

WORK AND LABOR
Transdisciplinary Studies
for the 21st Century

Women, Work, and Activism

Chapters of an
Inclusive History
of Labor in the
Long Twentieth
Century

Edited by

**ELOISA BETTI
LEDA PAPASTEFANAKI
MARICA TOLOMELLI
SUSAN ZIMMERMANN**



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Introduction

Thinking the History of Women's Activism into Global Labor History

*Eloisa Betti, Leda Papastefanaki, Marica Tolomelli,
and Susan Zimmermann*

This book is about a major theme in the history of the laboring classes that continues to be understudied. Its chapters examine women's activism in men- as well as women-dominated sectors of the world of work and women's activism within the labor movement and various other male-dominated organizations and institutions on the one hand, and women-dominated networks and women's organizations on the other. Working women's activism and organizing aimed at improving both labor conditions in paid and unpaid work and the living conditions of working-class women and their families and communities. In short: women's activism with a focus on work possesses a rich history.

In the following pages, we first summarize what we consider this book's key contributions to the history of labor and gender. We then give a (however partial) overview of the genealogy of conceptual innovation generated by scholars who have studied the gendered history of work and women's activism in relation to work and labor. Finally, we discuss the three core themes most prominently addressed in the chapters assembled in this book, highlighting both their centrality to the gendered and global history of labor and the contributions of the individual chapters. Discussing these themes we ask: how can women's labor activism in a large variety of men- and women-dominated contexts be "thought together," and how does such an inclusive perspective help bring about conceptual advancement in writing the history of women's work-related activism? How can the study of the history of women's work-related activism contribute to advancing conceptualizations of agency and social action? And finally, how can a focus on women activists' biographies help us develop both inclusive and actor-centered approaches to women's work-related activism? As we engage with more specialized literature on these large themes and the related findings of the individual chapters assembled in *Women, Work, and Activism*, we aim to provide deeper insight into and exemplify the overall contribution of the book, which we describe in the following section.

Why this book?

The research assembled in this collection, which covers many places and was conducted in a multitude of languages, does more than expand our knowledge on the history of women's activism focused on work. The book's larger contributions to gender and labor history can be summarized as follows.¹ First, bringing together studies on a large variety of women's activism over a long period of time—ranging from, e.g., mutual societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the transnational circulation of ideas on vocational training in the 1950s and 1960s, and female migrants' activism in the twenty-first century—this collection contributes to an inclusive understanding of the historical and historically shifting contours of women's activism around work and labor. Second, the book illuminates how a wide array of specific contexts and politics and actors and institutions framed women's work-place related activism in uniquely gendered ways. This includes examples such as the political work of women communists and other activists among peasant women in 1930s Yugoslavia, the Workers' Commissions under the Franco dictatorship, the interaction between trade unions and feminist networks in the 1970s, and the relationship between factory management and women workers in late socialism.

Third, the chapters build and expand on the rich tradition of feminist² labor history and the conceptual debates that have shaped and propelled this tradition as they discuss the above and other sites and interactions that have shaped women's workplace-related activism in Europe, the United States, Australia, and internationally. The volume makes several contributions to feminist labor history. Importantly, it helps us "think-together" women labor activists' choices to organize within male-dominated institutions (in the absence or presence of women-specific organizational "infrastructures" available within these institu-

¹ Our two peer reviewers greatly inspired us to flag some of these contributions more explicitly in this introduction. We hope they do not mind that in doing so, we actually appropriate some of their wording; we also hope that we do not overstate the contribution of this book in this revised version of the introduction. We are grateful for the reviewers' thoughtful engagement with the introduction and each of the chapters to follow.

² We are fully aware of the contentious nature of this term. Many women activists belonging to or identifying with the laboring classes or engaged in movements that identified "feminism" with white, middle-class dominated, single-sex organizing and with prioritizing the struggle against gender oppression over the struggle against other oppressions have rejected the term and declined to self-identify as "feminist." We use the term "feminist" simply because it was chosen by the Working Group of Feminist Labor History of the European Labor History Network (see below). For the purpose of this introduction, we consider it a (rather unfortunate) shorthand for any historiographic and/or political interest in women's (and sometimes men's) engagement on behalf of women and their interests however construed; such engagement historically has taken many forms, was shaped by many different contexts, and has prioritized or combined many different agendas. The historical conjuncture that gave rise to the naming of the Working Group Feminist Labor History deserves broader reflection.

tions), within women's cross-class networks, or on their own. The findings of the chapters assembled here suggest that, conceptually, we need to go beyond prioritizing any of these possibilities over others or juxtaposing them as mutually exclusive. Rather, we need to conceive of them as the range of political options that have been available to working-class women and their allies in male-dominated class societies and carefully evaluate how each of these options has been limiting and enabling in its own way and within specific contexts. Another distinctive approach pursued in this book is the careful and precise analysis of how the historical actors, i.e., the women activists themselves, construed and framed their arguments and agendas. Such an approach helps uncover more fully the agenda and agency women activists developed in response to the complex historical realities and frameworks about which they were very knowledgeable and with which they interacted so thoroughly. The deep engagement with the details and complexity as present in the activism discussed can contribute to the abandonment of earlier argumentative clichés that have often been characterized by masculinist and sometimes also by feminist biases or simplifications.

Finally, the book invites labor historians to rethink a number of reigning assumptions, categories, and narratives concerning the labor movement, its constitutive subjects, and their actions, as well as some of the related historiographic wisdom. Making female activists and women's activism the center of attention, this book, with its contributions on Europe, the United States, and Australia, as well as transnational organizing and interaction, brings an inclusive feminist perspective to labor history. In the past half century, the historiography on labor has been characterized, on the one hand, by complex interaction, or lack thereof, between labor and feminist historians, and on the other, by labor historians writing in (and on) different parts of the world. Classical European (and Western) labor history largely rejected or ignored the conceptual renewal that characterized both feminist labor history and non-Western labor history (as epitomized, for example, by the rich scholarship informed by various trends in subaltern studies). The new global labor history, while even today strongly driven by historians with roots in the West, has in fact built substantively on the advances spearheaded by both non-Western labor histories and feminist labor history from the 1970s onward. At the same time, feminist labor history has been subjected to two types of marginalization within this new era. First, as labor history took its global turn, it looked out for and discovered conceptual rejuvenation and advancement largely within the non-Western world while continuing to overlook the feminist tradition and its advances, some of which were characterized by striking conceptual congruence with, e.g., subaltern studies. The new global labor history, in other words, tends to associate the conceptual innovation on which it is based with the history and historiography of labor

associated with the Global South³ rather than with the parallel advances made by feminist labor historians in the West. Second, non-Western labor historians have seldom developed a sustained interest in this feminist tradition, associating it all too easily with ongoing Eurocentrism. Overcoming this double stalemate is the fourth important service this volume can render for the community of labor and feminist historians. The collection demonstrates that there is much in common between the conceptual advances made in the past half century by feminist and non-Western labor history. The following chapters, thus, help advance global labor history as a whole.

The collection also exemplifies that feminist labor history with a focus on Europe and the West does not by definition entail conceptual Eurocentrism. On the contrary, as it contributes to developing a more inclusive and conceptually revised and enlarged history of labor within Europe, this collection aims to drive home critiques of Eurocentric historiographies of labor to Europe while simultaneously making a contribution to an inclusive history of women's labor-related activism wherever it is to be found. The authors of the following chapters engage with a rich array of traditions for studying women's labor-related activism in both better and less well-known European contexts, the United States, and Australia. The collection cannot do justice to the rich scholarship on the past and present of parallel activism in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Yet, it might serve as a contribution to drawing out a map of common trends and major divergences, regional or global cycles and clusters, as well as long-term trends of women's labor activism around the globe. We consider that research pursued and collaboration built by feminist labor historians around the world is at present reaching a stage that will enable this scholarly community to fruitfully bring together the manifold research results and begin to outline larger-scale global trends and cycles, divergences, similarities, and interactions.⁴

³ We use the term Global South to refer to those nations that experienced colonialism or economic imperialism and subsequent underdevelopment from the standpoint of the industrialized market-dominated societies. The term Global North refers to market-based or capitalist economies of the West and similar economies elsewhere. Both terms are rather vague and lack historical depth and, thus, could only with some difficulty be applied to some parts of Europe that figure prominently in this book.

⁴ Collections with a regional focus such as Kaye Broadbent and Michele Ford, eds., *Women and Labour Organizing in Asia: Diversity, Autonomy and Activism* (London: Routledge, 2008); monographs such as Malek Abisaab, *Militant Women of a Fragile Nation* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010); collaborative research as conducted, for example, in the research project "Women's Labour Activism in Eastern Europe and Transnationally, From the Age of Empires to the Late 20th Century (ZARAH)," accessed April 17, 2021, <https://zarah-ceu.org/>; and scholarship with a focus on global interaction can play an important role here. For the latter type of new scholarship, see Suzanne Franzway and Mary Margaret Fonow, *Making Feminist Politics: Transnational Alliances between Women and Labor* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Eileen Boris, *Making the Woman Worker: Precarious Labor and the Fight for Global Standards, 1919–2019* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *For the Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality* (Princeton, NJ:

Women, Work, and Activism is an outcome of such intensifying networking activities and renewed scholarly interest related to the history of women's work and working women's activism in Europe and beyond. More concretely, the collection builds on the activities of the Feminist Labor History Working Group of the European Labour History Network (ELHN). The latter was established in Amsterdam in 2013 and from the beginning has included this network of historians of women and gender in the world of work among its working groups. The chapters included in this book evolved from papers presented and discussed at the ELHN conferences in Turin 2015, Paris 2017, and Amsterdam 2019, as well as the conference "New Perspectives in Feminist Labor History: Work and Activism" organized in Bologna in 2019.⁵ The establishment of the ELHN has spurred the revival of labor history in many European countries and stimulated communication and exchange among the scholars involved in the network. It has also co-triggered a new wave of institutionalization of labor history as a field of study. To put it in a wider context, the activities of the ELHN and its working groups reflect, somewhat belatedly, the rise of a new (global) labor history.

A Short Genealogy of Gendered Histories of Labor and Their Relationship to the New Global Labor History

As women's and gender history developed into a historical (sub-)discipline in the Western world from the 1970s onward, rewriting the histories of labor movements and labor activism from a gendered perspective formed one thematic focal point. National historiographies of course tend to follow their own paths and remain at least partly embedded in distinctive cultural, political, and academic traditions and developments in a given country or region. We do not aim here to give an exhaustive presentation of the different historiographical approaches to gendered histories of labor.⁶ Rather, we wish to point to one

Princeton University Press, 2021). Bringing together scholars and scholarship from all corners of the world with a view to survey large themes, such as women and gender politics in trade unions, and to examine sets of common questions may serve as the backbone for our joint endeavor to draw a global map of the history of women's labor organizing and activism.

⁵ The activities of the ELHN and Working Group Feminist Labor History, including the panels and the conference the Working Group organized, are documented under <https://social-historyportal.org/elhn>. The Bologna conference was co-organized by the University of Bologna under the leadership of Marica Tolomelli and Eloisa Betti, the SISLAV Genere & Lavoro Working Group, and the ELHN Working Group Feminist Labor History.

⁶ For different historiographical accounts in Europe, see Efi Avdela, *Le genre entre classe et nation: Essai d'historiographie grecque* (Paris: Syllepse, 2006); Françoise Thébaud, *Écrire l'histoire*

common trait that has characterized the relationship between women's and gender history and labor history across the globe. In many parts of the world, historians nurturing an interest in the history of women were instrumental in bringing women and gender into the history of labor. Developments in India, a country whose labor historians have played a leading role in advancing and globalizing the field and which is also noteworthy for the role subaltern studies have played in rejuvenating labor history, are a case in point. Until the 1980s, Indian labor history, in line with labor history in other countries, was characterized by the equation of the "history of workers with labor movement history" and a "labourist modernization narrative."⁷ As labor history from the 1940s onward occupied itself mainly "with strikes and unionization," the attention earlier accounts had paid to "women workers as a special category eroded."⁸ Just as most historians specialized in the field of labor history, early subaltern studies "largely ignored gender ideologies and women as historical subjects."⁹ From the 1980s onward, it was scholars interested in the history of women who made the question of women's work and the relationship between gender, class, and other themes into one of the focal points of interest.¹⁰ Two edited volumes published in 1989 on women in colonial India comprised chapters on women's work and labor activism, including various groups of agricultural workers, the textile industry, and other sectors. The volume *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid—described in a review article published in 2013 as a "watershed" in Indian women's and gender history¹¹—also included the editors' conceptual discussion of the relationship

des femmes et du genre (Paris: ENS éditions, 2007); Leda Papastefanaki, "Labor in Economic and Social History: The Viewpoint of Gender in Greek Historiography," *Genesis: Rivista della Società Italiana delle Storie* 15, no. 2 (2016): 59–83.

⁷ Ravi Ahuja, "Preface," in *Working Lives and Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, ed. Ravi Ahuja (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013), x–xii.

⁸ Samita Sen, "Gender and Class: Women in Indian Industry, 1890–1990," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 1 (2008): esp. 83. Samita Sen is the author of the pioneering study *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), which built on her PhD thesis defended in 1992. A recent account of the state of the art of labor history in India summarizes that "[u]ntil quite recently there was no serious engagement with questions of gender and women's work in labour history writing in India." Rana P. Behal, "South Asia," in *Handbook Global History of Work*, ed. Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018), 43.

⁹ Mytheli Sreenivas, "Women's and Gender History in Modern India: Researching the Past, Reflecting on the Present," in *Making Women's Histories: Beyond National Perspectives*, ed. Pamela S. Nadell and Kate Haulman (New York, London: New York University Press, 2013), 172.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, eds., *Class, Sex and the Woman Worker* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977); Louise Tilly, "Paths of Proletarianization: Organization of Production, Sexual Division of Labor and Women's Collective Action," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no. 2 (1981): 400–417; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out of Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

¹¹ Sreenivas, "Women's and Gender History in Modern India," 170.

between gender, class, and colonialism, and their statement that possibly the value of the collection lies more “in the fact that it sets out to interrogate the very nature of feminist questioning” rather than “in its provisional answers.”¹² Samita Sen’s seminal study *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* published in 1999 highlighted the material and gendered connection between industrial work and agricultural work in villages and the power of gendered ideology in devaluing and marginalizing women’s industrial work.¹³

In the state-socialist world of Eastern Europe and partially in parallel political settings dominated by Marxist or Marxian worldviews, the last decades before the fall of state socialism in 1989/1990 similarly saw a continued and sometimes growing interest in the history of women’s labor activism. In contrast to developments in the Western world, works written and professional activities unfolding in these latter contexts did not partake in the making of women’s and gender history as a self-reliant (sub-)discipline of historical study. Here, authors with a sustained interest in the history of women challenged the male centrism of the dominant Marxian and Marxist frameworks of the study of work and the labor movement. They examined women’s gendered status in the world of work and showcased their contributions to workers’ struggles and sometimes their precarious status in trade unions and the labor movement while barely questioning the overall priority of class as an analytical category. Still, through their focus on women and in some cases the “underdeveloped” societies of Eastern Europe, these studies widened the horizon of what counted as work and working-class struggle—focusing, e.g., on struggles around reproductive work or casual labor—and explicitly critiqued the male bias in the history and historiography of working-class organizing.¹⁴

In the Western world, the new (sub-)discipline of women’s and gender history established itself, among other things, as a critique of those varieties of social history that invariably focused on class as the determining feature of both

¹² Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, “Recasting Women. An Introduction,” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 5; the other volume is Jayasankar Krishnamurty, *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work and the State* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

¹³ Sen, *Women and Labor in Late Colonial India*. In her article “Gender and Class” published in 2008 and cited above, Sen emphasizes the active role played by trade unions, i.e., working-class politics in tandem with gender ideologies, in marginalizing women’s work.

¹⁴ Eloisa Betti, “Generations of Italian Communist Women and the Making of a Women’s Rights Agenda in the Cold War (1945–68): Historiography, Memory, and New Archival Evidence,” in *Gender, Generations, and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond*, ed. Anna Artwińska and Agnieszka Mrozik (London: Routledge, 2020), 82–101; Alexandra Ghit, “Professionals’ and Amateurs’ Pasts: A Decolonizing Reading of Post-War Romanian Histories of Gendered Interwar Activism,” *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d’histoire* 25, no. 1 (2018): 21–44; Susan Zimmermann, “In and Out of the Cage: Women’s and Gender History Written in Hungary in the State-Socialist Period,” *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women’s and Gender History* 8, no. 1 (2014): 125–49.

social stratification and labor activism.¹⁵ The new feminist history of labor aimed for conceptual and historical-empirical renewal not in terms of replacing class as a key category in historical scholarship on work and labor; rather, it sought to establish gender, against the dominance of class, as another irreducible and self-reliant analytical category conceptualized on equal footing with class. In 1989, German historian Gisela Bock described this move, and summarized the state of the art in women's (labor) history, as follows:

The frequent equation of the notion "social" with "class-based" or "class-specific" . . . has contributed to the view that other social relations—for instance those between races and between the sexes—are something non-social, pre-social, or even "biological". . .

In fact, neither class nor gender refer to homogeneous groups and even less to necessary bonds of solidarity, but both class and gender are important context-specific and context-dependent categories and realities of social relations between and within social groups. Thus, women's history also deals with class, and there are important studies of women workers, workers' wives, middle-class and noble women. Many of these focus on, and attempt to solve, three problems: the different conceptualization of class for men, where the main criterion is their relation to capital, production, the market, or employment, and for women, where it is their relation to the men of their family, particularly husband and father; secondly, the different and gender-based experience of class which, in the case of women, includes their work for family members; thirdly, relations between women of different classes, which may be different from those between men.¹⁶

The 1970s and the 1980s indeed had seen the flourishing of scholarship that imbued the field of working-class history with studies that focused on women workers and their activism.¹⁷

Born as a critique of traditional working-class and social histories, the new women's and gender history of labor early on engaged in lively debates regarding its own approaches and findings, propelling further conceptual breakthroughs. In the introduction to a pathbreaking volume published in 1985, editor Ruth

¹⁵ For a critique, see, for instance: Sheila Blackburn, "Gender, Work and Labour History: A Response to Carol Morgan," *Women's History Review* 10, no. 1 (2001): 121–35; Efi Avdela, "Work, Gender & History in the 1990s and Beyond," in *Gender and History: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Leonore Davidoff, Keith McClelland, and Eleni Varikas (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 110–23.

¹⁶ Gisela Bock, "Women's History and Gender History: Aspects of an International Debate," *Gender & History* 1, no. 1 (1989): 18–19.

¹⁷ To take France as an example, see, among others, Michelle Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève: France 1871–1890* (Paris: Mouton, 1974); Marie-Hélène Zylberberg-Hocquard, *Femmes et féminisme dans le mouvement ouvrier français* (Paris: Les éditions ouvrières, 1981).

Milkman aptly captured the limitations of some of the early scholarship.¹⁸ Discovering instance after instance of women's labor activism, many of these studies were "essentially descriptive in nature," while others supplanted "old myths of women's lack of interest or involvement in labor struggle by new myths" about the "virtually limitless potential for women's activism in the labor movement—a potential thwarted primarily by the . . . hostility of male-dominated unions." Some of the early work had thus produced a "highly romanticized conception of women's labor history." The studies published in the 1985 volume moved beyond the "early, essentially compensatory literature" in three respects, Milkman explained. The chapters sought to "specify the historical conditions which have encouraged women's militancy and those which have impeded it"—i.e., Milkman identified the volume as an initial contribution to the historicization of women's labor activism, a process that is still ongoing today and to which *Women, Work, and Activism* aims to make its own contribution. The 1985 volume also highlighted how "the mobilization of women has been especially effective when it has utilized organizational forms and techniques very different from those typically employed by men" and explored how these forms were "rooted in women's own distinctive culture and life-experience." Considering the new research on female activists and functionaries within strongly male-dominated contexts and institutions especially in the post-1945 period, some of which is showcased in the present collection, this early finding, based largely on research on earlier periods, might need nuancing and invites further thought. Finally, the 1985 volume began "to explain, rather than simply describe, the long history of male unionists' poor treatment of women." The book was innovative also in that it included studies on the interwar period, an "almost" unearthed scholarly territory at the time.

A decade later, in another pathbreaking volume, historians Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose described the prospects of engendering "working class and labor history" against the backdrop of the linguistic turn that dominated historiography in many parts of the world at the time. While focusing on Western Europe, the volume included two chapters on the early Soviet Union and European communism, respectively, and examined the pre- and post-1918 period. As it ventured beyond labor's politics and workers' activism, the collection expanded the historical terrain with a number of chapters focusing on changing and entangled labor relations and state policies and legal framings of gender and class. In their introduction, Frader and Rose described what they considered "a new agenda for working-class and labor history":

¹⁸ Ruth Milkman, "Editor's Preface," in *Women, Work and Protest: A Century of US Women's Labor History* (Milton Park, NY: Routledge, 2013 [1985]), xi–xiv.

By making gender (and race/ethnicity) a focal point of analysis, historians can begin to interrogate the conceptual categories of work and workers. When these categories are made problems . . . for study rather than deployed as pre-formed and unitary identities, scholars . . . will produce a less unified and more multifaceted view of working people's lives. By focusing on how the categories "work" and "workers" were constituted by historical subjects, moreover, scholars will glimpse how these subjects attempted to manipulate their social words, and the technologies of power that they used in doing so.

To make sense of these fundamentally political activities, scholars will have to examine how discourse worked to constitute political identities. By examining these discourses, historians will be in a position to determine the inclusions and exclusions that are central to the creation of political identities, and to the making of solidarities.¹⁹

Even this brief review of key conceptual insights present in a few internationally influential early publications demonstrates that as women's and gender history emerged as a field of historical inquiry in its own right, historians of gender and labor reflected on the relationship between gender and class (and other relational categories). They aimed to conceive of these categories as context-dependent and malleable rather than simply mirroring material circumstances. And they developed a complex, manifold, and stimulating debate on the conceptual horizons and fault lines of the field. In doing so, women's and gender history contributed early on to the conceptual foundations of what would come to be labeled "global labor history" later on.

The publication of Frader and Rose's edited volume in 1996 took place in a period of marked change in the historiography. Labor history was in a period of sharp decline in the Western and the former state-socialist world. Initially, post-colonial studies, women's and gender history, and the linguistic or cultural turn had contributed to destabilizing the inherited varieties of labor history rooted in an often schematic and implicitly male- and Western-centered class analysis of proletarianization and material circumstances. As demonstrated above, women's and gender historians had begun to break conceptual ground for a rejuvenated labor history that would be based, among other things, in a rethinking of the relationship between class and gender. Yet, whatever the conceptual (and political) commitments and scholarly aims of early feminist labor history, the transition to a new historiographical conjuncture would devalue labor history as such and effectively "drown out" early feminist contributions too. In an often-quoted phrase, Stuart Hall in 1996 described the transition as a shift from the "abandonment of deterministic economism" to a "massive, gigantic and eloquent disavowal. As if, since the economic in its broadest sense, definitively does not, as

¹⁹ Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose, "Introduction," in *Gender and Class in Modern Europe*, ed. Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 32.

it was once supposed to do, 'determine' the real movement of history 'in the last instance,' it does not exist at all!"²⁰

Feminist labor history with a focus on women's activism, however, carried on even during this period of decline in the broader field of labor history. This research had long developed a non-deterministic historical understanding of (female) workers' agency. Aiming to integrate gender into the history of class formation in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Anna Clark insisted on the transformative capacity of women's experience as militant activists even during times when political language called for domesticity. Pamela Graves described the changing agendas and political alliances of women in the British labor movement in the interwar period. Anneliese Orleck and Dorothy Sue Cobble both used collective biography to detail the agency of labor women activists—many of whom were from immigrant backgrounds in a range of settings in the United States—and to specify their distinctive class and gender politics. Cobble also highlighted how a focus on working women's activism fundamentally revises received wisdom about the two waves of women's activism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, proposing a very different periodization.²¹ Samita Sen's *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India* cited above was also published in this period.

The new historiographical conjuncture of the 1990s that overshadowed both earlier advances of women's and gender history with a focus on work and labor activism and the ongoing scholarly work in the broader field would not last forever. The revival of feminist labor history and the coming of the global turn in the Global North became markedly visible in the two conferences "Labouring Feminism and Feminist Working-Class History in North America and Beyond" and "Labouring Feminism and Feminist Working-Class History in Europe and Beyond: An International Conference" held in Toronto and Stockholm in 2005 and 2008, respectively. In its spring 2008 issue, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* published a cluster of contributions on women's labor activism in the period since the 1980s, out of which four focused on the Global South, five on the United States and Europe, and one on transnational activism.

²⁰ Stuart Hall, "When Was the 'Post-Colonial'? Thinking at the Limit," in *The Post-Colonial Question*, ed. Ian Chambers and Lidia Curti (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), 258.

²¹ Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Pamela Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics, 1918–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Anneliese Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900–1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995; republished as open access in 2017). An important volume advocating a thoroughly critical reevaluation of the "waves of feminism" metaphor is Nancy A. Hewitt, ed., *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, labor history as such was back not just empirically and conceptually but also institutionally as manifested, for example, in the ELHN founded in 2013 and the Global Labour History Network (GLHN) founded in 2015.²² Today, the new paradigm of global labor history certainly can be considered, at least from the perspective of internationally visible and transnationally connected (and mostly English-language) scholarship, the dominant one in the field of labor history.²³ The rise of global labor history was triggered by many factors: the changing structure of the global labor market that occurred in conjunction with the deindustrialization of huge areas of the Western world since the late 1970s; the development of new migration trajectories affecting the composition and characteristics of the labor force nationally and internationally, including the gendered processes of mobility and the feminization of some labor sectors; the decline of global Western hegemony which has given rise to much more sustained interest in the history of the Global South and other non-Western regions; the global financial crisis of 2008; and last but not least, the upsurge of “atypical,” informal, and combined labor relations worldwide, including the West. This multidimensional socio-political constellation was instrumental in bringing about the inclusion of many forms of labor and workers’ agency into the new global labor history as well as stimulating interest in the historical development and interaction of many different types of labor relations. As the history of proletarianization and the workers’ movement in the West and its earlier historiographies came to be provincialized (while not yet fully historicized), concepts developed by labor historians working with different interests, geographies, and histories gained global traction.

This reorientation, while taking up and expanding on conceptual advances triggered in the decades before the “gigantic disavowal,” has proceeded unevenly. On the one hand, the new global labor history has incorporated key conceptual innovations in the realm of the history of work and labor initially promoted by postcolonial and subaltern studies, women’s and gender history, and (yes!) representatives of the cultural turn. Both subaltern studies and women’s and gender historians had underlined the need to think more inclusively about the history of the laboring classes, their organizing and collective protest, the constitution of activist identities and the subjectivities of working people, the continued involvement of most working people in multiple and often precarious and unstable labor relations and in unpaid labor, and the role of the state and other institutions in shaping the history of labor. Both traditions had intensely discussed the conceptual implications of their findings for labor history.²⁴ While

²² Information on ELHN and GLHN and other networks and institutions can be found on the Social History Portal, accessed April 10, 2021, <https://socialhistoryportal.org/>.

²³ A foundational conceptual statement is Marcel van der Linden and Jan Lucassen, *Prolegomena for a Global Labor History* (Amsterdam: IISH, 1999).

²⁴ Foundational texts for the new labor history connected to subaltern studies include Ranajit

there has been some debate around the continued focus on labor commodification and commodified labor in some of the new labor history,²⁵ there is no doubt in the 2020s that unpaid care, family, and subsistence work, and the ongoing historical tension around the commodification of such work oriented toward “social reproduction” is back on the scholarly agenda²⁶ and accepted as a relevant dimension of the global history of labor, at least in principle.

On the other hand, within the new historiographical conjuncture, some among those counter-traditions of labor history that had moved beyond the false universalization of Western and masculinist “models” of proletarianization and the reification of histories of male-dominated organizations and struggles of the overwhelmingly male working-class as *the* history of the working class fared better, while others fared worse. Feminist labor history in the broad sense discussed here certainly belongs to the latter group. The reasons are manifold and certainly cannot be reduced to the tendency of benevolent negligence of women and gender in the new history of labor—even though such a tendency certainly has been discernible in the past two decades. Likely not a single new labor historian would deny the relevance of the category of gender for labor history as a broad theme. Yet, substantial engagement with the gendered history of women's work and activism for the larger part has remained the prerogative of specialists; i.e., it is a terrain that continues to be plowed by feminist labor historians, whose most recent work is made available in this collection in an exemplary manner.

Beyond the continuing lack of practical commitment of representatives of the new labor history who do not specialize in women's and gender history, other factors have also contributed to the limited engagement of the new labor history with both gender as a category of analysis and the conceptual contribution of feminist labor history, both old and new. One of these factors is the stated interest and necessity for global labor history as a field to stimulate and

Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890–1940* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

²⁵ Dorothy Sue Cobble, “The Promise and Peril of the New Global Labor History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (Fall 2012): 99–107, made an important contribution to this debate. She did so in response to Marcel van der Linden, “The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (Fall 2012): 57–76. Other responses to van der Linden's contribution in the same volumes aptly capture other important elements of the debate.

²⁶ See among others, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Dirk Hoerder and Silke Neunsinger, eds., *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Care Workers* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Raffaella Sarti, Anna Bellavitis, and Manuela Martini, eds., *What is Work? Gender at the Crossroads of Home, Family, and Business from the Early Modern Era to the Present* (New York: Berghahn, 2018); Manuela Martini and Leda Papastefanaki, “Introduction: Des économies familiales adaptatives en temps de crise dans l'Europe méditerranéenne,” *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique* 15 (2018): 9–22; Eileen Boris, “Subsistence and Household Labour,” in Hofmeester and van der Linden, *Handbook Global History of Work*, 329–44.

integrate work focusing on Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As discussed earlier, against this background, conceptual advances generated by Western feminist labor historians tend to be overshadowed by the interest in the parallel advances made by labor historians from the Global South simply because the former have been rooted in research mostly focusing on the Western world. Concluding his essay on the state of the art in and the future of global labor history published in 2012, Marcel van der Linden reflected on the relationship between the necessary globalization of the field and the prospects of European labor history. Obliterating the European (and more broadly Western) feminist labor history tradition, van der Linden relegated the renewal of European labor history to the future. He argued that it “will take quite some time yet before we can trace out all the far-flung corners” of the new world of the history of labor “on our mental maps. When we begin to succeed in this, we will also be able to renew our understanding of the original terrain of labor and working-class history in Europe and North America.”²⁷

Second, research on the gendered history of work and labor activism in Eastern Europe has fallen prey to a double marginalization. The histories of women’s work and labor activism written under state socialism were grossly devalued after the systemic change in 1989/1990. To be sure, this work had been largely ignored by the Western new labor history, including the feminist variety, before 1989, too: for being old-fashioned or as a result of being inaccessible in terms of the language of publication. When, after the historiographic slump of labor history in the 1990s, the gendered history of labor in Eastern Europe began to attract renewed attention, the focus was on the state-socialist period in the first place. The international community harbored scant interest at best in the history of labor, gendered or not, in the bygone state-socialist system, whose longer-term historical relevance was thrown into question. The ongoing interest of Western historians of labor in the Soviet Union, who after the end of the Soviet Union could suddenly access a wealth of new sources, was a partial exception to this trend.²⁸ Meanwhile, many of those belonging to the community of historians researching state-socialist labor history developed a somewhat inward-looking attitude.²⁹

²⁷ Linden, “The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History,” 72. In her response entitled, “The Promise and Peril,” published together with van der Linden’s piece, Dorothy Sue Cobble already pointed out that “[u]nfortunately, van der Linden’s portrait of ‘traditional labor history’ renders invisible [the] pioneering work of women’s labor history.” Only a year after this exchange, the ELHN was established upon the invitation by Marcel van der Linden and the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam.

²⁸ For an overview, see Susan Zimmermann, “Eastern Europe,” in Hofmeester and van der Linden, *Handbook Global History of Work*, here 135.

²⁹ Zimmermann, “In and Out of the Cage,” 138–44; Adrian Grama and Susan Zimmermann, “The Art of Link-Making in Global Labor History,” *European Review of History/Revue européenne d’histoire* 25, no. 1 (2018): 9–10.

Last but not least, the meager interest in women's labor activism as a specialized theme within the gendered history of labor in particular can be attributed to an additional, third factor. After the dismantling of the classical "labourist modernization narrative" and witnessing its attempted replacement by culturalist approaches and concepts indebted to discourse analysis in the 1980s and 1990s, more than a few historians, even when engaged in attempts to revive labor history, opted to pause the study of labor activism.³⁰ If classical labor history tended to prioritize histories of the labor movement and its activism, the new global labor history has repositioned this large theme as only one among many others, arguing that labor history "encompasses a much larger intellectual territory than we were previously taught."³¹ In other words, the reconceptualization of labor activism and the enlargement of the very concept of the political as spearheaded by feminist labor history starting in the 1970s tended to fall into oblivion as masculinist labor history aimed to move beyond the shortcomings of the traditional history of the labor movement. When new labor historians began to (re-)include the political history of labor after the millennium, they began to pay attention to workers' organizing and activism in all parts of the world,³² and owing and contributing to the transnational and global turn in historical scholarship, there is important new research on the varieties of labor internationalism.³³ Sitting in the blind spot between male-dominated activism in class-based movements and middle-class dominated activism in women's movements, women's labor activism has remained understudied in this new literature.

³⁰ Ahuja, "Preface," xi; Miguel A. Cabrera, *Postsocial History: An Introduction*, trans. Marie McMahon (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004): 95–104.

³¹ Linden, "The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History," 72.

³² With a view to South Asian and Indian labor history, Ahuja stresses that historians continued to study activism but tended to avoid generalization beyond their empirically rich case studies or to connect them "with larger political processes and . . . the politics of the labor movement." Ahuja, "Preface," xii.

³³ See, e.g., David Berry and Constance Bantman, eds., *New Perspectives on Anarchism, Labour and Syndicalism: The Individual, the National and the Transnational* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010); Holger Weiss, ed., *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919–1939* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Stefano Bellucci and Holger Weiss, eds., *The Internationalisation of the Labour Question: Ideological Antagonism, Workers' Movements and the ILO since 1919* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

Toward an Inclusive History of Women's Work and Activism

In this section we introduce some of the state of the art in the old and new scholarship on women's activism in relation to work and labor and the contribution of *Women, Work, and Activism* to the study of labor activism as an important theme for both labor and gender history. The chapters brought together in this collection demonstrate that conceptual advances do not stem from the study of the "far-flung corners" of the world beyond Europe alone but can be found in traditions, ongoing debate, and renewal within feminist labor history with a focus on Europe and beyond. The chapters are arranged in three large thematic clusters. In the following section, we present the chapters as embedded in and contributing to traditions and conceptual debates and advancements in feminist labor history as related to each of the three large themes introduced above. It is important to note that many chapters provide thought-provoking insight and colorful detail in relation to more than one of the three themes. We point to some of these multiple connections below.

WOMEN'S LABOR ACTIVISM IN A MULTITUDE OF MEN- AND WOMEN-DOMINATED CONTEXTS

Bringing together scholarship on women's work-related activism in a wide range of institutional and organizational contexts and discussing the terrain and repertoires of action available to women in both women-only and male-dominated contexts, this volume contributes to an inclusive understanding of the history of this activism. Taken together, the chapters highlight that in writing the history of working women's labor-related activism, we must transgress the historical dividing lines between the labor movement and the women's movement because working-class women organized and acted in both these movements as well as, sometimes, in organizations of their own. Similarly, we need to follow the activism of these women through an array of different types of organizations and institutions as these emerged and evolved in different historical contexts. Working women aimed to pursue their cause within both movements and institutions as they could access them, and their activism was shaped by and contributed to the historically changing contours of these movements and institutions. The chapters of this book contribute to the drawing of a map of the historically changing range of possibilities encountered and/or practices displayed by working women as they struggled to improve their lot and achieve their goals.

As discussed above, women's activism in relation to work and labor was a key theme of Western and Eastern European women's and gender history in

the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond. Feminist labor historians have explored different traditions of women's protest as (paid and unpaid) workers and housekeepers in industrial disputes, strikes, and political struggles.³⁴ Women as workers in the workplace and at home, even in isolated male-dominated patriarchal communities such as mining communities, created diverse networks of solidarity and informal support, while in some cases they forged new political identities through feminism and socialism.³⁵ In the past two decades, historians have begun to more systematically explore the transnational and international dimensions of the histories of women's labor activism.³⁶ This new historiography, however, has remained rather marginal to both the evolving new labor history and the new historiography of women's movements and activism alike.

In a sense, the new transnational gender history and global labor history have replicated the historical marginalization of women's labor activism within male-dominated workers' activisms and organizing and in cross-class women's organizing and activism, respectively. The development of our knowledge of women's labor activism has progressed unevenly. Although in the early decades, when in labor history as a field the focus was still strongly on "the" narrowly conceived labor movement, historians with an interest in women and gender uncovered the history of women within male-dominated trade unions and labor movements. By contrast, recent research on working women's activism on the international plane has foregrounded the independent organizing of women activists, i.e., contexts in which working-class women established their own organizations independently from male-dominated, class-based organizations and middle-class-dominated women's organizations. The pronounced interest in the short-lived International Federation of Working Women (1919–24) is a case in point.³⁷

In terms of research on how women struggled to bring working-class women's agendas into both single-sex, cross-class women's organizations and activisms and mixed-gender, working-class organizations, a lot remains to be done. In his enchanting new monograph on the Berlin-based trade unionist Paula Thiede (1870–1919), Uwe Fuhrmann has asserted—with reference to Germany—that

³⁴ See, among others, Jaclyn J. Gier and Laurie Mercier, eds., *Mining Women: Gender in the Development of a Global Industry, 1670 to 2005* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2006), 171–80; Rossana Romano Barragán and Leda Papastefanaki, "Women and Gender in the Mines: Challenging Masculinity Through History: An Introduction," *International Review of Social History* 65, no. 2 (2020), esp. 215–20.

³⁵ Valerie Gordon Hall, "Contrasting Female Identities: Women in Coal Mining Communities in Northumberland, England, 1900–1939," *Journal of Women's History* 13, no. 2 (2001): 107–31.

³⁶ See, e.g., the relevant studies cited in footnote 4.

³⁷ Dorothy Sue Cobble, "A Higher 'Standard of Life' for the World: U.S. Labor Women's Reform Internationalism and the Legacies of 1919," *The Journal of American History* 100, no. 4 (2014): 1052–85; Lara Vapnek, "The 1919 International Congress of Working Women: Transnational Debates on the 'Woman Worker,'" *Journal of Women's History* 26, no. 1 (2014): 160–84.

“even regarding the overarching themes ‘gender and class’ or ‘women and trade unions,’ only a few pertinent works can be counted, especially for the period to 1933, and most of them have been published a couple decades ago.” Fuhrmann considers it “virtually ludicrous that a biography such as Thiede’s,” who was a leading female trade unionist and President of the Association of Male and Female Letterpress and Lithograph Workers of Germany for a long period of time, “has not attracted [scholarly] attention for so many decades.”³⁸ One obvious reason for this state of affairs is the fact that new labor history, including its feminist variant, has aimed to move beyond the study of “the” classical labor movement to which trade unionists such as Paula Thiede belonged. Additionally, it might be argued that in the wake of the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s to 1980s, gender historians developed a strong interest in women’s autonomous, i.e., single-sex and non-party/trade union organizing and activism, leaving behind the traditions of the “old” Left including its socialist and communist varieties. This fact might help explain the present comparatively scant interest in women’s participation in mixed-gender and more traditional, masculinist contexts. At the same time, there is a long and ongoing tradition of feminist labor historians’ debate on the complex history of women’s “separate” and mixed-gender organizing in the world of trade unionism and beyond.³⁹ One of the factors nourishing this debate was the hostility with which the male-dominated labor movement and trade unions has regarded working-class women’s “separatism” since the nineteenth century.

The present collection brings together new research on women’s mixed- and single-sex organizing and activism within as well as beyond the classical labor and trade union movement and in a number of contexts barely studied so far. Taken together, these contributions are innovative in a number of ways and also invite us to think anew about a number of overarching questions. First, several authors discuss in an open-ended manner how women working within male-dominated movements and organizations operated within these contexts to advance their agenda; how working in these male-dominated contexts impeded their work; and how it shaped what they could and could not do. The authors find great variety depending on the context and the forms of organization, which included yet were not restricted to separate women’s platforms within larger male-dominated movements. These chapters also begin to sketch common tendencies that might form a relevant point of reference for feminist historians’ broader joint endeavor

³⁸ Uwe Fuhrmann, *“Frau Berlin”: Paula Thiede (1870–1919); Vom Arbeiterkind zur Gewerkschaftsvorsitzenden* (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2019), 15, 225.

³⁹ Dorothy Sue Cobble, “Rethinking Troubled Relations Between Women and Unions: Craft Unionism and Female Activism,” *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 3 (1990): 519–48; Linda Briskin, “Union Women and Separate Organizing,” in *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy, and Militancy*, ed. Linda Briskin und Patricia McDermott (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 89–108; Broadbent and Ford, *Women and Labour Organizing in Asia*.

to draw a global map of the history of women's labor organizing and activism. They suggest that until well after 1945, the visibility and influence of women in male-dominated contexts increased slowly and that some of their hardest struggles were about both manifest gender discrimination in the world of work and political issues and agendas repeatedly marginalized because they were deemed relevant for women alone, among them maternity-related matters or women's vocational training.

Second, several chapters show that the changing political constellation in the era of the new women's movement from the 1970s onward seems to have set things into motion. They highlight the strong and multifaceted and hitherto barely explored impact of women's new autonomous activism on the gender politics and women's organizing within trade unions and other male-dominated institutions of labor beginning in the 1970s. This impact of the autonomous women's movement (to use a term *en vogue* at the time), or at least the visibility and traceability of the impact of women's "autonomous" organizing, was a new phenomenon in the history of the labor movement, and it would have lasting consequences.

Third, the growing knowledge about women's mixed- and single-sex labor organizing, as it helps to historicize our thinking on this activism, also invites us to engage (anew) with important overarching questions. What has been the role of working-class women and their allies when they "invaded" the male-dominated labor movement and put pressure on it from the outside, bringing about gendered change in this movement and its institutions in the long run? What are the consequences of the varieties of women's mixed- and single-sex organizing in terms of shaping the agenda-setting and politics of labor movements and the trade unions? Do we witness historical waves of women's separate organizing, or is there a secular trend by which women's autonomous organizing for labor issues has lost (some of) its significance, not least because of the pressure women brought to bear on male-dominated labor movements and institutions? Are there important long-term trends and patterns concerning how women's labor activism aimed to bring together gender and class issues, and what are they?

The chapters in this book begin to address some of these questions. Virgínia Baptista and Paulo Marques Alves describe the discrimination faced by women in mixed-gender mutual societies from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s. They note the resistance within societies to accommodating women's child-bearing needs. They discuss women's greater equality in single-sex societies and their advocacy for the needs of mothers. Laura Savelli in her chapter explores the role played by activist women working in the post and telegraph sector to advance demands and suggestions within the international trade union, the Postal Telegraph and Telephone International (PTTI), and within the feminist movement with regard to women's work and working women's rights from the end of nineteenth century to the interwar period. Savelli argues that through

their trade union activism in national and transnational settings, women workers organized in the PTTI contributed to the improvement of working conditions for women and the recognition and addressing of gendered difference in the world of work within the communications sector. Examining a later period, Debora Migliucci analyzes women's participation in the Labor Chamber of Milan in the twenty years following World War Two through the biographies and careers of key activists. She shows how these women acted entirely within the existing men-dominated organizations. They did not question the basic orientation of these organizations, nor did they aspire to replace them with alternative forms of organizing. Migliucci's contribution offers a carefully contextualized, precise account of how women activists, although encountering severe difficulties as they endeavored to acquire visibility and power, still managed to impact trade union policies. In her contribution, Nadia Varo Moral explores the relationship between women workers and Workers' Commissions (*Comisiones Obreras*, CCOO) in Spain during the Franco regime and in the transitional period (1964–1981), highlighting the tensions and the gendered notion of membership in women's participation in *Comisiones Obreras*. Varo Moral claims that the patterns of women's engagement in the union and their militancy, which changed over time, can be explained with reference to the gender segregation of the labor market and their relationships with anti-Francoist political parties and the feminist movement.

Moving from the European context to Australia, Diane Kirkby, Lee-Ann Monk, and Emma Robertson show how gender asymmetries characterized trade union life and activism in the Oceanic context as well. Substantial changes occurred in the 1970s, when growing demand for a female workforce in male-dominated sectors, the pressure of feminist movements, and the implementation of ILO conventions against women's discrimination, taken together, facilitated the emergence of a trade union environment more sensitive and willing to address women's grievances. Led by women activists and trade unionists, these developments culminated in the adoption of the Working Women's Charter, which committed the trade unions to the improvement of women's access to the labor market and equal labor conditions at the workplace. Change manifested itself also in the election of the first woman to the national executive of the Australian Council of Trade Unions and, in the early 1980s, the enactment of equal employment opportunity legislation. Anna Frisone's chapter on trade union feminists' efforts to bring about women-friendly change in the General Confederation of Labor (*Confédération générale du travail*, CGT) and make the large French trade union federation more amenable to women's needs makes a similar argument about the importance of the importation of feminist ideas into the world of trade unions in the era of the new women's movement.

WOMEN IN MOTION: RETHINKING AGENCY AND ACTIVISM

The conceptualization of the agency of women and other dominated groups as they engage in activism to bring about social change and improve their position and the position of the dominated group to which they belong has long occupied gender studies scholars. Gender theory and history has moved beyond simplifying ideas about how the experience of oppression, or the emerging consciousness of oppression, “automatically” generates agency that enables individuals and groups to struggle for social change.⁴⁰ Yet, the debate on what comes next continues. A broadly conceived theoretical notion of human agency as “a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment),” can be useful.⁴¹ Such an approach can, on the one hand, help bypass the long-lasting and controversial debate on how agency is tied to dimensions like self-hood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and deliberation, and on the other, the extent to which agency is limited by structures, power relations, and, of crucial interest for the present volume, gender relations. In other words, we can go beyond a dichotomist understanding of agency as simply opposed to the notions of passivity or adaptation to given circumstances, institutional structures, and the existing social order.

It is not our purpose, in the introduction of this book, to give an account of the wider sociologically and historically informed debate on the semantic field covered by the concept of agency since the 1990s. Nevertheless, we should at least mention that Western democracies and liberal systems have been, for a certain time, the privileged fields of interest to detect and define women's agency. One important reason has been the ongoing scholarly bias privileging the Western experience, if not Western concepts and “values.”⁴² Thanks to the widening of spatial horizons (which for a long time have been narrow in the Western world in particular) and the rise of concepts challenging Western-centric feminist approaches—a process that built up momentum in the context of the first World Conference on Women of the United Nations and the parallel conference of

⁴⁰ Lois McNay, “Agency,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 39–60; Claudia Leeb, *Power and Feminist Agency in Capitalism: Toward a New Theory of the Political Subject* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴¹ Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, “What Is Agency?” *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1998): 963.

⁴² Francisca de Haan, “Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF),” *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (2010): 547–73.

nongovernmental organizations held in Mexico City in the summer of 1975⁴³—we witness a growing awareness of the entanglements of women’s activism with variegated social, cultural, gender, and racializing contexts and socio-political systems. This has enabled gender scholars, including gender historians, to develop concepts that help overcome previously presupposed clear dividing lines between grassroots and institutional action, social movements as agents of progressive change versus institutions that preserve inequality and subordination, and social systems that allow or suppress progressive social action.⁴⁴ As a consequence, more nuanced and, at the same time, more reflexive and less normative scholarly attitudes toward multiple patterns of women’s agency in the long twentieth century have begun to enable a deeper understanding of how women faced manifold structural and cultural framings, including both the limitations and spaces of opportunity with which they had (and have) to engage in their daily lives.

Conceptual challenges to Eurocentrism, the demise of Cold War paradigms, and the rise of global history, which has responded to post-colonial, cultural, and other “turns,” together have enabled a significant widening of, or at least facilitated the engagement of, the international community with research contexts around the world, where new questions have been asked and new approaches are tried out. Studies on feminism and women’s agency in non-Western countries have allowed for the widening of concepts and categories with the aim to arrive at adequately inclusive working definitions of women’s agency and activism. This research has addressed contexts as different as women-led campaigns, protests, and actions unfolding within the apparatuses of workerist or state-socialist states,⁴⁵ or the rethinking of the concept of women’s agency in Muslim societies and contexts.⁴⁶ An original debate developed around the concept of “state feminism,” which identified so-called “femocrats” in the “progressive-socialdemocratic” states mainly in Scandinavia as subjects to be included in an enlarged concept of women’s activism and gendered social movements. This concept can be helpful to study women involved, for example, in trade union activism within the state-socialist state.⁴⁷

⁴³ Jocelyn Olcott, *International Women’s Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴⁴ Laure Bereni and Anne Revillard, “Movement Institutions: The Bureaucratic Sources of Feminist Protest,” *Politics & Gender* 14, no. 3 (2018): 407–32.

⁴⁵ Natalia Jarska, “A Patriarchal Marriage? The Women’s Movement and the Communist Party in Poland (1945–1989),” *Kwartalnik Historyczny* 125 (English language edition), no. 2 (2018): 7–37.

⁴⁶ Sirma Bilge, “Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance: An Intersectional Approach to the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31, no. 1 (2010): 9–28.

⁴⁷ Zheng Wang, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist-Feminist Revolution in the People’s Republic of China (1949–1964)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

There are a number of additional conceptual tools that hold promise for the study of women workers' social action in offices and factories within (and beyond) non-liberal contexts, concepts which, however, have neither been developed with close attention to women nor employed in our field of study in a systematic manner so far. We could mention Alf Lüdtke's studies of *Eigensinn*⁴⁸ here and James Scott's notion of the hidden transcripts and "infrapolitics" mobilized by subordinate groups, which represent "a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant."⁴⁹ In his chapter, Rory Archer points to the potential relevance of Scott's concept for capturing women's everyday resistance at the workplace, yet simultaneously warns that the binary distinction between public and hidden transcripts might once again reinforce the false dichotomy between official and informal spheres of action, which all too often has characterized the historiography on socialist countries.

The concept of *Eigensinn* focuses on the insistence of workers in the enterprise on their own common perception of and engagement with the authority structures to which they are subjected. It can help—yet is not in itself sufficient, argues Thomas Lindenberger—to explain both rebellion and the lack thereof. It aims to capture modes of action that cannot be reduced to resistance, accommodation, or anything in between these two classical poles of social and political action. While contributing to the functioning of the system of workplace-related domination, *Eigensinn*-based action simultaneously constitutes the sand in the gears of the exploitation machinery and marks the limits of domination.⁵⁰ The concept thus points to the necessary enlargement of what counts as political and helps to think anew about how workplace-related social action and agency can be captured conceptually.

The chapters assembled in this book contribute to a more inclusive understanding of women's activism precisely through the shift of focus from a broader social field of women's activism to the labor environment to explore how women acted and thus developed their agency through worker's organizations and labor conflicts. All contributions discuss women's activism covering the period of the long twentieth century. This temporal frame coincides with the rise of industrial

⁴⁸ Alf Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn: Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Hamburg: Ergebnisse Verlag, 1993). While Lüdtke has studied in detail the role of masculinity in the *eigensinnig* action of men, he has not done a parallel inquiry for women. Mark Pittaway used the concept to study male skilled workers in 1950s Hungary and drew attention to the relevance of skill and male gender for his findings. Mark Pittaway, *From the Vanguard to the Margins: Workers in Hungary, 1939 to the Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

⁴⁹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), quote xii.

⁵⁰ We follow here Thomas Lindenberger's apt discussion of the concept and its historical genealogy. Thomas Lindenberger, "Eigen-Sinn, Herrschaft und kein Widerstand," Version: 1.0, in *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, September 2, 2014, <http://docupedia.de/zg/Eigensinn>.

work, which in many places produced sharp divisions of roles, or altered preexisting ones, and strengthened gender stereotypes, often with adverse effects on women's potential to act in the public sphere. At the same time, the private sphere was construed as the site of women's (politically inconsequential) action.⁵¹ Yet, as we know, women were marginalized but not excluded from a labor market and production systems that heavily relied on the cheap and highly exploitable workforce they offered. In reality, the world of work thus became a critical context for the unfolding of women's agency. In addition, working women often found themselves on the vast peripheries of the labor market. Drawing on forms of "social engagement informed by the past (in its habitual aspect)," women here tried to find their place within trade unions dominated by men or, when they were not admitted or had no chance to find representation, they founded women-only unions, often building on patterns of existing labor unions.

The chapter by Virgínia Baptista and Paulo Marques Alves illustrates how these dynamics played out in the Portuguese case. At the same time—and the chapter by Baptista and Alves also illustrates this point—women never merely adopted inherited habits and modes of action. Rather, women's activism was also "oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)."⁵² Debora Migliucci's chapter beautifully exemplifies the multifaceted interplay between these different time orientations. By virtue of their steadfast determination and ability to act on different scales and within different frameworks, these women trade unionists were able to sharpen unions' sensitivity concerning women's issues to achieve relevant goals for improving women's working lives in the present and future. At long last, the chapter implicitly questions the often-presupposed dogma of the weak agency of women in male-dominated trade unions by stressing how influential women's engagement could be even though gendered hierarchies and power relations did not fundamentally change until recent times.

Based on rich historical material, Rory Archer's chapter questions the typical Western-centered concept of agency by focusing on strategies and struggles for the improvement of women's work and life conditions within Yugoslavia's socialism from the second half of the 1970s to the breakdown of the regime. While aware of the strict rules of social behavior and organizational forms at the workplace imposed on workers within this social order, Archer challenges the

⁵¹ For an initial effort to rethink these and related insights from a global perspective, which however remained tied to an (implicitly Eurocentric) culturalist approach when discussing non-European sites of the history of women's work, see Alice Kessler-Harris, "Reframing the History of Women's Wage Labor: Challenges of a Global Perspective," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 4 (2004): 186–206.

⁵² Emirbayer and Mische, "What Is Agency?" 963.

implicit notion of agency as a “process of *social engagement*” by pointing to less formal activities and strategies of accessing welfare to secure women's well-being in the workplace. In many cases, women acted individually, and they avoided resorting to the institutions of self-management or party organizations. Although some might consider it problematic to regard action carried out by single individuals as a form of labor activism, Archer's contribution points to the unpredictable use of non-formal activism even under conditions of a system of rather strictly organized social control and management of work relations. Paradoxically, it seems that in the case of Yugoslavia, where the social order was based on the vision of the primacy of collectivism, women developed a form of collective agency when they acted outside of the organized structures of the socialist state.

Archer's chapter links to some elements of Marco Caligari's contribution on the role of women, particularly women members of the Italian Women's Union (*Unione Donne Italiane*, UDI) whose support was critical for the success of a strike initiated by the ship repair workers of Genoa which lasted for almost four months in 1955. While Archer argues that individual action taken by women workers can be understood as women's work-related agency as well, Caligari draws attention to the intersection of activism in the private and the public sphere, describing a form of women's activism that was capable of transforming traditional roles by subverting their normative functions. Wives, mothers, and sisters—of course these three categories are related to the private life and the socially conservative tasks of the family as an institution—became crucial supporters of their relatives, the ship repair workers, making possible the long duration of the strike, which in turn enhanced its chances for success.

Women have played a decisive function in supporting strikes, but they have also displayed a great capacity to initiate and carry on labor struggles on their own, deploying a high degree of autonomy and self-organization. This is the case tackled by Thanasis Betas in his chapter on the resistance and protest of women workers in the Greek tobacco industry between 1945 and approximately 1970, which was characterized by a clear gendered cleavage between the female workforce and the male management. Betas's special focus on the workplace in this industry contributes to a better understanding of workers' demands and helps to grasp and highlight the informal practices of women's resistance in Greece after World War Two. Comparable forms of women's action come to the fore in Elizabeth Faue's contribution on women working in the US health care system, when the spread of HIV/AIDS in the second half of the 1980s posed a threat to their own health and labor conditions.

WOMEN ACTIVISTS' BIOGRAPHIES

In the past few decades, an increasing number of studies belonging to different clusters of research have pointed out the relevance of individual biographies for understanding the history of the political activism of women as a group.⁵³ By taking into consideration the biographical paths of female activists around the globe,⁵⁴ the relevance of the connection between the local and the global becomes visible.⁵⁵ The concept of global and transnational lives,⁵⁶ for instance, which was introduced for the study of merchants, missionaries, and imperial officials, has proved to be useful also for the study of women belonging to national and international organizations, especially those belonging to the left-wing political milieu,⁵⁷ as well as for the study of migrant women workers.⁵⁸ Studies foregrounding the experience and action of subaltern women or focusing on the Global South have made a crucial contribution to developing a de-centered global perspective.⁵⁹ There is fascinating new scholarship on how female activists belonging to dominated minority communities such as the Maori in New Zealand pursued the interests of both these communities in general and women

⁵³ See, for instance, Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin, eds., *Women and Social Movements, International: 1840 to Present*, Database, Alexander Street Press and ProQuest Company; Francisca de Haan, Krassimira Daskalova, and Anna Loutfi, eds., *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2006); Thébaud, *Écrire l'histoire des femmes*, 58–59, 71–78. For a pioneering article on women's history through the biographical approach, see Eleni Varikas, "L'approche biographique dans l'histoire des femmes," *Les Cahiers du GRIF* 37–38 (1988): 41–56.

⁵⁴ Francisca de Haan, Margaret Allen, June Purvis, Krassimira Daskalova, eds., *Women's Activism: Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁵⁵ Clare Midgley, Alison Twells, and Julie Carlier, eds., *Women in Transnational History: Connecting the Local and the Global* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁵⁶ Brice Cossart, "Global Lives: Writing Global History with a Biographical Approach," *Entremons: UPF Journal of World History*, no. 5 (2013), accessed April 18, 2021, <https://www.raco.cat/index.php/Entremons/article/view/266751>.

⁵⁷ See the chapter on women in Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and most recently for both male and female Cominternians, her *Reisende der Weltrevolution: Eine Globalgeschichte der Kommunistischen Internationale* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2020).

⁵⁸ Donna R. Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta, eds., *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2002); Huping Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain: A History of Chinese American Women and Their Lives* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998).

⁵⁹ Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Tonio Andrade, "A Chinese Farmer, Two African Boys, and a Warlord: Toward a Global Microhistory," *Journal of World History* 21, no. 4 (2010): 573–91; Marcia C. Schenck and Jiyoung Kim, "A Conversation about Global Lives in Global History: South Korean Overseas Travelers and Angolan and Mozambican Laborers in East Germany during the Cold War," *L'Atelier du Centre de recherches historiques* 18 (2018), <https://journals.openedition.org/acrh/8113#tocto1n2>.

within these communities in local, national, and international settings. In doing so, these activists “shifted their speaking positions on the internal politics of gender” within their communities “according to the pressure of other issues and of particular audiences.”⁶⁰ These complex strategies and combined agendas can be captured well through a focus on how individual protagonists negotiated the struggle against various axes of domination in their writing and action.

The same is true for the history of women's workplace-related activism, where women needed to negotiate the critique of male dominance within (and beyond) the working-class communities to which they belonged or with whom they identified with the defense and protection of these dominated communities. As demonstrated in some of the chapters in this collection, left-wing female activists repeatedly moved between and combined activism within male-dominated labor movement organizations and networks—where class interests were regularly put first—and cross-class women's organizations and networks in which gender interests were foregrounded.⁶¹ Suzanne Franzway and Mary Margaret Fonow have convincingly argued that their activism thus has served as a “bridge” between different social movements,⁶² even while the position of these women, who were simultaneously active on both sides of this bridge, might have remained insecure and subject to politics of domination.

The role of individuals has turned out to be important also for improving our knowledge about the organizations to which they contributed. In turn, reconstructing the path of individual women belonging to mixed-gender organizations allows us to understand women's roles and opportunities in these male-dominated contexts.⁶³ This has been particularly true in the case of trade unions and labor movement organizations.⁶⁴ Women here played significant roles among officials and activists, yet this contribution often remained disguised or neglected. Biographical study helps correct this (historiographical) marginalization. Even in biographical dictionaries of the labor movement, which developed as a proper genre during the twentieth century, women have traditionally received

⁶⁰ Patricia Grimshaw and Hannah Loney, “The Local and the Global in Women's Organizing in the Pacific Region, 1950s–1990s,” in Midgley, Twells and Carlier, *Women in Transnational History*, 163–79.

⁶¹ For a systematic elaboration on the relationship of women's and labor movements to women representing or identifying with the class and gender interests of ordinary working women, see Susan Zimmermann, *Frauenpolitik und Männergewerkschaft: Internationale Geschlechterpolitik, IGB-Gewerkschafterinnen und die Arbeiter- und Frauenbewegungen der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Wien: Löcker Verlag, 2021), chpt. 12.

⁶² Franzway and Fonow, *Making Feminist Politics*.

⁶³ See, for instance, Eileen Boris, Dorothea Hoehcker, and Susan Zimmermann, eds., *Women's ILO: Transnational Networks, Global Labour standards and Gender Equity, 1919 to Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

⁶⁴ Susan Zimmermann, “Framing Working Women's Rights Internationally: Contributions of the IFTU Women's International,” in Bellucci and Weiss, *The Internationalisation of the Labour Question*, 95–117.

limited attention among labor leaders and activists both at the national and international levels.⁶⁵ These reference works, in other words, have reproduced the historical marginalization and invisibility of female labor activists. More recently, though, some collective editorial projects have begun to alter this situation, producing biographical dictionaries of women's activists as well as of women in male-dominated professions (e.g., science).⁶⁶

The biographical approach also helps make visible women workers who were active at the frontlines of industrial conflict and labor mobilization, claiming labor and social rights for women. The stereotype attached to the history of working women, supposedly less involved in strikes, rallies, and factory/land occupations, has been challenged by research conducted on primary sources, including memoirs and interviews.⁶⁷ The latter not only provide rich details related to the context and results of women's actions at the workplace but also help to understand their subjective and personal standpoints and approaches, which were, in turn, extremely important for shaping their actions.⁶⁸ For instance, the study of women's actions and experience in male-dominated workplaces through the lens of their biographies brings to light a diverse history of women's actions and reactions to variegated circumstances ranging from inaction or exclusion of certain strata of workers through large-scale, intra-group solidarity to open resistance to both male and employers' power. Competition between male and female workers has been a long-lasting factor preventing solidarity as well as pushing female labor leaders to the margins. Research into historical biographies can help provide evidence of women's individual and collective roles in such settings, enabling interpretations that go beyond stereotypes.

The chapters gathered in this collection provide new insight regarding the relationship between female biographies and women's activism in the world of work, both at and beyond the workplace during the long twentieth century. Maria Tamboukou's chapter retraces the long genealogy of migrant female workers' experiences in the garment industry, looking at the trans-local connections

⁶⁵ See, for instance, A. Thomas Lane, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of European Labor Leaders* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1995), and the collaborative on-line project: Biographical Archive of the Labor Movement, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://archiviobiograficomovimentooperaio.it/>.

⁶⁶ De Haan, Daskalova, and Loufti, *Biographical Dictionary*; Joyce Harvey and Marilyn Ogilvie, eds., *The Biographical Dictionary of Women in Science: Pioneering Lives from Ancient Times to the Mid-20th Century* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000); Valeria Babini and Raffaella Simili, eds., *More than Pupils: Italian Women in Science at the Turn of 20th Century* (Florence: Olschki, 2007).

⁶⁷ See, among others, Daniel Armogathe, ed., *Jeanne Bouvier, Mes mémoires: Une syndicaliste féministe, 1876–1935* (Paris: La Découverte/Maspero, 1983); Maria Tamboukou, *Gendering the Memory of Work: Women Workers' Narratives* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁶⁸ Luisa Passerini, "A Memory for Women's History: Problems of Method and Interpretation," *Social Science History* 16, no. 4 (1992): 669–92; Luisa Passerini, *Memory and Utopia: The Primacy of Intersubjectivity* (London: Equinox, 2007).

shaping women's lives at the dawn of the twentieth century as well as at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Tamboukou refers, for instance, to the biography of Rose Pesotta, a Jewish anarchist labor organizer in the garment industry, revealing the controversial (and neglected) role of anarchist women in the US labor movement. Several life stories of present-day migrant and refugee women workers illuminate women's role in labor mobilization, as well as the continuum between home and work that has characterized female migrants' life in the informal economy and family workshops in Turkey. The chapter by Virginia Baptista and Paulo Marques Alves shows how important activists such as Sara Beirão and Laurinda Alembre contributed directly to the development of a specific discourse on the relationship between mutualism and women workers' protection in Portugal in the interwar period. Isidora Grubački's chapter analyzes how rural women's labor was of major importance for feminists and women activists in Yugoslavia in the 1930s. The life and work of Darinka Lacković brings to light the role of a woman activist as an organizer of domestic schools for peasant women in interwar Yugoslavia, showcasing the impact the work of one dedicated individual could have. Juxtaposing the approach of Lacković and her circle to the activism of a group of young communists, who similarly targeted peasant women's work and education, Grubački argues that both groups were united in their support for peasant women's empowerment but radically diverged on how they conceptualized the need for education for these women.

Françoise Laot's chapter reveals the crucial role of three French trade unionists, Madeleine Colin, Rose Étienne, and Simone Troisgros, who contributed to the development of adult education and vocational training in both the national and international context in the post-World War Two era. Laot adopts a biographical approach, which serves as a vital method for understanding the transnational connection and the circulation of ideas among different actors. In doing so, the chapter also contributes to gendering the history of international organizations, namely the ILO and trade unions, highlighting the role of French female trade unionists in the international discussion on adult women's education.

Debora Migliucci's chapter mentioned earlier traces the biographical paths of the female trade unionists in the Milan Chamber of Labor, exemplifying the connection between micro-history or individual history and national and international history. From the biographies Migliucci examines, we gain crucial new knowledge about the role of the anti-fascist movement and World War Two in generating personal and family backgrounds that enabled and pushed these women to become union activists and, later on, officials.

Local and national activism are linked, in the chapter by Anna Frisone, through the biography and tragic fate of leading French unionist Georgette Vacher. The biographical path of Vacher is fully mined for its relevance thanks also to the memories of Vacher's colleagues, who were interviewed by Frisone. Vacher's biography, set in the wider framework of female unionists' mobilization

in Lyon, shows the difficulty women labor activists faced when dealing with strongly male-centered union hierarchies. It demonstrates the essential role the *commission-femmes* of Lyon, led by Vacher, played in promoting women's collective empowerment and making politics vis-à-vis the CGT. Important elements of the history of French trade union feminism, especially in the public and tertiary sectors, are captured through the story of Georgette Vacher.

Biographical accounts of working-class women illuminate the intersection of class and gender vis-à-vis political participation as demonstrated in Rory Archer's chapter on Yugoslav women workers in late socialism. The biography of Mirjana shows the controversial relationship between her identity as an unskilled worker and her political commitment, which eventually led her to hand in her party membership card. The life story of Ljiljana, by contrast, reveals the choice of not participating in self-management institutions and the League of Communists as a way to maintain space for "entrepreneurial self-initiative."

Epilogue amid the Pandemic

As we submit this book to the publisher, the world is undergoing a deep and unpredictable economic crisis and a new wave of unemployment and loss of work opportunities unleashed by a viral pandemic. Worldwide, working-hour losses for 2020 relative to 2019 are estimated to reach 8.8 percent, the decline in labor income is 8.3 percent, and the number of persons outside the labor force increased by eighty-one million, resulting in a reduction of the global labor force participation rate by 2.2 percent.⁶⁹ Today, "[i]n contrast to previous crises, women's employment is at greater risk than men's, particularly owing to the impact of the downturn on the service sector. At the same time, women account for a large proportion of workers in front-line occupations, especially in the health and social care sectors. Moreover, the increased burden of unpaid care brought by the crisis affects women more than men."⁷⁰ Indeed, globally, "women have been affected by employment loss to a greater extent than men. At the global level, the employment loss for women stands at 5.0 percent in 2020, versus 3.9 percent for men. . . . Across all regions, women have been more likely than men to become economically inactive, that is to drop out of the labour force, during this crisis."⁷¹ The current crisis is dramatic for everybody—though in varying forms and to varying degrees. If we consider the critical importance for women

⁶⁹ ILO, "ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work. Seventh Edition. Updated Estimates and Analysis," January 25, 2021, accessed April 9, 2021, <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/covid-19/>.

⁷⁰ ILO, "ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work. Fifth Edition. Updated Estimates and Analysis," June 30, 2020, accessed April 9, 2021, via www.ilo.org/wcms_749399.

⁷¹ ILO, "ILO Monitor COVID-19 Seventh Edition."

of the involvement in paid work, one major context in which women struggled to obtain a socially recognized and respected place in public and private life, we can expect particularly harsh effects on social relations around the globe resulting from a new tendency toward women's marginalization and the additional burden put on them in the sphere of "social reproduction." All contributions included in this volume testify to the crucial role of work and labor for the shaping of the agency of women, the recognition of their social role and status, and the evolution of more humane, respectful, egalitarian interpersonal relationships in all realms of life, "private" and "public." They also make a case for the argument that historically, the struggles of women themselves have been the crucial driving force for the step-by-step overcoming of fundamental cultural, economic, and social obstacles that have produced the centuries-long exclusion of women from all kinds of *polis* or *res publica*, regardless of their widely varied contexts. Historical variety notwithstanding, there is a profound common foundation that has characterized the status of women in society. The tremendous achievements during the long twentieth century in terms of women's improved civic, political, social, and economic rights are not a definitive conquest. Recent developments represent a threatening scenario, and the picture becomes even more frightening if we consider the possible futures of gender relations which have become, against all odds, more egalitarian and democratic in many places in the past few decades. Policymakers, political parties, trade unions, economic and cultural institutions, and—to use a term invoked constantly in the historical battles around women's work—"the women themselves" must take extremely seriously the issue of women's equity and advancement in the world of work. Of course, this is not the only issue at stake in the period of global crisis we are currently in, but it is certainly a crucial one. We hope that our volume makes a modest contribution to both the scholarship and the struggle.

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The thirteen critical and well-documented chapters of *Women, Work, and Activism* examine women's labor struggle from late nineteenth-century Portuguese mutual societies to Yugoslav peasant women's work in the 1930s, and from the Catalan labor movement under the Franco dictatorship to workplace democracy in the United States. The authors portray women's labor activism in a wide variety of contexts including transnational organizing, feminist engagement with men-dominated trade unionism, long-distance migration, and the socialist workplace. The chapters address the involvement of working people in multiple and often unstable labor relations and in unpaid labor, as well as the role of the state and other institutions in shaping the history of women's labor activism.

The book is an innovative contribution to both labor and gender history. It redefines the new labor history by focusing on the gendered political-social history of labor and by fully integrating the conceptual advances made by gender historians in the study of labor activism.

"Women, Work, and Activism captures the intellectual energy and innovative thinking of feminist labor historians across Europe and beyond. This eye-opening collection models new theories of class and gender and dismantles outmoded assumptions, categories, and narratives in labor and feminist history. Written by an impressive mix of up-and-coming younger scholars and distinguished senior researchers, these essays are pioneering in their attention to new sites of working women's agency, their adoption of transnational methodologies, and their fluency with global scholarship in multiple fields and languages."

Dorothy Sue Cobble, Distinguished Professor Emerita of History and Labor Studies, Rutgers University, author of *For the Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality*.

"By providing a rich range of examples of labor-related women's activism—from mutualism to conventional trade unionism, and from feminist workers to communist wives of workers—this volume demonstrates not only that 'activism' can be defined very differently in various contexts but also the myriad positions workers' politics can take vis-à-vis the politics of class and gender. There have been very few collected volumes on women's labor politics that could be compared to this book, and even less with a view back on the twentieth century as long as offered by this collection. Also, Women, Work, and Activism comes timely, at a pivotal moment for labor politics marked by structural changes in the labor market that will impact gender composition and gendered practices—a moment when we especially need to recognize and understand the history of women's labor activism."

Samita Sen, Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial and Naval History at the University of Cambridge, coauthor of *Domestic Days: Women, Work and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata*

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Eloisa Betti is Adjunct Professor of Labor History at the University of Bologna; **Leda Papastefanaki** is Associate Professor of Economic and Social History at the University of Ioannina; **Marica Tolomelli** is Associate Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Bologna; **Susan Zimmermann** is a distinguished Professor in the Department of History and the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University.

On the cover: Workers at the "21. Maj" factory, Belgrade, Yugoslavia (c. 1985). Arhiv Jugoslavije, Novinska agencija "Tanjug," AJ, 112-L13282-29.

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