Boris Roundtable: From Othering to Inclusion

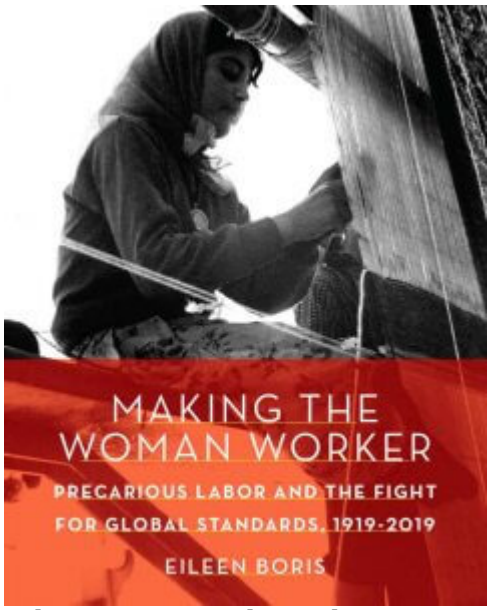
Posted on March 9, 2020 by Naomi R Williams

Eileen Boris details the history of how the International Labor Organization (ILO) moved from positioning the male industrial worker in imperial centers to acknowledging the feminization of labor and promoting gender mainstreaming in *Making the Woman Worker*. She illustrates the ways that "othering" women workers led to treating women as objects instead of agents involved in their own economic justice efforts. This increased discrimination in employment and limited employment opportunities for women around the world and reinforced inequities among women and men and industrial and developing nations. Her history of the politics and deliberations around ILO conventions and recommendations concerning the "special case" of women workers demonstrates the ways that the othering of groups of people reinforces systemic inequality. It provides justification for the necessity of creating inclusion and engaging with the global labor movement. It also demonstrates the need for robust social movements to promote workers' rights and expand economic security. The passage of the Domestic Workers Convention in 2011 shows how workers' collective action can reshape discourses around labor rights.

> *This is the second installation in our special roundtable on Eileen Boris's new book,* Making the Woman Worker: Precarious Labor and the Fight for Global Standards, 1919-2019*. Yesterday, we brought you Katherine Turk's contribution, "Women's Labor and the Transnational Turn." Come back tomorrow and Wednesday for new contributions from Chaumtoli Huq and Sarah Lyons, and Thursday for a response from Boris.*

Today, most workers labor outside of standardized labor law regimes. Some have described this as the feminization of labor, where more and more people work in the low-wage service sector and informal economies. Boris's history of the discursive making of the woman worker shows how "othering" women workers in ILO deliberations and instrument making limited all workers from expanding economic security over the course of the twentieth century. powell and Menendian define othering as "a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities."[1] Othering limits full belonging in society, impacts how individuals and groups are perceived, and limits power and access to

resources. Using a framework of "othering" and "belonging" we can create "inclusive responses to group-based marginalization and inequality" and use inclusion to solve the problem of othering in our fights for social justice.[2]



Eileen Boris, Making the Woman Worker

Making the Woman Worker illustrates how constructions of "work" and "woman" as a special category of worker led to the othering of women and the work most associated with female labor. From the ILO's inception, women workers stood as the other. Boris divides the book into three overlapping sections that conform to broad constructions of the woman worker. The first period, looking at the woman as different covers the years from 1919-1958. The second period shows how women in the Global South came to be understood as "difference's other," and the final period from 1990s-2010s looks at all workers as different, the feminization of labor. As Boris explains, the process of establishing global labor standards led to a construct of the woman as an exception. The white male industrial worker was the norm. Women were underrepresented in jobs covered by existing labor standards in the early twentieth century. Deliberations around setting global standards failed to consider reproductive labor as work. Ideas about the home as private and housework as outside ILO purview, women as dependent on husbands or fathers, and women's role as caregivers, limited the number of women workers who qualified for workplace rights and protection under ILO conventions and recommendations.

Boris's examination of the "culture of protection" that surrounded women's work and the isolation of women workers illustrates the ways that othering women and women-dominated

forms of work limited women's ability to be active agents in their own economic independence and reinforced inequality across gender and national lines. For example, the 1930s negotiations to revise the 1919 Night Work Convention were seen by various parties as protecting women from dangerous working conditions, protecting the home from abandonment by women who should be at home caring for family instead of working, equality feminists who opposed limiting women's employment options, and labor feminists who argued that adjusting hours would only increase the exploitation of women workers by increasing household responsibilities and limiting pay (34-38). These battles limited the role of working women and reinforced assumed difference and dependency.

During the interwar period and the years immediately following World War II, ILO conventions and recommendations seemed to be gender neutral, yet continued to assume the white, male, industrial worker as the norm. As Boris explains, the continued conflation of work inside the home as family labor stopped successful release of standards for domestic service work or industrial homework until the turn of the twenty-first century. The ability of countries to exempt certain work and/or workers from standards, even while signing on to conventions reinforced gender, ethnic, and legal status inequities for workers in developing countries, rural areas, and for migrant workers, especially those who worked in homes, either through piecework or as caregivers and maintainers of home life (reproductive labor).

Yet, the example of the successful 2010-11 Domestic Workers Convention No. 189 and Recommendation No. 201 illustrates how worker mobilization, access to the ILO deliberations, and the impact of social movements can reshape global political economy. Domestic worker organizing at the local level helped generate national movements around the globe. Boris highlights the work of domestic workers in India through the grassroots organization, Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). Workers organized themselves through education and empowerment. They brought isolated workers together in gatherings to meet others doing similar work and learn more about labor rights (173-178; 180-181). Boris shows how the example of the Indian organization SEWA became a model for labor standards addressing domestic work. Domestic workers in the United States used organizations such as the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) to help build and expand domestic worker organizations. Often seen as un-organizable, these workers organized themselves. They sought collaborations with and, some became active in, traditional labor unions. As Boris argues, these national-level organizations and social movements that supported workers' rights went a long way in opening the door for the ILO to move to set standards around domestic work.

Workers and domestic worker organizations did not have the political power to bring their issues to the ILO without assistance. *Making the Woman Worker* details the ways that

women policymakers, feminist social scientists, and the networks they established beyond the ILO and the United Nations were key to the deliberations of the ILO tripartite apparatus. The work of the ILO to have better representation of women in leadership roles in the organization itself also created opportunities for networking to get domestic worker issues on the agenda. For example, Boris describes the network of feminist scholars who worked within the Programme on Rural Women in the 1970s and 1980s. They introduced participatory methodology to the evidence gathering of ILO and UN agencies and advocated for community engagement when it came to policymaking (124-125). The support of NGOs and feminist social scientists granted domestic workers access to the ILO deliberations in the 2010s despite Employer resistance. Women workers intentionally used their collective power to appeal to delegates' hearts and relied on tropes of domestic workers as victims of exploitation. But they also reshaped the narrative to focus on the work as dignified and deserving of the rights of any other worker. National domestic worker alliances also influenced Government action in support of these standards (213-219).

As labor continues to transform to more and more informal forms of work, many are grappling with how to fight against oppression and exploitation on a global scale. The answer lies in the framework that powell and Menendian set up around othering and belonging. Only through collective power can workers demand a voice in policy making to expand economic security. Using available institutions and human capital in the form of networks of activists and policymakers, workers can build a radical inclusion of all work as dignified and valuable. In short, all workers are deserving of full rights to livelihood. Examining our social justice institutions to rid our policies and practices of exclusionary structures will help build inclusive organizations. Supporting grassroots organizing, worker-to-worker organizing, and building sustainable social movements can expand inclusion and belonging. Only when all voices are actively engaged will workers build sustainable inclusion to leverage their power in the global political economy.

> *Come back tomorrow for the next installment, Chaumtoli Huq on "Realizing the Global Labor Rights of Domestic and Rural Women Workers: Fight for Global Standards Must Continue at the Grassroots Level." And if you missed yesterday's opening contribution from Katherine Turk, click here.*

[1] John a. Powell and Stephen Menendian, "The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging," *Othering and Belonging: Expanding the Circle of Human Concern*, Issue 1 (Summer 2016), 17.

[2] Powell and Menendian, 17-18.

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