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# Women's Work and Women's Households: Gender Bias in the U.S. Census\*

BY NANCY FOLBRE  
AND MARJORIE ABEL

**I**N 1878 the officers of the Association for the Advancement of Women wrote a letter to the U.S. Congress protesting the U.S. census's notion that home-keepers were not gainful workers. "We pray your honorable body," their letter read, "to make provision for the more careful and just enumeration of women as laborers and producers. . . ." In 1976, a group called Social Scientists in Population Research circulated a short report criticizing the census term "head of household." This term, the report concluded, "has a subjective, intuitive meaning—suggesting which person rules the roost or who lives in whose house—but no objective validity."

These documents, spanning a period of almost a century, speak for a tradition of feminist criticisms of gender bias in putatively objective sources of social statistics. In this paper, we review and advance these criticisms, detailing serious problems with the ways women's work and women's households were enumerated (or, as was often the case, not enumerated) by censuses of the U.S. population before 1950. This intellectual history sheds light on continuing problems of gender bias in contemporary census data and casts doubt on conventional

estimates of long-run trends in female labor-force participation and household structure.

The first section traces the evolution of the concept of "gainful occupation" in pre-1940 U.S. censuses, noting the devaluation of women's nonmarket work but focusing on the underestimate of their participation in market work. The second section develops a parallel analysis of census definitions of family and family headship before 1940, criticizing the failure to measure important changes in residential patterns that foreshadowed later increases in the proportion of households headed by women alone. The final section summarizes the contemporary implications of these forms of gender bias.

### *Women and the "Gainful Occupations"*

Critics of numerous technical inconsistencies in U.S. census terminology have long argued that historical data series significantly understate women's participation in the market economy, especially before 1940.<sup>1</sup> Conceding problems, most statisticians and labor economists have argued that the extent and implications of mismeasurement are relatively minor, easily adjusted with existing data.<sup>2</sup> A growing feminist

<sup>1</sup> Edith Abbott, *Women in Industry: A Study in American Economic History* (New York: D. Appleton, 1924); A.J. Jaffe, "Trends in the Participation of Women in the Working Force," *Monthly Labor Review* 79 (May 1956): 559-565; Robert Smuts, *Women and Work in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1959); idem, "The Female Labor Force: A Case Study in the Interpretation of Historical Statistics," *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 55 (March 1960): 71-79.

<sup>2</sup> John Durand, *The Labor Force in the U.S., 1890-1960* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1948); Stanley Lebergott, *Manpower in Economic Growth: The American Record Since 1800* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); Elyce Rotella, *From Home to Office: U.S. Women at Work, 1870-1930* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1977); idem, "Women's Labor Force Participation and the Decline of the Family Economy in the U.S.," *Explorations in Economic History* 17 (April 1980): 95-117; Claudia Goldin, "The Female Labor Force and American Economic Growth, 1890-1980," in *Long-Term Factors in American Economic Growth*, ed. Stanley L. Engerman and Robert

literature, however, asserts that androcentric concepts and patriarchal norms significantly distorted the empirical record of female labor-force participation.<sup>3</sup>

In the first place, the federal census, unlike some nineteenth-century censuses of England and the state of Massachusetts, consistently defined participation in the market economy as the only form of productive labor. Despite protests from feminist groups such as the Association for the Advancement of Women, the census institutionalized a definition of "work" as "market work" that literally devalued women's unpaid work within the home.<sup>4</sup> This definition remains in force today.

In the second place, the propensity to categorize women as housewives seriously understated the extent of their participation in the market economy. Before 1940, when the modern definition of labor-force participation was established (working for pay or seeking paid work in the preceding week), the census simply inquired after individuals' occupations, distin-

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E. Gallman, National Bureau of Economic Research Studies in Income and Wealth, vol. 51. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Penelope Ciancanelli, "Women's Transition to Wage Labor: A Critique of Labor Force Statistics and Reestimation of the Labor Force Participation of Married Women in the United States, 1900-1930," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Economics, New School for Social Research, 1983; Christine Bose, "Devaluing Women's Work: The Undercount of Women's Employment in 1900," in *Hidden Aspects of Women's Work*, ed. Christine Bose, Roslyn Feldberg, and Natalie Sokoloff (New York: Praeger, 1987), pp. 95-115; Margo Conk, "Accuracy, Efficiency, and Bias: The Interpretation of Women's Work in the U.S. Census Statistics of Occupations, 1890-1960," *Historical Methods* 14 (Spring 1981): 65-72. Related feminist criticisms of estimates of female labor-force participation in developing countries can be found in Lourdes Beneria, "Accounting for Women's Work," in Lourdes Beneria, ed., *Women and Development: The Sexual Division of Labor in Rural Societies* (New York: Praeger, 1982), pp. 119-147, and Ruth Dixon, "Women in Agriculture: Counting the Labor Force in Developing Countries," *Population and Development Review* 8 (September 1982): 539-566. For a recent feminist critique of the entire United Nations National Income Accounts, see Maryln Waring's *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Desley Deacon, "Political Arithmetic: The Nineteenth Century Australian Census and the Construction of the Dependent Woman," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11 (1985): 27-47; Nancy Folbre, "The Unproductive Housewife: Her Evolution in Nineteenth Century Economic Thought," University of Massachusetts Discussion Paper, June 1988.

guishing between those which were “gainful” and those which were not. Data on the gainful occupations have typically been used as a proxy for labor-force participation to construct series that span the change of definitions in 1940. Such series are problematic even for men, because the concept of occupation is linked to social identity rather than to economic activity. For instance, a man might describe himself as having an occupation even if he is unemployed, retired, or working only intermittently.

The potential disjuncture between gainful occupation and labor-force participation is even greater for women. If their primary social identity is housewife, and they are allowed only one choice of occupation, they are likely to describe themselves as housewives regardless of their participation in market labor. The very notion that individuals have only one occupation is androcentric—unlike men, women who work for pay normally perform the work of housewife as well. Further, traditional patriarchal norms attached some stigma to married women who relinquished their primary identity as housewife. As a result, women who participated part-time in the market economy were far less likely than men to be enumerated among the gainfully occupied.

The historical evolution of census definitions and discussions exemplifies the influence of cultural concepts of appropriate gender roles on putatively objective economic measures.<sup>5</sup> The first three censuses of the United States, taken in 1790, 1800, and 1810, focused on the economic activities of families rather than individuals. In 1820, the census stipulated its interest in individual rather than family occupations, but tallied the number of persons engaged in agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing by family. In the same year, “household manufactures” were explicitly distinguished from others, as “only incidental, and not the profession properly marking the

<sup>5</sup> See Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), chs. 6, 7.

class of society to which such individual belongs.”<sup>6</sup> These words, attributed to John Quincy Adams, suggest that the proper “marking of class,” construed to include the class of housewives, was considered more important than accurate measurement of production.

Interest in the gainful occupations of individuals grew slowly but steadily, probably driven by the increase in manufacturing employment. The 1830 census included no reference to occupations, and the 1840 census basically followed the 1820 conventions. Not until 1850 did the census explicitly inquire after the “profession, occupation, or trade of each male person over 15 years of age.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1860 and thereafter, this inquiry was extended to women. In 1870, the census made explicit the importance of a wage/salary criterion for women’s occupations: “The term ‘housekeeper’ will be reserved for such persons as receive distinct wages or salary for the service. Women keeping house for their own families or for themselves, without any other gainful occupation, will be entered as ‘keeping house.’”<sup>8</sup> This wording implies that keeping house was a gainful occupation, but it was not included among occupations in the aggregate tabulations. The requirement that distinct wages or salaries be earned was not imposed on any male occupations.<sup>9</sup>

The text of the 1870 census included some official

<sup>6</sup> Carroll D. Wright, *The History and Growth of the U.S. Census* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), p. 135.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159. The instructions to enumerators for the 1860 census are not included in this volume, and we have not been able to locate them.

<sup>9</sup> Not until 1910 did census instructions explicitly associate “gainfulness” with money. Even in that year the definition was ambiguous: “the particular kind of work done by which the person enumerated earns money or a money equivalent.” One could argue that a housewife normally received a money equivalent—a share of her husband’s market income—in return for her labor. In 1930, “gainful occupation” was more explicitly defined as “an occupation by which the person who pursues it earns money or a money equivalent, or in which he assists in the production of marketable goods.” Yet even in that year many women who assisted in the production of marketable goods were clearly not enumerated.

comments on the underenumeration of women's occupations, noting that the Census of Manufactures returns showed much higher levels of female employment than the Census of Population. Enumerators took the blame. "The assumption is, as the fact generally is, that they [women and young children] are not engaged in remunerative employments. Those who are so engaged constitute the exception, and it follows from a plain principle of human nature, that assistant marshals will not infrequently forget or neglect to ask the question."<sup>10</sup>

Critics of the census, however, voiced more far-reaching concerns. The Association for the Advancement of Women, a group of prominent and highly educated feminists, complained that "home and woman as a home-keeper have no place in the report, only the occupations called 'gainful' being noted, and more than twelve millions of American women being overlooked as laborers or producers or left out, in common with those pursuing disreputable employments, and not even incidentally named as in any wise affecting the causes of increase or decrease of population or wealth." Further, they noted a possible source of enumerator bias, the relatively few women employed despite "obvious justice and propriety in the employment of intelligent women to collect vital statistics concerning women and children."<sup>11</sup>

No census spokesperson responded to these complaints in print. The underenumeration of women wage earners, however, received greater attention in 1880. The census acknowledged the possibility of self-reporting bias, as well as enumerator error: ". . . women and children employed in factories are omitted in large numbers . . . either through failure of the enumerator to ask the questions relating to occupation concerning such persons, assuming that they have

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Census, *Ninth Census of Population, 1870* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1873), p. 375.

<sup>11</sup> For full text of their letter, see Appendix A. Further description of the association may be found in William Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), ch. 11.

no avocation outside their homes, or from the indisposition of the persons themselves or the heads of families to speak of them as in employment."<sup>12</sup>

Married women, in particular, had good reason to avoid mention of their participation in paid labor. Both the middle-class "cult of domesticity" and the working-class concept of the "family wage" dictated that a wife's proper place was in the home.<sup>13</sup> Census documents themselves betrayed considerable anxiety over changes in women's economic role. In a special report on the factory system included as part of the 1880 census, Carroll Wright wrote, "The employment of married women it seems to me is the very worst feature of factory employment. . . ."<sup>14</sup>

The assumptions of enumerators and respondents were clearly not the only source of bias. Not until 1900 did the census explicitly instruct its enumerators to consider the occupations of married women. In the same year, they officially adopted a new term, "breadwinner," for "every person 10 years of age and over who was engaged in gainful labor during any part of the census year, or who was ordinarily so engaged, even though he had been unable to secure work during that time." Specifically excluded were a person "who has retired from practice or business, or a wife or daughter living at home and assisting only in the household duties without pay."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Census, *Tenth Census of Population, 1880*, vol. 1, *Population* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883), p. 709.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Kerber, "Separate Worlds, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1985): 9-39; Martha May, "Bread Before Roses: American Workingmen, Labor Unions and the Family Wage," in Ruth Milkman, ed., *Women, Work and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 113-131.

<sup>14</sup> Carroll D. Wright, "The Factory System of the U.S.," in *Report on the Manufactures of the U.S. at the Tenth Census, 1880* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883), p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Bureau of the Census, Special Reports, Supplementary Analysis and Derivative Tables, *Twelfth Census of the U.S., 1900* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1906), p. 225.

In 1910, the census reiterated its directions regarding women's work in terms strong enough to suggest that they finally recognized the extent of the problem: "The occupation, if any, followed by a child, of any age, or by a woman is just as important, for census purposes, as the occupation followed by a man. Therefore it must never be taken for granted, without inquiry, that a woman, or child, has no occupation."<sup>16</sup>

In an even larger departure from precedent, instructions to enumerators in 1910 also included the following: "A woman working regularly at outdoor farm work, even though she works on the home farm for her husband, son or other relative, and does not receive money wages, should be returned in column 18 as a farm laborer." Despite the careful inclusion of the qualification "working regularly" in these instructions (a qualification that was never imposed on men), they resulted in a dramatic increase in the percentage of women reporting an occupation. These instructions were dropped in 1920, and the percentage of women with occupations declined.

This alarming discontinuity was the subject of some discussion in the 1910 census, but did not prompt any reconsideration or reestimation of published results for previous years. Rather, Alba Edwards, who took charge of the occupation statistics in 1910, repeatedly argued that much of the measured increase in women's occupations in 1910 should be discounted and treated as an anomaly rather than as an improvement.<sup>17</sup> Edwards also inserted a clear gender bias into

<sup>16</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Twenty Censuses: Population and Housing Questions 1790-1950* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1979), p. 43. The 1910 instructions also went to great lengths to explain treatment of "own account workers" including married women working for their husbands.

<sup>17</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the U.S. 1910: Population*, vol. 4, *Occupation Statistics* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1914), p. 28. See also Alba Edwards, *Comparative Occupation Statistics for the United States, 1879 to 1940. Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Population* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943).

the categorization of women's occupations. Between 1910 and 1940 clerks were explicitly instructed to question the accuracy of unusual occupations for women, but not for men.<sup>18</sup>

In 1920, a long feminist struggle to gain the franchise was officially won when the states ratified the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution. In the same year, under pressure from women's groups, the Department of Labor established a separate branch to study the needs of women workers, the Women's Bureau. One of their early published bulletins politely took issue with the Census Bureau's assumptions. Special investigators sent to reinterview selected samples of census respondents in Passaic, New Jersey, specifically inquired after types of economic activity, such as taking in boarders, that the census overlooked. The bulletin argued that female labor-force-participation rates in Passaic were 25 percent higher than census estimates.

While the report accepted the conventional emphasis on "breadwinners," it adopted a somewhat ironic tone that explicitly emphasized the arbitrary character of the distinction between "paid" and "unpaid" work. The first sentence of the bulletin noted that the 20 percent of all women who worked for pay had "a financial rating under our present system of national bookkeeping."<sup>19</sup> In the late 1920s, pressure from the General Federation of Women's Clubs prompted the Census

<sup>18</sup> Conk, "Accuracy, Efficiency and Bias," p. 68. In 1930, instructions to enumerators were actually revised to warn "if you are told that a woman follows an occupation which is very peculiar or unusual for a woman, verify the statement." In 1940, a small number of women were enumerated among skilled groups such as machinists, locomotive engineers, and blacksmiths. Edwards argued that their occupation codes must have been recorded incorrectly and arbitrarily recoded many of them. See Margo Conk, *The U.S. Census and Labor Force Change: A History of Occupation Statistics, 1870-1940* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980), p. 69. With reference to current issues of comparable worth, it is noteworthy that Edwards used the gender composition of occupations as an indicator of their skill level, downgrading certain occupations simply because of their demographic composition (*ibid.*, p. 43).

<sup>19</sup> Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, Bulletin 23, *The Family Status of Breadwinning Women* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922), p. 1. Bulletin 41, *Family Status of Breadwinning Women in Four Selected Cities*, provides additional related data.

Bureau to collect some data on homemakers in the 1930 census, but the practice was then discontinued.<sup>20</sup>

The early secondary literature that drew upon census data largely reflected the tone set by the Census Bureau itself. Edith Abbott's *Women in Industry*, first published in 1910, simply summarized the inconsistencies between the manufactures and population censuses that had been commented on in the 1870 and 1880 censuses.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, John Durand's classic book, *The Labor Force in the U.S., 1890-1960*, first published in 1948, reflected Edwards's earlier commentary. It recommended caution in interpretation of the pre-1940 censuses, and recapitulated the Census Bureau's argument that the 1910 results were anomalous.<sup>22</sup> Gertrude Bancroft's oft-cited book, *The American Labor Force: Its Growth and Changing Composition*, simply ignored the 1910 results in constructing labor-force series for 1890-1955.<sup>23</sup> None of these books mentioned any feminist criticisms of census methodology.

The first bold challenge to the census consensus came in 1956, in an article by A.J. Jaffe published in *Monthly Labor Review*.<sup>24</sup> Jaffe argued, contrary to Edwards, that the 1910 estimates were the most reliable of the pre-1940 censuses. High as the estimates were, Jaffe continued, they still represented an underestimate of the level of female labor-force participation as defined by the 1940 and later censuses, because of the emphasis in the instructions on the regular nature of employment.

The initial response to Jaffe's claims was coldly disapproving. In published comments that immediately followed his

<sup>20</sup> Margo Conk, "Improving Census Data: Lessons from the Past," in U.S. Census Bureau, *Third Annual Research Conference Proceedings* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), pp. 7-23.

<sup>21</sup> Abbott, *Women in Industry*, pp. 352-362.

<sup>22</sup> Durand, *The Labor Force*, pp. 191-200.

<sup>23</sup> Gertrude Bancroft, *The American Labor Force: Its Growth and Changing Composition* (New York: Wiley, 1958), p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> Jaffe, "Trends." Jaffe was, however, quite conventional in his emphasis on the exclusion of housewives. See Waring, *If Women Counted*, p. 31.

article, Sophia Cooper, one of his colleagues in the Bureau of Labor Statistics, reiterated Edwards's original arguments and claimed to find a logical "contradiction" in a greatly oversimplified paraphrase of Jaffe's argument. Stanley Lebergott, then employed at the Bureau of the Budget, seconded Cooper's criticisms.<sup>25</sup>

However, in 1959 and 1960 Robert Smuts published even more extensive criticisms of measurements of female labor-force participation in the pre-1940 censuses.<sup>26</sup> He focused, in particular, on the argument that the pre-1910 censuses considerably underestimated the number of women who were engaged in farm labor. He also reiterated earlier observations that the counts of women workers provided by the Census of Manufactures were consistently higher than those provided by the Census of Population.

Smuts's arguments, though widely appreciated, did not dissuade labor economists from use of the estimates in question. In his definitive book, *Manpower in Economic Growth: The American Record Since 1800*, Stanley Lebergott explicitly rejected Smuts's argument on the grounds that the suggestion that all the pre-1940 counts except that of 1910 should be upwardly revised was simply too "heroic." He went on to suggest that the differences between manufactures and population censuses were less important than they might initially seem because they largely reflected pieceworkers whose "primary status" was probably that of housewife anyway.<sup>27</sup>

The issue lay dormant for a number of years. Then, in the late 1970s, a proliferation of social-historical studies began to show that married women, less likely than single women to engage in wage labor, nonetheless seem to have participated

<sup>25</sup> Sophia Cooper, "Comments on the Analysis of Working Force Trends for Women," and Stanley Lebergott, "Conclusions," in *Monthly Labor Review* 79 (May 1956): 566–567.

<sup>26</sup> Smuts, *Women and Work* and "The Female Labor Force."

<sup>27</sup> Lebergott, *Manpower in Economic Growth*, pp. 71–72.

widely in the nineteenth-century market economy. Many married women in small towns engaged in industrial homework.<sup>28</sup> In large cities, many earned income by taking in boarders.<sup>29</sup> In rural areas, particularly where mixed farming took place close to urban markets, women participated directly in agricultural production for the market.<sup>30</sup>

These empirical findings helped inspire a number of efforts to use new sources of historical data to reestimate female labor-force-participation rates. Several recent studies utilize manuscript census and other survey data provided by the early Women's Bureau to estimate the number of women performing industrial homework, taking in boarders, and assisting in family farm, craft, or retail enterprises.<sup>31</sup> These estimates suggest that levels of female participation in the paid labor force between 1880 and 1910 were at least 25 percent greater than conventional census figures suggest, and may even have been twice as high.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Dublin, "Women and Outwork in a 19th Century New England Town," in Stephen Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in an Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

<sup>29</sup> John Modell and Tamara Hareven, "Urbanization and the Malleable Household: An Examination of Boarding and Lodging in American Families," in Tamara K. Hareven, ed., *Family and Kin in Urban Communities, 1700-1930* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1977); Elizabeth Pleck, "A Mother's Wages: Income Earning Among Married Italian and Black Women, 1896-1915," in Michael Gordon, ed., *The American Family in Social Historical Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's, 1978), pp. 152-178; Martha Fraundorf, "The Labor Force Participation of Turn of the Century Married Women," *Journal of Economic History* 39 (June 1979): 401-518.

<sup>30</sup> Joan Jensen, "Cloth, Butter, and Boarders: Women's Household Production for the Market," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 12 (Summer 1980): 14-36; idem, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, *To Their Own Soil: Agriculture in the Antebellum North* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa University Press, 1987), p. 46. See also Harold Barger and Hans Landsberger, *American Agriculture 1899-1939: A Study of Output, Employment and Productivity* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1942), pp. 230-250.

<sup>31</sup> See Goldin, "The Female Labor Force," Ciancanelli, "Women's Transition to Wage Labor," and Bose, "Devaluing Women's Work." For a more detailed discussion of the differences in these estimates, see Marjorie Abel and Nancy Folbre, "Female Labor Force Participation in the Late Nineteenth Century: A Methodology for Revising Estimates," unpublished manuscript available from Department of Economics, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01003.

In short, recent research vindicates the concerns of the Association for the Advancement of Women, the Women's Bureau, A.J. Jaffe, and Robert Smuts. The mismeasurement of female labor-force participation was more than a matter of enumerators' mistakes or self-reporting error—it was built into the very terminology of the census. A persistent gender bias shaped the interpretation as well as collection of labor-force data, as is evident from Lebergott's suggestion that women's "primary status" as housewives mitigated their underenumeration as participants in the market economy. The result was a misleading exaggeration of female domesticity around the turn of the century.

This bias was both modified and perpetuated by the adoption of the modern term "unpaid family workers" in 1950 to describe those who participate in market production in a family enterprise without receiving an explicit wage or salary. The term reinforces the devaluation of housework (housewives are not considered either paid or unpaid family workers) but acknowledges a distinctive form of participation in the market economy through a family enterprise. Still, such participants are subject to a conceptual double standard. One hour per week of work for pay or other monetary reward qualifies an individual as a labor-force participant, but at least fifteen hours per week is required for unpaid family workers.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *U.S. Census of Population. 1950. Employment and Personal Characteristics.* Population Census Report P-E, No. 1A, preprint of vol. 4, pt. 1, ch. A (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1955), p. 1A-5. The concept of the unpaid family worker first emerged in the 1940 census, but in that year any work for pay or profit, including unpaid family labor, qualified as labor-force participation. See *Sixteenth Census of the U.S.: 1940. Population*, vol. 3, *The Labor Force, Part 1. U.S. Summary* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), p. 3. Interestingly, the number of male unpaid family workers enumerated dropped between 1940 and 1950, whereas the number of females increased slightly (and would have increased even more had the same criterion been employed in both years). The category is most relevant to agriculture. In 1950, unpaid family workers comprised only 3.3 percent of the total female employees, but about 55 percent of all females employed in agriculture. See *U.S. Census of Population. 1950. Industrial Characteristics*, vol. 4, p. 1, ch. D (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1955), p. 1D-42.

*Women, Families, and Family Headship*

A similar form of gender bias infused statistical terminology pertaining to families and family headship. The intellectual history of this bias remains largely unexplored, despite recent protests that motivated the Census Bureau to dispense with the concept “head of household” in 1980. However, even a brief consideration of census texts reveals an explicit tendency to conflate families and households that understated deviations from the family norm. “Head of family,” the precursor to “head of household,” was always defined differently for men than for women. The term did not merely reflect traditional patriarchal norms—it reinforced them, often assuming an “outdated” authority structure (as Social Scientists in Population Research put it) even where it clearly did not apply.

Families were the basic unit of account of the early censuses. In 1790, only the name of the “head of the family” was recorded. Beginning in 1820, legislation required that census enumeration should be made by actual inquiry at every dwelling house, or of the head of every family.<sup>33</sup> Yet the term “family” was not explicitly defined in the instructions to marshals until the 1850 census. At that time, the Census Office explicitly affirmed its broad use of the term, which went well beyond biological kinship to encompass units later termed “households”:

By the term family is meant, either one person living separately in a house, or a part of a house, and providing for him or herself, or several persons living together in a house, or in part of a house, upon one common means of support, and separately from others in similar circumstances. A widow living alone and separately providing for herself, or 200 individuals living together and provided for by a common head, should each be numbered as one family. The resident inmates of a hotel, jail, garrison, hospital, an asylum, or other similar institution, should be reckoned as one family. . . . All landlords, jailers,

<sup>33</sup> Wright, *History and Growth*, p. 134.

superintendents of poorhouses, garrisons, hospitals, asylums and other similar institutions, are to be considered as heads of their respective families, and the inmates under their care to be registered as members thereof, and the details concerning each designated in their proper columns.<sup>34</sup>

Broad extension of the term "family" entailed a parallel extension of the term "family head." Any doubt as to the nature of authority conveyed by this term should be assuaged by the placement of landlords, jailers, and superintendents under its rubric. As new residential patterns emerged, traditional terminology was literally stretched to accommodate them as metaphorical families. The possibility that an actual or metaphorical family might lack a "head" was simply never entertained. Further, headship was defined in gender-specific terms that disqualified married women living with their husbands.<sup>35</sup>

The growth of boarding and lodging represented a major change in living arrangements in late-nineteenth-century America.<sup>36</sup> Recent social-historical research suggests that early increases in residential independence had particularly important implications for women, freeing them of the traditional obligation of performing domestic labor for male kin and allowing them far more control over their leisure time.<sup>37</sup> Women on their own also represented a vanguard within the

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Census, *Statistics of Women at Work: Based on Unpublished Information Derived from the Schedules of the Twelfth Census, 1900* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1907), p. 28; see also the discussion of results from a sample of the 1900 manuscript census in Daniel Scott Smith, "Life Course, Norms and the Family System of Older Americans in 1900," *Journal of Family History* 4 (Fall 1979): 289.

<sup>36</sup> Modell and Hareven, "Urbanization"; Mark Peel, "On the Margins: Lodgers and Boarders in Boston, 1860-1900," *Journal of American History* 72 (March 1986): 813-834.

<sup>37</sup> Joann Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1986).

early labor movement.<sup>38</sup> Yet because boarding houses were treated as “institutional” families, often headed by a male proprietor, many women who clearly supported themselves independently of men were enumerated as members of male-headed families.

In 1900, the census acknowledged the growing significance of new residential forms by introducing a small terminological innovation—a distinction between “private families” and “economic families,” comprised of boarding houses, hotels, hospitals, and other institutions. According to official tabulations, 3.6 percent of the entire population lived outside private families in 1900. In large cities, the percentage was much higher—7 percent in Boston, 5 percent in New York.<sup>39</sup> But these tabulations underestimated the extent of nonkin residence, because families with nonkin boarders were included among the “private families.” A later auxiliary report fully considered the extent of boarding and lodging, but limited its attention to female “breadwinners” (not including domestic servants) in 27 cities.<sup>40</sup>

The 1910 and 1920 censuses maintained the distinction between private and economic families, and continued to include families with boarders and lodgers in the former category. Not until 1930 was this issue addressed: In that year, households reporting more than ten lodgers were classified as boarding or lodging houses rather than families. Conceding the strained quality of the terminology, the census began to use the term “quasi-family” for institutions, boarding and lodging houses, hotels, etc.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Mary Blewett, *Men, Women and Work: Class, Gender and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry, 1780–1910* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

<sup>39</sup> *Twelfth Census of the U.S. 1900. Population, Part II* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902), pp. clvii-clxii.

<sup>40</sup> *Statistics of Women at Work*, pp. 26–28. This report found that boarders and lodgers comprised about 19 percent of all women “breadwinners” over 16 (exclusive of servants and waitresses), and about 15 percent of all married-women breadwinners.

<sup>41</sup> Office of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the U.S. 1930. Population. Vol. VI. Families* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1933), p. 6.

Statisticians revealed as much anxiety over new residential trends as over new patterns of labor-force participation. The report of the U.S. Bureau of Labor on the condition of women and child earners<sup>42</sup> coined a new term, “women adrift,” used to designate both boarding and lodging women wage earners as well as married women earning a living for themselves and their children—those “without homes that are in that sense an asset” (i.e., lacking adult male kin). According to their survey of twenty-two cities, an estimated 14 percent of working women lacked proper moorings. The Census Bureau did not adopt this terminology. Nor did it adapt its traditional terminology sufficiently to measure the increase in nontraditional households. Attention to the issue was probably constrained by fear of controversy.<sup>43</sup>

Lack of attention to the growing importance of nonkin residential arrangements and allegiance to the notion that every family must have a “head” were not the only manifestations of gender bias. The census remained largely uninterested in the incidence of households lacking adult women, or the distinction between male-headed families that included a wife, sister, or mother and those which included no woman at all.<sup>44</sup> Why was it more important to ask how many women lived in “families” without adult men (i.e., how many “headed” families) than to ask how many men lived in “families” without adult women?

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor, *Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners in the U.S.*, vol. 5, *Wage-Earning Women in Stores and Factories*. Senate Document No. 645. 61st Congress. 2nd Session (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1910), p. 53.

<sup>43</sup> Lynn Weiner writes, “All women workers were to some degree controversial, but those living away from home, who, because of their class status, were also visibly separated from their ‘proper place’ seemed to pose an especially grave threat to social order.” See her *From Working Girl to Working Mother: The Female Labor Force in the United States, 1820–1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 30.

<sup>44</sup> In 1930, as aforementioned, the census did specifically inquire after the “homemaker,” that woman who was responsible for the care of the home and family. Homemakers were found in 95 percent of all U.S. families. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the U.S.: 1930. Population. Vol. VI. Families* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1933), p. 9.

Apart from the obvious concern with patriarchal authority, census assumptions reflected the devaluation of women's nonmarket work alluded to above. Because domestic labor was considered "unproductive," women were considered far more economically dependent on men than vice versa. Indeed, demographers to this day calculate "dependency ratios" that place women who prepare meals, wash clothes, rear children, and supervise servants in the same economic category as helpless infants, sick, and elderly.<sup>45</sup>

Like the census definitions of gainful occupations, the definitions of family structure dressed up patriarchal norms in a fancy official vocabulary. The application of this vocabulary to changing historical circumstances almost inevitably understated its own obsolescence. Mismeasurement of the extent of female residential independence contributed to exaggeration of the persistence of male family headship, which in turn diminished the apparent need for a new terminology. It could not, of course, reverse the actual changes in residential patterns, which continued to diminish the applicability of the traditional patriarchal family model.

In 1940, the Census Bureau supplemented the term "family" with the term "household," and defined the private household as the private family plus lodgers, servants, or hired hands. The term "quasi-household" was reserved for groups of individuals not living in private families.<sup>46</sup> In 1947 the family concepts were revised again, and one person in each household was designated "head." The description of "headship" in the 1950 census offers a particularly transparent example of overt gender bias:

The head is the person so reported to the enumerator, with the

<sup>45</sup> Henry S. Shryock and Jacob S. Siegel, *The Methods and Materials of Demography* (Washington: Bureau of the Census, 1973); for a recent application, see Steven Ruggles, *Prolonged Connections: The Rise of the Extended Family in Nineteenth-Century England and America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), pp. 42–47.

<sup>46</sup> *Sixteenth Census of the U.S.: 1940. Population. Families. Types of Families* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), p. 2.

exception that married women are not classified as heads if their husbands are living with them at the time of the census. In the small proportion of the cases where the wife is reported to the enumerator as the head, the husband is almost always an invalid. In order to avoid establishing a separate category for the small number of families with the wife reported as the head, such families are edited to show the husband as the head.<sup>47</sup>

In 1940 and 1950, tabulation of individuals by their relationship to the head of household made it possible to distinguish to some extent between kin and nonkin residents, and to arrive at a better estimate of the percentage of women living independently of fathers and husbands. However, despite some attention to new household forms, official tabulations and most independent researchers continued to employ definitions of household composition strongly based on headship.<sup>48</sup>

In 1980, in response to pressures from social scientists, feminist organizations, and pilot surveys that suggested considerable dissatisfaction with the concept of "headship" among respondents, the Census Bureau introduced a substitute—"householder." Defined as "the person in whose name the home is owned or rented," the term allows married couples to choose which adult should be the "reference person." The category "female householder, no husband present" provides

<sup>47</sup> U.S. Census of Population: 1950. *Special Reports. General Characteristics of Families.* Census Report P-E, No. 2A, vol. 4, pt. 2, ch. A (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1955), p. 2A-7.

<sup>48</sup> Arnold Rose, "Living Arrangements of Unattached Persons," *American Sociological Review* 112 (August 1947): 429-435; Edward T. Pryor, Jr., "Rhode Island Family Structure: 1875 and 1960," in Peter Laslett and Richard Wall, eds., *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972). Frances Kobrin, who notes in passing the problematic character of household definitions, focuses her analysis of household composition trends between 1940 and 1970 on "primary individuals," defined as household heads who lived either alone or with unrelated persons. See her "The Fall in Household Size and the Rise of the Primary Individual in the United States," *Demography* 13 (February 1976): 127-38. An article by R.T. Michael, V.R. Fuchs, and S.R. Scott represents an exception to the common emphasis on headship, but focuses on individuals who live completely alone. See their "Changes in the Propensity to Live Alone: 1950-1976," *Demography* 17 (February 1980): 39-56.

an analogue to the earlier category "female head of household." "Male householders, spouse present" are also tabulated.<sup>49</sup>

*The Implications of Gender Bias*

The Census Bureau did not invent the assumptions regarding gainful occupations, families, and family heads that structured its detailed quantitative surveys of the U.S. population before 1940. It simply adopted and clung to terminology that reflected prevailing patriarchal norms. This retrospective critique, enhanced by hindsight, aims no insult at past census takers. Rather, it illustrates the pervasive, easily camouflaged workings of gender bias, and warns against uncritical use of census data. A brief consideration of two common misinterpretations of historical data series reiterates this warning.

In the big picture based on published U.S. census estimates, changes in women's participation in the market economy between 1880 and 1930 were gradual, far less dramatic than changes between 1940 and 1985. By most accounts, changes in the later period were largely driven by a rush of married women into paid labor. This empirical generalization has shaped numerous discussions of important theoretical issues, such as the determinants of female labor-force participation and the causes of the sexual wage differential.<sup>50</sup> Yet the analysis above suggests that census data seriously understate women's labor-force participation before 1940, and therefore overstate the early differences in men's and women's participation in the market economy.

Similarly, aggregate U.S. census historical series on house-

<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1987* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986), p. 45.

<sup>50</sup> Valerie Oppenheimer, *The Female Labor Force* (Berkeley: University of California, 1970); Claudia Goldin, "The Changing Economic Role of Women: A Quantitative Approach," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12 (Spring 1983): 707-733.

hold structure suggest that relatively little change took place before 1940. In 1890, the first year a breakdown of the number of families headed by women was included in the aggregate census, 14 percent of all families fell into that category. In 1940, 15 percent of all households were headed by women.<sup>51</sup> By 1970 the proportion of woman-headed households had reached 21 percent and become the focus of considerable concern over the relationship between increases in government social-welfare programs and the "breakdown of the family." Indeed, this so-called breakdown effect remains a major preoccupation in current policy debates.<sup>52</sup>

But the apparent chronological link between increased social spending after 1940 and the weakening of traditional patriarchal family forms is largely a statistical artifact. Ross and Sawhill pointed out long ago that about one-third of the increase in female-headed households between 1940 and 1970 simply reflected changes in living arrangements—greater availability of housing and higher incomes made it possible for already self-supporting women with young children to move into separate households.<sup>53</sup> The analysis above suggests that conventional census categories also significantly underestimated levels of de facto female headship before 1940. Further, historical comparisons of female headship between white and black households may be confounded by as-yet-unexplored differences in boarding and lodging patterns.

Census measures of important changes in women's lives in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lagged behind

<sup>51</sup> U.S. Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1987), Series A 320.

<sup>52</sup> The best known version of this argument is Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancy, eds., *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967). See the discussion of the contemporary debate in Fred Block, Richard A. Cloward, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Frances Fox Piven, *Mean Season: The Attack on the Welfare State* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987).

<sup>53</sup> H. L. Ross and Isabel Sawhill, *Time of Transition: The Growth of Families Headed by Women* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1975).

actual changes. Perhaps part of this lag reflected general institutional inertia, but it also reflected a larger problem of social-scientific discourse that remains in force today. Those who use statistics, as well as those who collect them, are generally reluctant to question assumptions that lend the prestigious appearance of objectivity to their analysis. Letters of protest are generally excluded from the scientific canon. Yet, as this paper shows, they can provide important scientific insights.

#### *Appendix A*

Memorial of Mary F. Eastman, Henrietta L.T. Woolcott, and others, officers of the Association for the Advancement of Women, praying that the tenth census may contain a just enumeration of women as laborers and producers, Senate Miscellaneous Documents, 45th Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. 2, No. 84 (Serial Set, 1786). The full text, less the detailed list of the names of officers of the Association, follows:

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States in Congress assembled:

Whereas the acknowledged errors, discrepancies, and incompleteness of the Ninth Census render it an unsatisfactory and unreliable record of the population, wealth, industry, and physical, mental and moral conditions of the American people; and

Whereas the home and woman as a home-keeper have no place in the report, only the occupations called "gainful" being noted, and more than twelve millions of American women being overlooked as laborers or producers or left out, in common with those pursuing disreputable employments, and not even incidentally named as in any wise affecting the causes of increase or decrease of population or wealth; and

Whereas gross errors in enumerating the births, ages, diseases, and deaths of children are the inevitable result of the natural barriers in the way of men as collectors of social and vital statistics, who frequently obtain information, in the language of the report, from "fathers, nurses, servants, and unsympathetic fellow-boarders;" and

Whereas there is obvious justice and propriety in the

employment of intelligent women to collect vital statistics concerning women and children:

Therefore we pray your honorable body, in enacting a law providing for the taking of the Tenth Census, to make provision for the more careful and just enumeration of women as laborers and producers; for a record of the wages of men and women in all occupations; for a record of causes of pauperism, vagrancy, vice and crime, insanity, idiocy, blindness, deformity, and disease; for the enumeration of all men and women engaged in disreputable occupations, for full statistics concerning all reformatory institutions; and

We further pray that you will enact such laws or amendments as may be requisite to secure the employment of a fair ratio of suitable women as collectors of the centennial census.

Mary T. Eastman, Massachusetts, Secretary, Association for Advancement of Women, et al.

### *Appendix B*

#### SOCIAL SCIENTISTS IN POPULATION RESEARCH 6700 Selkirk Drive Bethesda, Maryland

December 14, 1976

Dear Colleague:

Social Scientists in Population Research, a group of scientists based in the Washington Area, has been questioning the use of the concept "head of household" in official census statistics. Our investigation of this matter, including discussions with several officials at the Bureau of the Census, have led us to formulate the following points which we would like to share with you.

1. In designating who is "head of household," the Census currently accepts the answer of the respondent—unless a married woman is designated as head (in which case it is changed by the Census to be the husband). The concept has a subjective intuitive meaning—suggesting which person "rules the roost" or who lives in whose house—but no objective validity.

2. The concept "head of household" implies an authority structure that many families do not recognize. In a special study conducted by the Bureau of the Census, a third of the respondents who declared a "head of household" reported both husband and wife as co-equal "heads of household." In addition, 17% of husbands reported their wives as the "head of

household." Only 49% of all persons surveyed reported the male as head of household. Thus, the Census procedure of automatically assigning headship status to the male in a husband/wife family is at odds with people's perceptions.

3. Alternate means exist to collect data on households that are both more precise and less offensive than the Census Bureau's current procedure. For example, one person—the oldest in the household or the person completing the form—might be listed on the first line and all other family members reported by their relationship to that person. Using such alternatives rather than headship designation does not entail any loss of information in terms of tabulation possibilities.

4. The Census Bureau is currently testing several alternative procedures for collecting data on heads of households. However, the results from their experiments will not be ready in time to be incorporated into the pretest for the 1980 Census scheduled for this coming April in Oakland, California. Since this pretest is a major step in solidifying the Census schedule, we are concerned that the Census Bureau has not allowed sufficient time for a thorough and thoughtful evaluation of the head of household studies.

5. The use of "head of household" is clearly objectionable to many people—both men and women. We are concerned that if the Census Bureau does not demonstrate a serious commitment to assessing alternatives and making appropriate changes there may be a serious backlash when the 1980 Census is taken. There is already some discussion about the possibility of organized noncompliance. As census-users we are concerned that the lowered response rates this implies would present serious problems to researchers and government officials.

If you agree with us that these are serious matters, we urge you to make your views known to the following individuals:

The Honorable Patricia Schroeder  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Robert L. Hagan  
Acting Director  
Bureau of the Census  
Washington, D.C. 20233

Daniel B. Levine  
Associate Director of  
Demographic Fields  
Bureau of the Census  
Washington, D.C. 20233

David L. Kaplan  
Assistant Director for  
Demographic Censuses  
Bureau of the Census  
Washington, D.C. 20233

You should also write to your own Congressperson.

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The time table of activities at the Bureau of the Census demands that action be taken *immediately*. If you have any questions, or would like to discuss this further, please feel free to call me; my office number is (301) 454-5963.

Sincerely yours,  
Harriet B. Presser, Ph.D.

HBP:jeg

P.S. The following resolution was passed unanimously by the Census Advisory Committee of the American Economic Association, December 3, 1976:

“We believe the term ‘head of household’ in the questionnaire and in the public tabulations is ambiguous, not currently descriptive of many households, and offends numbers of people. Elicitation of information needed by users of the Census is feasible through other methods. We urge that the Census Bureau make the change in time for the 1980 Census.”

\* Versions of this paper were presented at the meetings of the Population Association of America, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Indiana. We learned a great deal from the ensuing discussions. We also gratefully acknowledge the comments and criticisms of Margo Anderson, Claudia Goldin, Robert Pollak, and Elyce Rotella.