

**Women in Labor:
Mothers, Medicine and Occupational Health in
the United States 1890-1980**

Hepler, Allison L.
Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 2000.

Reviewed by Amy Cuomo

Women in Labor: Mothers, Medicine and Occupational Health in the United States 1890-1980 provides an incisive history of gender issues in the workplace. Hepler's interdisciplinary approach to motherhood, medicine, and industrial labour offers a fully realized exploration of the many issues that have affected women in the workplace. While the book focuses on motherhood, the workplace, and health, Hepler's emphasis on gender allows for a wider understanding of occupational health that includes, for example, how and when laws intended to aid/protect women also benefited their male co-workers. As suggested by its subtitle, Hepler's book spans ninety years of occupational health and provides an interesting overview of the many problems women have faced in industry. The author's focus, however, eventually shifts to the conflict between feminists who believe in protective labour legislation for women in the workplace and feminists who work for women's equality by minimizing differences between men and women.

Divided into seven chapters, *Women in Labor* explores the construction of the idea of occupational health. Hepler notes that early reformers' concerns about women's health in the workplace was founded on the principle that women's primary duty was that of mother. Long hours and unsanitary conditions could hinder women's ability to produce and raise future citizens. The author notes that reform efforts eventually led to protective legislation that limited the number of hours women could work in selected jobs. While protective legislation often was beneficial to women, it also prohibited their employment in jobs that posed less of an overall threat to their health.

In the 1920s, the debate over protective legislation was shaped by two groups: the Women's Bureau and supporters of the Equal Rights Amendment. Hepler traces this debate through World War II when women's entry into the workforce in unprecedented numbers instigated a variety of reforms beneficial to both women and men. These reforms convinced protectionist advocates such as Alice Hamilton to support a philosophy that minimized difference. This philosophy, expressed by supporters of the Equal Rights Amendment, limited activism for protective legislation based solely on gender.

Hepler continues her investigation of protectionism in her study of fetal protection policies by citing the American Cyanamid's surgical sterilization of five employees as part of its fetal protection policy. She also discusses the

Supreme Court case in which the United Auto Workers (UAW) challenged the constitutionality of Johnson Control's fetal protection policy. Hepler emphasizes the difficulties that result from the polarization of protective labour legislation and equality based policies regarding women in the workplace. While the Supreme Court declared fetal protection policies unconstitutional in *UAW v. Johnson Controls, Inc.*, (1991), this victory, according to Hepler "must be tempered by the realization that the decision did not result in a different work environment. Emphasizing equal rights has placed responsibility for health on the workers themselves."

Women in Labor is an excellent resource for courses on women or gender studies. The book provides an invaluable history of how gender has dictated women's roles at work and at home. Also included are several carefully selected illustrations and photographs that portray women in industry. Hepler's scholarship is impressive and her work is well research and documented.

Born to Procreate: Women and Childbirth in France from the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century

Graves, Rolande.
New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001.

Reviewed by Susan S. Hennessy

In *Born to Procreate*, Rolande Graves lays out the history of midwifery and the development of obstetric medicine from medieval times through to the eighteenth century. The book begins with an overview of scientific knowledge during the Middle Ages. While medical doctors published numerous treatises on the female anatomy, beliefs stemming from superstition and the Church continued to override rational explanations for reproduction: "To these theories must be added the philosophical debates on the power or influence of God and the stars on the sperm at the time of conception" (27). Other common beliefs included the notion of menstruation as a necessary purification of the body, or that menstruation was a means of shedding an overabundance of blood in the woman's body. Such perceptions continued to pervade the scientific realm for centuries to come.

Graves traces the evolution of obstetrical manuals, including those written by *sages femmes*. Ambroise Paré, cited as one of the more influential doctors, published manuals that provided extensive information drawn from his own experience with parturient women. They also describe and attempt to explain common complications of childbirth, stillbirths, and the birth of deformed babies. Here, too, superstition underlies the explanation of unusual births: