characterize their employment (see Table 4.1). The clustering of foreign-born women at the top and the bottom of the job hierarchy in the United States, furthermore, may be increasing. As some Latinas take blue-
**TABLE 4.1**

Employment of Immigrant Women in the U.S. in 1970, by Economic Sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FB foreign born</th>
<th>Professional</th>
<th>Clerical /Sales</th>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Operative /Labor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central and South American</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Hispanic</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FB Japanese</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FB Chinese</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FB Filipino</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FB Other</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


collar and farm jobs abandoned by native-born Americans, many refugee, Asian, Cuban-born, and West Indian immigrant women compete with native-born American women in clerical and professional employment.39

Foreign-born women work for wages in about the same proportions as native-born women. They work for the same reasons as most other women: they, their children, their parents, and their husbands depend upon their earnings. Income pooling within families is alive and well in the late twentieth century.40 At the same time, immigrant women’s rates of labor-force participation vary by national background more now than they did in the past, largely because of differences among married women.41 Maried Cubans (64%), Chinese (54%), and Filipinas (61%) work at rates comparable to those of married native-born Black women, and at higher rates than native-born Puerto Ricans or Chicanas or Mexican immigrant women (45%).42 Refugee women from Southeast Asia seem to have experienced the greatest initial difficulty in finding work, though their rates of wage-earning, too, are rapidly increasing.43 By contrast, Soviet Jewish refugees, many of them professional or highly skilled, adapted quickly and relatively easily to wage-earning in the United States.44

While immigrant women recently arrived in the United States earn slightly less than native-born women in the same jobs overall, they rapidly attain income parity with their native counterparts—far more rapidly, for example, than do immigrant men. This hold true even for African-descent women from the West Indies.4 Immigrant women today often earn consid-
erably higher wages than native-born women in professional jobs. Foreign-born clerical workers, by contrast, find that their education or experience on the other side does not allow them to earn wages comparable to their native-born clerical counterparts.\textsuperscript{46} Still, high rates of wage-earning among many foreign-born wives keep household incomes among some immigrant groups close to the American average. And, while a somewhat higher proportion of foreign-born than native-born households have at least one member receiving public assistance, immigrant women who head their own households are less likely to receive public assistance and more likely to work for wages than native-born women heads of households.\textsuperscript{47}

Agriculture has remained an important employer of immigrants in the twentieth century, largely because of expanding agri-business in the Southeast and Southwest (most notably California and Florida). Special recruitment of male agricultural workers during World War II aimed to bring Mexican and West Indian men to the United States—temporarily. But women eventually joined them. By the 1950s, Mexican migrant families followed a cycle of harvests from the Southwest to the fields of the upper Midwest. Today, men, women, and children from Mexico and Central America—many of them, like Isabela and Francisco Ramírez, without proper documentation—lead itinerant and difficult lives in the Southwest, Florida, and the Southeast. Despite efforts by farmworkers’ unions (see chapter 6), labor in the fields remains some of the most physically arduous and poorly paid work in the American economy. Work in the fields generally requires women, men, and children to live in camps, where schooling, housing and domestic life remain notorious for their low quality.\textsuperscript{48}

Given the decline of domestic service in the American economy, it may seem surprising that about a quarter of foreign-born women still work in service. However, immigrant women arriving in the United States without proper documentation find that work in private households—for cash pay—is the only work readily available to them. While immigration regulations prohibit other employers from hiring workers without proper visas, the INS declines to check employment in private homes. Unmarried and independent women—like the Irish and Swedish women of the nineteenth century—find live-in positions a solution to their pressing need for both housing and employment.\textsuperscript{49}

Unlike the domestic servants of the nineteenth century, however, immigrant domestic live-in servants from the Caribbean and Latin America today may have children, either left behind with female relatives in the homeland or living with relatives in the cities where their mothers work. For such women, work in corporate service jobs—as office cleaners and as employees in hospitals, nursing homes, home health care services, and restaurants—represents a qualitative social if not economic step forward.\textsuperscript{50}

Factories in New York, Los Angeles, Miami, and Texas continue to depend heavily on foreign-born women as low-wage operatives. Women seeking work in garments, textiles, and canneries often discover that neither
sweatshops nor poor working conditions have disappeared. Today’s can­
nery workers are women from Mexico and other Latin American countries, while garment factories attract workers from China, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Male immigrant entrepreneurs have taken over declining garment production industries in cities like New York; they prefer to hire women of their own backgrounds. Immigrant women without proper documentation have strong incentives to accept appalling working conditions and wages in exchange for an employer’s willingness to pay cash and remain silent.

In parts of New England and the West Coast, immigrant women from Asia, Europe, the Caribbean, and South America also find employment as assembly workers in high-tech electronic firms—the American counterparts of factories on the other side. Immigrant women also work in older low-capital industries where labor represents most of the employers’ fixed costs (jewelry, for example). These industries pay women through elaborate piecework systems, which complicate workers’ efforts to compare their productivity to that of others or to predict wages due at the end of the week. In these industries, too, employees are of mixed backgrounds, and informal segregation by culture and language group frequently occurs at work.

Even homework survives, and its survival reminds us of a final continuity in immigrant women’s working lives. The context, however, has changed. The nation’s labor unions remain firmly opposed to homework. But whereas once native-born women reformers clamored to prohibit homework, professional and clerical American women now sometimes advocate it as a solution to their own difficulties in combining wage-earning with domestic responsibilities. As this suggests, native-born white women have joined immigrant and minority women in seeking ways to balance work for money with labor that carries no financial rewards. No examination of immigrant women, past or present, is complete without attention to this dimension of their working lives.

LABORS OF LOVE AND THANKLESS CHORES: UNPAID WORK, PAST AND PRESENT

Although immigrant women devoted more time to the pursuit of money than they had on the other side, labor without financial reward remained a constant in their lives. In the nineteenth century, subsistence production survived in modified form on family farms. In cities it has survived down to the present in family-operated businesses and in domestic or “house” work. Of these three, housework alone showed initial signs of becoming a uniquely female task in the United States—the domain of women “breadgivers” and their daughters.

Most European and Japanese immigrant women who settled on the land in the nineteenth century worked without pay on family farms. In censuses,
they—like other rural women—appeared as “not gainfully employed” or “housewives.” Because immigrants initially transplanted Old World divisions of labor to the New World fields, however, their lives little resembled those of urban middle-class women, or even American farm women, who had largely withdrawn from field to “house” work. Immigrant women attracted attention—some of it negative—for their haying, plowing, harvesting, cultivating, and care of animals. Women’s farm work was demanding, but flexible: Korean Mary Paik Lee worked in the fields, sold produce from a vegetable stand, and did domestic work for the owner of the farm where she and her husband and sons were tenants.

Immigrants gradually adopted American notions of female agricultural work. Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish women initially cared for cattle and processed dairy products into cheese. When these became family commercial ventures, however, men joined women in specific dairy-related tasks. And where Norwegians failed to develop dairying as a commercial specialty, men ultimately took over complete care of family livestock, while women retreated from the fields to American-style domesticity and the keeping of a kitchen garden.

Small family businesses also reproduced household-based work groups familiar from the other side. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Greek, Lebanese, and Arab immigrants, along with Jewish immigrants from Germany and eastern Europe, often founded small retail businesses catering to ethnic or American consumers. Small “Mom and Pop” operations required the labor of many family members, often in or near the family residence. Studies of immigrant family businesses emphasize their sharply patriarchal nature. Family workers may receive no wages, giving tiny businesses a competitive edge but making it difficult for wives and children to challenge parental or masculine authority or to establish their independence from the family group without leaving it. On the other hand, within family businesses women have been apt to exercise managerial influence as operators of cash registers and keepers of business accounts. Immigrant businesswomen (see chapter 7) have often begun their careers as workers in family enterprises.

Women immigrants specialized in the business of keeping boarders. Korean women on Hawaiian plantations cooked, laundered, and cleaned for bachelor men while their husbands worked for wages. Migrations of male sojourners guaranteed a plentiful supply of boarders for other groups, too: a quarter to a third of immigrant households at any given point in time between the 1890s and the 1920s contained at least one boarder, and a woman with three boarders would generate about a third of a typical family’s income in 1900. Still, since women’s work for boarders was the same as the work done without pay for family members, few immigrant women saw the keeping of boarders as a business. And American observers insisted that it was the male boarders, not their female keepers, who contributed to immigrant family income.

Production of meals and clean clothes left immigrant women with little time for housework tasks more highly valued by middle-class Americans—
child-rearing and housecleaning.66 Thus "breadgiver" rather than housewife or mother best describes immigrant women working without pay. As keepers of kitchen gardens, rural women raised much of the food their families ate.67 Surprising numbers of immigrant women in urban and industrial settings continued to produce at least some of their families' food. High prices in company stores in mining towns encouraged the practice.68 But even in late nineteenth century New York, Americans complained about immigrants' pigs roaming the streets, their chickens roosting in tenement kitchens, and their goats stabled in tenement basements. Urban women marketed once or more often a day, purchasing only small quantities that would not spoil. Since boarders and wage-earners worked irregular hours, women often served food over a period of several hours in the early evening. Meat, sweets, and bountiful meals symbolized the well-being of America; women's work guaranteed that bounty. Immigrant women treated this task as their most serious challenge.69

Like other American women in the nineteenth century, immigrant women laundered once a week. If their water supply was a pump in the back yard or alley, they worked outside. As builders and landlords installed faucets in urban homes in the twentieth century, women laundered and dried clothes inside, where they dripped over the kitchen stove in the winter. In New York's tenements, women preferred the roof for drying clothes, but this required a long climb with wet clothes. More frequently, they hung laundry out a rear window.70

Cooking, laundering, and dishwashing required urban women to fuel and care for a stove—usually the coal stove that heated most immigrant homes until the 1920s. In the countryside, women produced much of their own fuel, splitting and stacking wood. In cities, women or their children helpers scavenged fuel from railroad yards or construction sites; they carried purchased coal from the basement to the stove; they removed ashes and other household refuse. They kept the stove—along with any lamps used prior to gas piping—clean, polished, and in working order. And they maintained a fire that allowed cooking, even in the heat of summer.71

In the past, immigrant women lacked the time to read aloud to their children or have long maternal talks with them the way middle-class native-born mothers were supposed to. Their major goal as mothers and childrearers was to keep their children alive through infancy—no minor undertaking. In New York, for example, as many as a quarter of all babies died in their first two years, usually as a result of spoiled food or milk during the summer months. The infant mortality rate did vary among ethnic groups, although the reasons are not always clear. For instance, Jewish babies generally survived at higher rates than Italian babies, a pattern which may have reflected the superior economic position of Jewish families (and their purchase of modern medical care), superior standards of cleanliness related to Jewish requirements for ritual bathing, higher rates of breastfeeding, or better access to pure milk.72 It is noteworthy that in the United States today, foreign-born women often have healthier babies with higher birth weights and lower infant mortality rates.
than do poor African American or other native-born minority women. This may reflect their superior educational levels, older average age, better health practices, or more positive attitudes toward pregnancy. Ironically, today's immigrant mothers quickly abandon breastfeeding for bottle feeding, which they perceive as more modern even as many American women, along with the medical profession, have come to see the health advantages of nursing infants in the old-fashioned way.

To native-born observers, as mentioned earlier, immigrant women have sometimes seemed unconcerned with American middle-class standards of cleanliness. Immigrant farmsteads were probably no sorrier than American rural homes generally in the nineteenth century; indeed, observers singled out German farm houses and yards as exemplary. In cities, however, Americans often claimed that immigrant housewives had "no sense of order to their housework"—and lived in cluttered and often dirty homes as a result. But this is not what photographs of immigrant households suggest. Here one merely finds variable definitions of both order and decoration. Women of many backgrounds decorated the edges of kitchen shelves with cut paper. Eastern European Slavs favored embroidered bedding and pillows; eastern European Jews added the ritual mezuzah outside their door and preferred carpets and upholstered furniture; Italians decorated walls and dresser tops with ceramics, pots, calendars, and clocks. The erection of domestic altars was a female folk art in some groups. Because married immigrant women spent so much time at home, this was work they did for themselves; these women saw their homes as beautiful.

They also saw running water, flush toilets (even if outside), coal stoves, nearby marketplaces, and ready-made cloth or clothing as American luxuries accessible even to the poor. Similarly, today's immigrant women value the household tools—especially automatic washing machines—that lighten the physical burdens of housework. Many feel they achieve upward mobility simply by purchasing such appliances. German, Italian, and Jewish women of the past would agree with the Dominican women who argue today that labor-saving domestic tools (more than improved wage-earning opportunities) convinced them they made the right decision in moving to the United States. Dominican women do not talk of returning to the homeland with the enthusiasm of some of their husbands and brothers. At the same time, immigrant women regretfully recognize that poverty can prevent them from purchasing the "good things" that American domesticity promises.

CONCLUSION

Labor remained the central focus of immigrant women's lives. Few immigrant women stopped work as a result of migration, although most experienced significant changes in the location and conditions of their labor. Domestic service continued to sustain life outside family economies for women who had migrated independently to the United States; work in fac-
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storied allowed the daughters of family migrations to contribute to family economies in ways sometimes unknown at home. Still, the burden of subsistence production—undergoing a gradual redefinition as housework—increasingly fell to married women and their children helpers, even though women found they had to combine it with work for money. Immigrant women shared with other poor women a common focus on making ends meet; both female wage-earning and housework contributed materially to family well-being among the poor. As laws gradually excluded children from wage-earning, the numbers of immigrant wives working outside the home for wages increased—as they did in all American families—without eliminating their unpaid labor at home.

Although both found themselves listed in censuses as housewives, immigrant women with families labored under conditions that can scarcely be compared to those of their middle-class white counterparts in the nineteenth century. Most earned money. Few could employ a servant to help with household work; even the daughters, sisters, and nieces who might have helped them out served instead as maids and cooks in middle-class households. The tasks that defined middle-class domesticity—particularly the moral and spiritual supervision of a small group of children—fell near the bottom of an immigrant housewife's long list of chores.

As the American economy changed, immigrants' daughters moved into white-collar work and female professions, where they today encounter new generations of recently arrived immigrant women. Both groups now enjoy access to occupations and skills once limited to the native-born Anglo-American elite. Overall, ethnicity, race, and nationality no longer segment the female work force as sharply as they did at the turn of the century. But it would be a mistake to see the transformation of women's occupations as the seamless assimilation of former outsiders, or even as evidence of immigrant women's successful adaptation to American models of appropriate work for women. The working lives of today's women, regardless of background, resemble those of the immigrant and minority women of the past. Most women work throughout their lives, including during their childrearing years. Most juggle unpaid domestic work with money-earning. Most must seek ways to limit the burdens of household work, yet few can adopt the strategy of middle-class women of the nineteenth century: their family incomes will not support hired service workers, let alone full-time domestic servants.

This chapter has emphasized the many similarities between immigrant women and other groups of American women in the past and the present. Changing focus, however, and attending to family ties and kinship (in the next chapter), and to collective action among the female and foreign-born (in chapter 6) will bring ethnic and racial differences more sharply into focus again. Race, language, nationality, ethnicity, and religion created important divisions among women who otherwise lived in quite similar economic, family, and community relations. Their contacts largely limited to others of "their own kind," many immigrant women literally could not see what their expe-
riences as workers, daughters, mothers, or community activists gave them in common with women of backgrounds unlike their own. However important the shared and central experiences of laboring—at home and for wages—these alone could not always create common ground upon which immigrant and other American women might learn to work together.