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Women in Labor: Mothers, Medicine, and Occupational Health in the United States, 1890-1980 (Women and Health: Cultural and Social Perspectives (Paperback))

Allison L Hepler

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Early in the twentieth century, states and courts began limiting the workplace hours of wage-earning women in order to protect them from fatigue and ill health. It was felt that a woman's role was to be a mother and that working too many hours in an often unhealthy and dangerous workplace created risks to the performance of that task. In the 1970s, many Fortune 500 companies began implementing "fetal protection policies" to prohibit women from working in areas deemed risky to reproductive capacity. Again, assumptions about motherhood were the driving force behind employment regulations.

Women in Labor examines how gender norms affected the workplace health of men and women. Did the desire to protect women result in a safer workplace for all workers? Did it advance or hinder the status of women in the work-place? In answering these questions, Hepler describes a complex network of medical experts, state bureaucrats, business owners, social reformers, industrial engineers, workers, and feminists, many with overlapping interests and identities. This overlap often resulted in tradeoffs and unintended consequences. For instance, efforts promoting gender equality sometimes created equal risks for workers, whereas emphasizing social realities resulted in job discrimination. Reformists efforts to promote the important connection between the home and the industrial environment also allowed an employer to shirk responsibility for worker health.

The issue of women in the workplace will remain crucial in the twenty-first century as workers worldwide struggle to create safer workplaces without sacrificing socioeconomic benefits or the health of women and their children.

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