In the tiny coastal village of Grey Rock Harbour in Newfoundland, where residents earn their living in the precarious, cold, hard work of ocean fishing, one woman asks another, “How are you today?” Her neighbor replies, “My nerves is some bad.” Another woman stirs her boiled caribou stew and concentrates on her husband fishing from a small boat in rough seas. “It grates on my nerves, I worries some awful when he’s out and the weather turns.” A friend compliments her. “After the life you’ve led, my dear, you can’t expect much more from your nerves.”

Some Newfoundlanders say that men don’t have nerves, that men can’t feel much. Others say they have heard about men who had nerves. But chiefly, as everyone knows, women have nerves. One woman summarizes: “I worries about the worst happening. That’s what nerves is.”

Ethnographer Dona Lee Davis conducted this research on nerves in icy Newfoundland. She notes, “It is the women, who carry the burden of worry, who deserve nerves. Her lot in life is harder than the male’s. Nerves belong in the emotional, affective realm, the domain of women” (Davis 1989:74).

By taking on the burden of worrying over their menfolk at sea, women in Grey Rock Harbour are valued in their community for easing the dangers and deprivations of maritime life and freeing the men to fish. In Newfoundland, under the harsh conditions of earning a living there, wives, sisters, and mothers have become women the worriers. Fulfilling this role involves an expenditure of time and energy that suggests worrying is actually a form of work. This work is part of the work of being married, of husbanding resources, of being a housewife.

Chapter 1 centers on work and gender in ways that everyone has experienced. It introduces some ideas, theories, and controversies that swirl around the problems of defining work, valuing work, or rewarding work. When we talk about women and men, work and survival, what matters most: biology or culture? Should we point up some differences between men and women or deny that any exist? Is there such a thing as just being “natural,” some irreducible minimum, some universal or essential floor under us?
Or are patterns of work and gender the products, the constructions, of the cultures we live in? Perhaps, you say, all this is completely up to individuals.

**WORK: THE FIRST FACT OF LIFE**

Women, like men, work for a living. In every human society that anthropologists ever studied, people divide the work they have to do between women and men. This is called the **sexual division of labor**, the assignment of the survival tasks of the society according to gender. Men get some of the jobs and women get some of the jobs. A few jobs may be done by both sexes. Generally, people feel strongly that their way of dividing up work is the best way or the “natural” way. Generally, some other group does it differently. That this division of work may be neither equal nor equally rewarding is quite beside the point.

Some jobs are “women’s work” and others are defined as “men’s work.” The catch is that these tasks are not the same from group to group. For example, in cultures along the Sepik River in New Guinea, people eat flour made from sago palms. Someone must cut, haul, and process the trunk of the palm tree for the soggy flour it reluctantly yields. In some groups along the dramatic river, only men do this work. There people say, “Of course, it is naturally men’s work.” Downriver or upriver, women gather to strain the flour out as people in that group remark, “Naturally this is women’s work.” Then, just as they think they have it sorted out forever, something changes—the environment, the world economy, or historical forces beyond their control. Their division of labor by gender changes as well, predictably and irrevocably.

This book begins with work and gender for two reasons. First, scholars who disagree with each other on everything else are, in the main, agreed that human beings divide up the work of survival and put meaning in their lives by assigning tasks based on gender and age. Anthropologists, notoriously independent thinkers, still think that the sexual division of labor is true across time and space. Conservative male sociobiologists and radical Marxist feminists all admit that the sexual division of labor is fundamental to being human. Work divided by gender is somehow a true statement about the human condition. This will be the last time for such easy agreement in this book. Such people do not, however, agree on why the sexual division of labor is true. Some say God, religion, nature, science, or mothers make us live this way. And no one concurs on how to translate this agreement over the sexual division of labor into decent and life-affirming social policies. In fact, there is no widespread agreement that human beings even need such policies.

But the second and even more important reason to start this book by discussing work and gender is the pain, denial, defensiveness, and heated arguments that currently surround this topic. Who takes out the trash, feeds the children, brings home the bacon, fries it up, remembers to buy and wrap presents are not abstractions. They are the topics of tense political discussions about “family values” and marital arguments about who does the household’s work. One of the most difficult ideas women’s studies faculty have had is getting our students and ourselves beyond the culture-bound notion that some women work and some don’t. Some of us think that women have perfectly obvious choices between “staying at home” or “going out to work” or that our personal worth or mothering abilities are tied irrevocably to these categories. Some people think that work is defined as nuclear suburban families do it or that work equals collecting a paycheck and that work done without a paycheck or title is not really work.
Work is at the heart of the theoretical arguments swirling around gender relations. The goal of this chapter is to make women and women’s work visible in ways you may not have considered. Here we’re taking a rather domestic and familiar viewpoint. In sharp contrast, the last chapter talks about women and work from the point of view of international development and economics. These are very different ways to bracket the lives of women.

We are used to looking at work from a perspective of production or earning a wage. Though emphasized in industrial and postindustrial societies, this is only one type of work. The basic point to understand is that all women work, even if they are not being paid, recognized, or otherwise rewarded. Women work as mothers or wives. We work as healers and caregivers. We work to keep our communities together. These jobs may be easy or life-threatening. The tasks associated with these jobs and who fulfills them vary from culture to culture. For example, in some cultures, raising children means attending to them during a culturally defined period of time known as “childhood.” What we think of as childhood—a protected and structured time of play, development, and learning—is a relatively recent phenomenon. In different times and places, children actually work. In some societies, good mothers are those who bear the emotional responsibility of childrearing, transmit codes of proper behavior, or nurse their infants. In others, they arrange beneficial marriages for their children or provide them with the economic means for independent survival. In some places, the work of mothering falls on one person; in others it is shared. There is no universal definition of what it means to be a wife or mother or to “earn a living.”

The work that human beings do falls into four categories: production, reproduction, status enhancement, and morale building. Sometimes work falls neatly into one of these four categories. At other times we see these categories merge or overlap. Although both men and women do all of these kinds of work, we do them to a very different drum beat. We are rewarded and recognized in separate ways. Women’s work in these spheres often looks and feels quite distinct from men’s work.

The first kind, work as production, generates goods, money, wages, or income of some kind. Often this kind of work is associated with men. People tend to call this “real work” or “going to work.” The work of women in production is often seen as only an extension of household work. An example is a woman selling her handmade, homemade, or homegrown products in local markets. These economic activities in the informal work sector are usually not listed in statistics about productivity or regulated by national laws. Jobs in the formal work sector or the official part of the economy are thought of as genuine productive work.

Then there is the work of reproduction. This is having babies and raising them. Overwhelmingly associated with women, these tasks are generally more undervalued and underpaid than the work of production. Moreover, the work of reproduction is routinely broadened to include extensions of “housework,” such as home gardens; subsistence farming; food preparation, preservation, and storage; as well as caring for those who are like babies—sick people, old people, or helpless people.

The third kind of work is what we might call the work of status enhancement. These activities promote prestige and social worth—however they are defined. This kind of work includes leisure-time activities and volunteer work, which not only integrate, but also enhance the status of a husband or family. Conspicuous
consumption, effective consumerism, and social climbing are still work and are often highly valued. Among the upper classes all over the world, wives of prominent (rich) men organize large-scale events like charity balls. A wife is a public acknowledgment of a husband’s ability to afford a “nonworking” wife. She may arrange other status-enhancing activities, such as dinner parties, rounds of seasonal festivities, or the debutante seasons. The latter are training grounds for daughters as status enhancers, as future wives, and as fodder for parental ambitions. Sometimes women in these social circles are widowed, divorced, abandoned, or bankrupted. They may have to “go to work” and find paying jobs using the same abilities they developed as wives. Although the activities of status enhancement are often valued as entertainment or special events, their importance as work—skilled, necessary, and time-consuming—is largely invisible.

The last major type is work as morale, caring, repairing, and integration. These tasks are overwhelmingly assigned to women in human cultures. Inevitably, they include feelings, emotional responsibilities, and social obligations, which start with parents, husbands, and babies and flow directly into public life. This kind of work includes arrangements for crucial and regular rituals and religious observances and the care of elderly and disabled people or other nonworkers, as well as children. Women visit, write notes, call others, and plan weddings, family reunions, or holiday celebrations. Women often create community, build bonds that hold groups of people together, and provide crucial services to others in times of trouble. This is the work of integration. While men frequently have titles, positions of authority, and salaries attached to this kind of work, women usually work through their networks without pay, simply because the work is there to be done.

“What’s for Dinner?”: Gender and Practical Economics

All of us eat; we know that food is basic to survival and that food carries as much symbolic and practical significance as any activity humans do. Anthropologists categorize human cultures now and in the past by how people get the foods they eat. We talk about hunting and gathering, horticultural, and agricultural societies or working for wages to purchase food. Archaeologists classify and analyze cultures by the kinds of tools people make and use to survive. Tools mean actual material objects (emphasized in this chapter) as well as social tools such as marriage, kinship reckoning, and political organization (coming later).

Subsistence technologies, whatever they are, have critical consequences for the way work is divided and rewarded within genders and ages, and the quality and quantity of relationships between men and women. The continuum of cultural experiences in earning a living runs from our human ancestors, all of whom were gatherers and/or hunters, through cultivators, farmers, and pastoralists who care for animals to those of us who live now in complex, multicultural, urban, postindustrial nation-states. Below are examples of this key proposition and the continuum of subsistence. Drawn largely from archaeology, they center on food, fibers, fabrics, and other practical technologies. Nothing in anthropology or the archaeological record comes close to concepts such as “happiness,” “self-esteem,” or “fairness.” We cannot, however tempting, write onto the past or onto different groups our contemporary arguments about who does household work and who doesn’t. The goal is to illuminate women’s work in ways you may not have seen before.
HUNTING, GATHERING, AND BEING HUMAN

The hunting–gathering or foraging way of life is extremely significant for anthropologists. All Homo sapiens lived this way before the beginnings of agriculture, the invention of plant and animal domestication about 10,000 years ago. A fraction of the world’s peoples still earn a living this way in geographical regions where agriculture and industrialization have not reached. Foraging peoples collect wild plants; small creatures like rabbits, birds, or fish; wild fruits and berries; eggs; roots; tubers; insects; and many other delicious, healthy foods in their environment. They may also hunt large land animals like buffalo, bear, and deer or large sea mammals like whales or seals. They may fish with elaborate traps.

What foragers catch or collect to eat varies with their environment. What does not vary is their inevitable, extensive, intense, and intimate knowledge and experience with their local environments. What does not vary is the inevitable, skilled tool-making and reciprocal sharing of work and food. The significant question for us is how much latitude for independent action a woman has in her household, in her body (sexual–reproductive life), and in her pocketbook (economic matters). It is generally agreed that the sexual division of labor in foraging groups was relatively egalitarian.

Thanks to several generations of scholarship, we are no longer prey to popular culture’s stereotypes of “man the hunter,” “man the tool-maker,” or the ever-popular “caveman.” In this silly sexual division of labor, men brought home the bacon and women cooked it. In some accounts, women apparently hung around the campfire cooking meat, grateful for every morsel, available for sex and bearing little hunters of the future. Popular depictions show them wearing tanned animal skins and carrying tools, food, and children. Note all the work implied in such depictions.

Our hunting–gathering ancestors had a small number of children and low population density. The basic social divisions they knew were age, which shifts through an individual’s life, and gender, which generally doesn’t shift. Men and women control some of the resources and services required by the other. Food-getting is work. It requires many tools, sharing and other social skills, wide variability in diets, and extensive knowledge of local environments. The facts of human survival offer no argument for idleness by either men or women.

Typically the group structure comes close to being egalitarian. A senior man or woman acts as a focus for collective decisions. Their taking on of serious responsibility must not be confused with power or authority. Elders and their networks of kinspeople are mobile most of the year, following the movements of game and the availability of gathered foods. As a result, foragers have no more possessions than they can comfortably carry in skin and net bags. Women carry babies or small children. For all foraging groups, there are predictable problems: bad weather and changing seasons, vanished game, dangerous predators, sickness, childbirth, correct relationships with in-laws, and effectively bringing young people into the full knowledge and experience they will need to survive. Over time, they develop significant “religious” and “medical” experience to deal with all of these problems. Foraging cultures typically acquire knowledge and information through altered states of consciousness, dreams, trances, or other visits with the spirit world with the help of shamans who may be male or female.
Chapter 1 • “What’s for Dinner Honey?”

The Pot-Luck Principle

Sharing, gathering, and carrying in foraging societies are complexes that shaped human life as we now know it. The pot-luck principle is one key to human survival. People contributed what they had and fed themselves and several others better than they could do it alone. In foraging cultures, a woman gathered foods from a source she knew about; then she exchanged some for a foodstuff she had not found. One day she gave foodstuffs to relatives who couldn’t go out foraging that day; on another day she prepared a soft, easy-to-chew dish for an old person or an easily digestible dish for a sick person or a child. Salads, soups, and stews, for example, contain a number of ingredients put together rather flexibly. Mixing food together enhances the nutritional value for everyone. But no one person could gather and prepare his or her own bowl of salad each day. Imagine preparing a rich vegetable soup or stew from scratch for one person each day. Now imagine helping someone make a soup and sharing from a large pot.

In most animal groups, individuals must find their own food each day. In sharp contrast, all known contemporary foraging groups divide subsistence tasks by gender and age. Increased sociability, sharing of resources, structured giving, and ordered social relationships would have contributed to growth and survival. Shared food is good for everybody. In some fashion or another, the metaphors of shared food around a fire are at the heart of many religions.

Sophisticated new research and analysis of contemporary foraging groups over the last forty years reveals the complexity and contributions of gathering. Our ancestors used plants for making medicines, drinks, clothes, equipment, and tools. At the same time, females carried and nursed an infant almost continually for three to four years, did a lioness’s share of food-gathering, and 90 percent of child care. A woman often walked miles carrying an equivalent of 75 percent of her body weight in baby, firewood, gathered foodstuffs, or other raw materials. Women contributed dietary proteins, clubbed turtles, and collected eggs and insects. Women made systematic observations about the availability of game or tracks and reported back to the men. Anthropologists know that women hunted as well and gathered small game and fish. Mothers often, as they still do, left small children in the care of kinfolk, sister-like cooperatives, brothers, or other adult males. Males also gathered, for themselves and in groups.

Honey, Meat, and Babies

As part of a research team, anthropologist Marjorie Shostak did fieldwork in the Kalahari Desert of southern Africa (Botswana). There she listened to and recorded the life story of Nisa, a woman who was born into one of the last gathering–hunting cultures, the !Kung Bushmen. Here Nisa discusses food and her memories of childhood. The fathers brought animals home for everyone to eat. Nisa loved to eat meat dripping with fat.

We lived, eating the animals and foods of the bush. We collected food, ground it in a mortar, and ate it. We also ate sweet nin berries and tsin beans. When I was growing up, there were no cows or goats… Whenever my father killed an animal and I saw him coming home with meat draped over a stick, balanced on one shoulder—that’s what made me happy. I’d cry out, “Mommy! Daddy’s coming and he’s bringing meat!” My heart would be happy when I greeted him, “Ho, ho,
Daddy! We’re going to eat meat!” Or honey. Sometimes he’d go out and come home with honey… Sometimes my mother would be the one to see the honey. The two of us would be walking around gathering food and she’d find a beehive deep inside a termite mound or in a tree. (Shostak 1981:87)

Honey and animal fat are two foods deeply prized and symbolic in hunting and gathering cultures. Folklorist Megan Biesele has also worked in the Kalahari Desert on the foraging ideologies of a related group called Ju’hoan. She found that even symbolic and expressive domains are divided between genders. This means that art, music, poetry, mythology, and other expressive parts of the Ju’hoan culture are codes that contain knowledge—information that helps them survive as a group. The verbal traditions are imaginative legacies strongly imprinted with ideas about work, social life, and the supernatural, which have adaptive value.

Hunting as a male activity is typically valued and ritually elaborated over either gathering or fishing, despite the relative economic importance of the latter activities in specific instances. Men’s hunting is often symbolically opposed not to the complementary female activity of gathering but rather to women’s reproductive capacity. (Biesele 1993:41)

In other words, producing babies is the equivalent of producing meat in terms of making the most significant contribution to group survival. “Men have trance-curing and hunting. Women have childbirth and plant food gathering. All are indispensable ingredients of traditional Bushman subsistence and social life” (Biesele 1993:98). Men cannot produce babies. Women produce babies—itself a potentially dangerous enterprise—and make the intensive investments of raising them. They are not likely to be hunters as well. But babies were a gift to their cultures, hard as this is to imagine in a world full of billions of people.

One misconception about foragers has been that their culture has survived unchanged for thousands of years. As anthropologists, we know that all cultures change to varying degrees. In recent times, foraging lifeways around the world have been influenced by climate shifts, economic and political change, territorial encroachment, government regulation, tourism, and disease (Lee 2013). As members of the Ju’Huansi community switch from hunting and gathering to sedentary agriculture and wage labor, the central ideal of sharing, the “pot-luck” principle, has started to fall apart.

Tools with a Feminine Twist

It’s often difficult to find ordinary women in the archaeological record. A great irony of studying gender and work is how transitory and perishable women’s productions are. Objects made of stone survive better than tools or objects made of wood, skin, bone, horn, fibers, or other perishable organic materials. Songs, stories, recipes, babies, fibers, clothes, fabrics, comfort care, or social skills may be crucial to survival but still vanish easily. This is one reason why some scientists in the past emphasized stone and saw tools only as weapons and only men as tool-makers or users. Despite the immense toil in producing clothing or children, for example, little or no evidence survives.
More and more anthropologists, however, see women in the role of tool inventors. The absolute best example is the simple act of carrying things. For starters, females carry babies in all nonhuman primate groups and in all human cultures. Slings for carrying infants are found in most human societies, so this is probably one of the earliest and most profound applications of tool use. Contemporary foragers use skin bags, fiber nets, or woven baskets for carrying food, wood, and other objects for long distances. Never mind that people in many places speak of a pregnancy as “carrying a baby.”

Today humans make thousands of kinds of containers. We buy them, give them as gifts, and rely on them for a thousand tasks: purses, pocketbooks, pockets, knapsacks, backpacks, shoulder bags, handbags, tin cans, paper bags, plastic sacks, boxes, baskets, briefcases, cosmetic cases, and brown paper packages wrapped up in string. These are major inventions. Frankly, I think women should boldly claim credit for inventing containers for carrying and celebrate the incredible developments that followed.

Here is a powerful example of finding women’s work in the scholarly record. Elizabeth Barber is an archaeologist who has done the authoritative study of the development of cloth in the ancient and early modern worlds. She uses linguistics, anthropology, and history to reveal women’s industry over the last 20,000 years. She herself spins and weaves and often re-creates the fabrics found in archaeological sites to learn more about them. In most parts of the world, until the Industrial Revolution, fiber arts were an extraordinary practical force belonging primarily to women.

Our foraging ancestors gathered more than edible wild plants. They collected plant fibers such as flax, hemp, nettle, ramie, jute, sisal, maguey, yucca, elm, linden, willow, and many others. These fibers were then processed for baskets, cordage, nets and traps for catching fish or other animals, mats for floors, roofs, beds, and fences—and thousands of other useful, necessary, everyday objects that made life safe, comfortable, and even possible. Some hunted animals like wild mountain goats for their fleece, which could be spun into warm yarns, or collected the hair other animals shed in the spring. In the great temple cave of Lascaux used 24,000 years ago, archaeologists found the remains of the string that led people into its darkness for stunning artwork and probably profound rituals and ceremonies. Should women give serious attention to something as humble and mundane as string? Barber says yes.

So powerful, in fact, is simple string in taming the world to human will and ingenuity that I suspect it to be the unseen weapon that allowed the human race to conquer the earth, that enabled us to move out into every eco niche on the globe during the Upper Paleolithic. We could call it the String Revolution. (Barber 1994:45)

String was invented and used everywhere in the world humans went. But the women of 24,000 years ago did much more than catch fish, carry food, or lead others into caves with their practical invention. They made skirts—swinging cords fastened from a twisted hip band, some with long beaded fringes. By any standards, their skirts could not have been modest or warm. But skimpy string skirts keep appearing in the archaeological records, and always on women. From archaeological sites dating to 1300 B.C., we can see actual skirts preserved in burials of young girls. The miniskirts scandalized some European archaeologists. Well into the twentieth century, one could still find descendants of string skirts in elaborate belts and aprons in some peasant cultures of Eastern Europe.
Barber asks: What could have been so important about such impractical, eye-catching miniskirts that the style lasts for thousands of years? Her best guess is that the skirts signified something about childbearing abilities, readiness for marriage, or both. There were many times and places in our human past when how a young woman dressed signaled her marriage status, even a sense of honor and specialness, and linked her with the ability to create new life—often a valuable gift to her society. A number of the so-called Venus figurines are wearing string skirts. The divine Hera in the epic poem of Homer wears a “Girdle of a hundred tassels.” Her skirts are too short to do much good—except for social signaling. This may be a subtle example of a woman’s language at work.

**PLANTING AND HARVESTING: THE NEXT REVOLUTION**

So what have anthropologists learned? The most egalitarian groups we know about are probably hunting and gathering groups. Do women and men do exactly equal work and get treated the same way? No. They do not have equality, just relatively egalitarian traditions and a sexual division of labor. No known groups allow one gender to be idle or excused from the basic work of survival. The foraging lifestyle required an amazing amount of practical intelligence; in fact, anthropologists know that horticulture and agriculture grew out of the increasingly skilled carrying, sharing, and gathering complexes of our early ancestors.

About 10,000 years ago, groups of people in various parts of the world learned how to cultivate and harvest plants and care for domestic animals as sources of food and fibers. This striking new relationship to the environment is called the **Neolithic Revolution**. But—and here is the key insight of anthropology—when people changed their patterns of earning a living and their eating habits, everything else shifted too. Eventually this key transition in food-getting would have extraordinary implications for women’s work and daily lives.

**Digging Sticks**

The revolution didn’t happen overnight. Gradually some groups adopted horticulture, the hand-cultivation system of growing food with the highly efficient but simple tools of hoes and digging sticks. Women played the major role as food producers of grain, cereal, and vegetable crops. Men did fishing and hunting to supplement diets. Horticulture is still the basic source of subsistence for many of the rural descendants of cultivators who were neither driven off their land by colonialism nor became dependent on commercial crops and agricultural wage labor. Once our ancestors began to cultivate their food, the potential for new kinds of gender relationships exploded. These kinds of cultures have amazing variety, so it’s very difficult to generalize.

Only a few things apply uniformly. In all horticultural societies, men clear the land for planting. It’s heavy, dangerous work. But depending on how fast things grow, it doesn’t have to be done often. Beyond that fact, there is no consistent adaptive advantage to whether females or males plant and harvest their crops. Horticulture is quite compatible with child-tending. In some places, men clear and both genders cultivate—sometimes their work is separated into “women’s crops” and “men’s crops.” In other places, such as highland New Guinea or the island of Pohnpei, where I did
fieldwork, men raise the ceremonially and prestige crops; women raise staple crops for domestic use. The common pattern in which men clear and women cultivate—like the Iroquois of Native North America—is generally associated with economic control and high status for women. In West Africa, both men and women cultivate staple crops for use value and prestige crops for exchange value. **Reciprocity** is still important, but trading in market arenas increases. In the horticultural societies of West Africa with well-developed market systems, women handle a large share of the trading. Women rarely become wealthy or powerful, but trading the products they grow and make does give them more autonomy in their personal lives and power in their marital relationships (Clark 1994, 2010).

Horticultural societies (with some notable exceptions) do not seem to promote very amicable relationships between women and men. I can't find a convincing argument why this is true, but my theory is that men and women are freed from the mutually shared dangers of the foraging lifestyle; competition can flourish without the imperatives for cooperation. There may be within-group female solidarity as well as male group linkages. But between men and women as groups or as couples, distance, disruption, hostility, and accusations mark their common lives. The key seems to be their relationship with local environments.

In simple horticultural societies, production mainly has utilitarian value. Exchange is usually within kin groups and based on reciprocity. Such groups are not yet oriented to markets and trade outside the village. In environments with plentiful, relatively uncontested resources and abundant arable land, groups are frequently matrilineal and still relatively egalitarian. Women work and live in localized groups with their kinsfolk. Matrilineal descent (tracing kinship through a female line) makes sense under these circumstances. The status and safety of women is appreciably high in matrilineal horticultural societies in which the local community is organized around related women. When societies practice matrilineal descent, have high degrees of female solidarity and female economic control, and when males are absent in war or trade, women have reasonably high status. When kin groups are nearby, women are more rarely abused or beaten.

However, in circumstances in which (for whatever reason) production is increased or there is competition or environmental pressures, men tend to live in local groups and eventually move to patrilineal descent systems (tracing kinship through a male line). In these systems, a husband and his immediate kin group are the beneficiaries of a woman’s labor. Men may also take more than one wife—all the better to increase production of crops and children. When patrilineal descent systems, male solidarity, male economic control, population pressures, the need for local defense, and warfare complexes occur, women become second-class people.

**Plows**

Horticulture, with its extensive varieties, is not intrinsically predictable in its effects on women’s work and lives. But the same cannot be said for agriculture. Women’s lives overall are heavily impacted in agriculture, and it would be difficult to argue that these new systems are improvements. **Agriculture** is complex cultivation using a plow, domesticated draft animals, or farm machinery. Farming may involve irrigation, livestock breeding, and cash crops or farm products that have no use value and are grown for sale. This extensive means of earning a living includes all plantations, agricultural
industries that produce such commodities as heroin, cocaine, tobacco, rubber, sugar, cotton, spices, and coffee. Agriculture, agribusiness, plantations, and animal husbandry are the subsistence bases for all contemporary industrial societies.

At various times and in many places in the world, people in horticultural societies needed—for whatever reason—to increase their productivity. They began to use more intensive and advanced cultivation techniques. They revitalized the soils with fertilizer; they harnessed animal power for harvesting and planting, and diverted water into fields under cultivation. These particular and increasingly widespread activities required male labor; the work was hard, long, dangerous, and strikingly incompatible with women’s work styles and the demands of child care. The most spectacular new tool in intensive agriculture was plows. Plows are the tool most heavily blamed among some archaeologists for altering the balance of men’s and women’s lives. In foraging and horticultural societies, women use hoes and digging sticks; women produce food directly, often working together in processing and distribution. But men with plows and draft animals replaced women as primary producers. Women cooked and processed food; they worked very hard at many tasks. But they did not produce food. Men increasingly did, and they did so in the company of other men. The effects on women were so dramatic that we are still living with them thousands of years later.

The realization that animals could be domesticated and used for wool, milk, and muscle power was truly a revolution. People settled down on farms and in villages; in many parts of the world, cities developed. Instead of mobility, human lives were characterized by settled village life. As you can imagine, things accumulated—like children. The number of births per family increased. Children were very useful in subsistence tasks. There was lots of homestead work to be done: herds of sheep, goats, or cattle to shepherd, milk, and tend; barnyard animals to tend; family clothes to make; food to process to last the winter; goods to produce for trade—thousands of specialized tasks, dawn-to-dusk labor, lots of children to bear and raise. Farm life requires the most broadly skilled and hardest working women and men I’ve encountered on the planet. It also means concentrating intensively only on a few aspects of the environment.

**Distaffs**

Once again I note: It’s easier than ever to lose sight of women in these male-heavy agrarian societies. So I want to add one splendid example of making women’s work visible. Remember string. In settled horticultural villages and agricultural societies across the planet, from Greece and Egypt to China and Peru, women took simple string, their spun fibers, and taught each other to weave them. They invented looms and woven cloth, fabric for high-fashion clothes, home furnishings, rugs, blankets, belts, baby dresses, and the sails of ships. Once woven, cloth wrapped the dead and the newborn; it often served as currency, bedding, bandages, and the mark of social status and sacred spaces. In most nomadic cultures, women still weave the floors, the walls, and the roofs of their portable tent homes; they are architects. They spun wool from their practical sheep and beautiful flax fibers for linen. They fed exotic worms and wove their cocoons into silk—the ultimate luxury fabric and for its weight as strong as steel. In other places they grew cotton or hemp (useful for rope as well as medicines).

The folk saying claims, “Clothes make the man.” But Elizabeth Barber says, “Women make the clothes.” She found a cloth-crazy world in the archaeological
records of the Middle East and Europe. Innumerable temple walls, pottery, and paint-ings show women and men planting and harvesting fiber plants or tending flocks of sheep. Women are continuously shown combing, carding, spinning, dyeing, weaving, wearing, giving, trading, and selling fabrics, miles and miles of the flowing stuff, cara-vans of cloth. However, nowhere in the world was textile manufacture simply women’s economic and household labor. Textiles became symbols of creation and fertility in some places, freedom in others. Barber says that patterned cloth is like a language. Like clothing, it speaks of many human events or feelings.

Cloth was women’s work and women’s status, even women’s language *par excellence*. It marked statuses such as married and dead. Social rank was coded through fabrics, designs, colors, and embellishments. Cloth marked ceremonial or ritual states and told the stories, myths, and histories of peoples. Cloth encoded women’s magical, wish-fulfilling, and fantasy lives. Everywhere Barber looked women coded their common objectives into cloth: fertility, prosperity, and protection. Slave women and queens alike put their fingers to this work. Sometimes women acted as business owners; sometimes they were part of family businesses. In some places and at some times, there were free, middle-class, independent-minded women who created textiles, both beautiful and in volume, for the busy commercial markets and trade routes, working with their men-folk. There were innovations in dyes and efficiency of looms. Sometimes I think of all the hard work of cloth production and I’m glad to be spared. At other times, I glimpse something about autonomy, creativity, deep personal privacy, even a meditative heal-ing that comes from producing fabric from scratch. It is also clear from the archaeo-logical and anthropological record, in which women worked together or even for each other, that they had more control over their lives, more autonomy.

The history of “civilization” is woven in these extraordinary crafts. Men helped; they participated in a thousand ways. But the fiber and fabric production industries centered on and were the inspiration of women. I am impressed that in every culture in which women spin fibers into thread and yarns, spinning is associated with female economic, sexual, and spiritual freedom. Distaffs—the tool that holds the unspun fibers for spinning—are the symbol for women’s work around the world. People who can spin a good yarn are valuable.

**Peasants**

In agriculture, women’s roles changed rather dramatically from those of foraging or horticultural societies. This period, often hailed as the “dawn of civilization,” undis-pputedly brought a loss of status and power for women relative to men of their social class, and for the majority of the growing populations relative to a tiny ruling elite. A significant result of this new adaptation was the production of surpluses. People had exchangeable wealth: stored food, domesticated animals, or other products they pro-duced, such as cloth, butter, wine, salt, and many others. They lived in permanent, larger, and denser populations. In these societies, there was still a division of labor by gender, but people had more options and statuses, more shifting by class or age or task. Plows, draft animals, fertilizing, and irrigating increased both productivity and the complexity of social organizations. But the work was strenuous, demanding, danger-ous, and time-consuming. Gatherers, hunters, and horticulturalists are rightly appalled at the sheer unending physical labor of farming.
Agriculture transforms the bulk of people into **peasants**. Peasants have the highest birth rates of any group of humans on the planet. But land is always finite, and landless peasants must migrate into cities, find other occupations, or form armies. The consequences of agriculture as a way of life include social phenomena such as class oppression, slavery, caste systems, and exploited or expendable classes of people such as beggars, criminals, or the chronically unemployed. Don’t forget to add in war, famine, and plague. There are always merchant or business classes, growing bureaucracies or retainer classes, and priestly classes. The world religions (Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism) all spread and became institutionalized within agrarian societies. Complex trade, transportation, and communication systems as well as powerful central governments are developed. Standing armies and warfare become chronic. In short, marked social inequality and exploitation are built into the economies and social organizations of all the great agrarian civilizations.

In this bleak picture, where are women? If you have a family business and inherited wealth, then kinship is important. In other places, such as Europe and North America, people moved into the constellation of monogamous marriages and nuclear families. Economic productivity of wives declines, as do collective female work groups. Wives have typically left their parents’ households and are living in their husbands’ natal homes. Females are like cattle—the property of males and intensive breeders for the labor supply. Peasants try to produce big crops and many sons. Women in agricultural societies have the largest number of children, and their births are more closely spaced than in any other group. The hunters of the Plains of North America marveled at European farm families with eight to twelve children. “Like dogs,” they whispered. Men need the labor of their wives, and women are required to have husbands—it’s their work. But this is unequal interdependence, because males control the primary productive processes and females are relegated to secondary tasks. They are working harder than ever but are still disposable and isolated.

You will not be surprised to hear how agriculturalists value virginity for their daughters and chastity for their wives, how women are used as pawns in vast male political alliances. Women are a key reserve labor supply for intense periods like harvest or planting. The rest of the time they are available for childbearing, childrearing, extensive fiber and fabric production (spinning, weaving, sewing), and food processing. To these major activities are added jobs like small animal husbandry, nursing, and running complex households while men are away at war. On top of all of this, agrarian societies develop elaborate religious, moral, and legal justifications for their sexual stratification systems. Hammurabi’s Code was the first set of laws written down and provided the basis for legal systems in the Middle East, ancient Israel, and cultures of this important region. Of the 270 laws engraved on an upright stone pillar, approximately 100 of them dealt with the problems of keeping women in line, assigning ownership and responsibility for them, and defining the boundaries of their sexuality. In the ideologies of agriculturalists, women are subordinate, unclean, and not bright enough to be trusted out alone. Women are viewed as suited only for inside and domestic tasks; they are incapable of public political and economic roles. Family units shrink. They become self-sufficient. A man’s home is his castle. Women have to rely on husbands for their livelihood—in short, institutionalized dependency, subordination, and political immaturity. If some of this sounds familiar to you, that’s because European American culture and society grew from its peasant agricultural roots. Summer vacation, for example, is time off from school to help with the harvest. “Naturally,” women are at home fixing their meals.
Peasant cultures do not paint a very pretty picture of women’s lives. Sometimes women resist in subtle ways. They gossip or tell stories that make their work visible. In the box is a folktale about the sexual division of labor, collected from storytellers in the peasant societies of northern Europe. I think it’s shamelessly a woman’s story because she believes his job is simple and hers is complex and that he doesn’t see or value her contributions. But you are free to interpret or rewrite it as you like.

The following description of the sexual division of labor in Grey Rock Harbour will feel familiar to most readers. This describes the traditional relationship of work and gender in peasant farming and fishing cultures until quite recently.

Despite the physical separation of the sexes, the family remained important. Nuclear and extended family networks were extensive and defined local social organization. Kinfolk could be counted on for support when times were hard. Marriage was universal and was considered essential for entry into full adult status. There was no divorce. Couples married in their midteens, started their families early, and looked forward to a life of fishing or work at the fish plant. Flexible hiring patterns at the local fish plant make it easy for women (and men) to schedule wage labor around family obligations. (Davis 1993:461)

A Folktale

What’s for Dinner Honey?

Once upon a time, a couple lived on a farm. They quarreled constantly about the work they had to do on their homestead. Each claimed that her or his labor was the most difficult and that the other one was not properly appreciative. Finally, when there seemed no other way to settle the issue, the husband and wife agreed to trade tasks for an entire day.

Early the following morning, the wife arose and went out to plow the fields and make hay. When she returned that evening, her muscles were sore and her hands had new blisters. But she had enjoyed her quiet, simple day outside in the fields. She was fiercely hungry; the leftovers from breakfast and the small lunch her husband packed for her had not been enough. As she stepped through the carved wooden door of their cottage, she called out, “What’s for dinner honey?”

But instead of dinner, she faced a disaster! Feathers coated in honey clung to the rafters. The cat, who should have been in the barn catching rats, crawled from the overturned butter churn, licking her paws with glee. Chickens cackled as they laid eggs on the mantel; they cackled as the eggs rolled off and broke on the floor. Ducks left their droppings as they marched across her handmade white quilt. From somewhere, the mooing of an unmilked and unhappy cow filled the air. The bread dough had not risen and the beer she was brewing had spilled. Flax fibers, soaking as the first stage in making linen cloth, were strewn damply about the dirty floor. Her garden was not weeded and something had happened to the fruits and vegetables she was preparing for winter. But worse, her husband, tied by his foot, hung upside down in the chimney, his face covered by her best apron and his head only inches away from a pot of uncooked soup teetering above the dead fire in the hearth.

“Don’t ask,” he moaned. “I’ve had a very bad day.” Before she released him, she satisfied herself that he had a new appreciation for her work and her work skills. Then she began to clean up enough to fix dinner for them. They lived and worked together for a very long time after that.
The egalitarian ethic in Grey Rock Harbour was “We’ll help each other out, but we all come up together or we don’t come up at all.” Most men fished; most women ran households. Men and women equally worked at the fish-processing plant. Every person was expected to be a hard worker. Other tasks filled their extra time; women knitted and men built or repaired their equipment. Figure 1.1 illustrates this old division of labor, one similar to many traditional peasant, fishing, and farming societies around the world. Note that women do 100 percent of women’s work, men do 100 percent of men’s work, and only some overlap is shared.

**OFF TO WORK WE GO**

Over the last 500 years, many largely peasant societies have become industrialized and “developed.” Some have created immense colonial empires and heavy war machinery. In the Industrial Revolution, factories became the workplace. People worked in an assembly line, mass-producing goods they couldn’t sell or use at home. Only their time at work had value. Although people still need to eat, it takes only a very few to produce their food. What did the first factories of the industrialization and its capitalistic methods produce? Thread and cloth. What is the name we give to our current age? The Age of Information. Computers come from looms, based on the same binary principle: yes–no, over–under, in–out. Huge looms for Jacquard woven fabric used the first computer cards. The image of this brave new age is the web the size of the world. Were there massive changes in women’s lives in each of these “revolutions?” Did marriage, family life, and economic prospects change with each new age? Of course. These are the revolutions we’re currently experiencing.

One element of the industrial sexual division of labor is the **family wage ideology**. Family wage laws and practices are still a fundamental part of gender ideologies in the Western world. They developed in nineteenth-century industrializing, capitalist societies.
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The premise is that a male worker (as head of a household) is hired and paid enough to support his wife and their children. Females (e.g., young single women) who work the same jobs are not paid the same as males. Presumably they do not have to support families. Married women are assumed to have access to their husband’s income; they are said to be working at home for him. If wives take wage-labor jobs, it is seen as supplementing their husbands’ income. This cultural formulation of the sexual division of labor has been enormously instrumental, even seductive, in western European and North American societies. You may recognize the impact of this gender ideology on your own salaries and lives.

Work and a Revolution

Early in the twentieth century, after the socialist revolution in Russia, Lenin, the ideological father, decreed that women must work for wages if they wanted to be equal to men. As he noted in a newspaper interview,

*Housework is the most unproductive, savage and most arduous work a woman can do…. Women must participate in common productive labor…. We are setting up model institutions, dining rooms and nurseries, that will emancipate women from housework. And the work of organizing all these institutions will fall mainly to women. (Pravda No. 213: Sept. 25, 1919)*

Under Lenin’s new socialism, Russian women would be paid as wage laborers for the same work they did for no pay before the revolution. But his socialist ideals never materialized. The state did not provide day care, laundry, or food preparation. Wives continued to do that work in addition to working for wages. The same thing is true now that Communism is dead and the Soviet Union disbanded.

As of this writing, no country or economic system in the world has solved the problem of valuing women’s domestic work. The capitalist solution pays only lip service to motherhood—phrases that include “family values,” “stay at home and take care of the kids,” or “women in the labor force.” No socialist country has been able to organize large-scale socialized domestic services. There has been no liberation from what Lenin called “household bondage and petty individual house-keeping.” None of these systems provide adequately for the economic problems of divorce or widowhood. Worse, they assume that all women find satisfaction in domestic work, do it naturally, and are always available to do it. And even worse, women who have made this a life career and are truly geniuses at their work find themselves fired in divorce, trivialized in feminism, and ignored the rest of the time.

The current American middle-class solution to this age-old dilemma is to affirm the belief that women and men are equally responsible for child care and domestic work. By contrast, people in many countries are shocked at the demand for day care in capitalist countries; staying at home with their children would be an unimaginable luxury. In fact, in traditional societies, socialist societies, and certain classes within capitalist societies, there was never a category of women’s work Americans call “staying at home.”

First, Second, and Third Shifts

The contemporary view of marriage and women’s work in the West centers on assumptions of equality and an equal division of labor. Figure 1.2 illustrates this model of how work is supposed to be distributed in modern families. Men do their share of the work
(e.g., 50 percent), and women do their share (the other 50 percent). Unlike women’s and men’s work in traditional societies, the tasks are interchangeable in modern settings. Both genders are supposed to do the same jobs, whether in the workplace or at home. However, this idea of equivalency or equality does not offer cross-cultural comparisons. They only recently evolved in the middle class of America.

You have heard this before, but it bears repeating: Women who are married and have children already have a full-time job. If they work for wages or salary somewhere else, then they have still another job. Women don’t just work; we are often overworked and invisible. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild interviewed two-career couples about their own sexual division of labor; she also visited these modern working partnerships to see how they divided up their “home-work.” Then she reviewed a large number of studies on who did what in contemporary households. No matter how she approached the topic, she came back to the same conclusion: the revolution is stalled. Despite the hopes and rhetoric of a generation of women, working mothers still carry the major burdens of childrearing, household maintenance, and whatever emotional work needs to be done. She averaged estimates from major studies on time use done from the 1960s on and discovered that women worked roughly fifteen hours longer each week than men do. Over a year, women worked an extra month of twenty-four days a year, and over a dozen years, they worked an extra year. Mirroring the wage gap between men and women in the workplace, there was a “leisure gap” between them at home.

As masses of women have moved into the economy, families have been hit by a “speed-up” in work and family life. There is no more time in the day than there was when wives stayed home, but there is twice as much to get done. It is mainly women who absorb this “speed-up”…. Even when couples share more equitably
in the work at home, women do two-thirds of the daily jobs at home, like cooking and cleaning up—jobs that fix them into a rigid routine. Beyond doing more at home, women also devote proportionately more of their time at home to housework and proportionately less of it to childcare. Of all the time men spend working at home, more of it goes to childcare. That is, working wives spend relatively more time “mothering the house”; husbands spend more time “mothering” the children. Since most parents prefer to tend to their children than clean house, men do more of what they’d rather do. (Hochschild 1990:8)

Hochschild calls what happens at the end of the day in American two-career families the second shift. Writers about international economics usually call this the double day. In the double day, women do child care, household and domestic duties in addition to agricultural work, and full-time or part-time wage-labor jobs. Figure 1.3 is a way of diagramming these workloads. The professional career women Hochschild interviewed are supposed to “have it all.” But she found that in only 20 percent of dual-career families do men share housework equally with their wives. Over and over, women revealed that they accepted this inequity to maintain peace in their marital relationships. They also reported chronic exhaustion, low sex drive, and more frequent illnesses. They felt intense feelings of time pressure, guilt, and anxiety. “Emotionally drained” was a constant refrain. Their deepest fantasies started with getting some sleep. Low wages, lack of support services, feeling tired all the time, and the double day or the second shift compose probably the most characteristic pattern for women’s work on the planet.

In the last half-century, both men and women are experiencing a new twist to their lives that Arlie Hochschild calls the time bind, or the third shift. This is when work becomes like home, and home becomes like work. The third shift is the emotional dirty work of making children adjust to their industrialized home, where time—not
food, clothes, silks, jewels, perfumes, or money—is the most precious commodity in the household economy. This work is another form of repairing or making up emotionally for never having “family time” or enough time.

As the first shift (at the workplace) takes more time, the second shift (at home) becomes more hurried and rationalized. The longer the workday at the office or plant, the more we feel pressed at home to hurry, to delegate, to delay, to forgo, to segment, to hyperorganize the precious remains of family time. Both the time deficit and what seem like solutions to it...force parents to engage in a third shift—noticeing, understanding, and coping with the emotional consequences of the compressed second shift. (Hochschild 1997:215)

Her point is that work now feels like home—it’s where everybody wants to be—and home feels like work. Homes have somehow become more “masculine” in that they need to be managed efficiently. At the same time, workplaces are correspondingly “feminized” through management philosophies that stress trust, team building, and courtesies to customers. One meaning we can draw from this is that as our economies constantly change, our work changes as well. Parents are still adjusting child raising to the work they have to do to earn a living. Mothers and fathers handle the wealth of technology and the poverties of time, but they do it in different ways.

Today, in Grey Rock Harbour, Newfoundland, women no longer worry about their men at work fishing. That way of life ended in the late 1970s when the fishing industry collapsed. Men are now land-bound. A combination of policies from the Canadian government and a changing ecology has resulted in chronic unemployment, the loss of a work ethic, and what the women call “ruined men.” There is conflict and hostility between men and women. According to men, women have become possessive and critical. As for women, they would rather be alone than marry a man who spends his time drinking too much (Davis 1993:470).

The men of Grey Rock Harbour now stay at home; they have invaded the domains of women. They spend dreary daytime hours at local bars and some turn to confrontational bravado. Women don’t need the romantic and idealized job of worrying any longer; they don’t have to be helpmates to earn a living. They are advantaged competitors for the few jobs available, which they can do as well as the men. Divorce, extra-marital activities, single mothering, and expensive TV dinners, unheard of in traditional times, are now common. Women are now “unhusbanding” their resources because marriage has few survival advantages for them. The sexual division of labor changed as the means of earning a living changed.

**VALUE, VALUED, AND VALUABLE**

Many women naively believe that if women’s work and labor is so vital to human survival and comfort, then we should be treated accordingly. Our work is valuable and the reward should correspond to the importance of our contributions, we protest. Alas, women’s work is not always valued. In fact, there is often no system for placing a value on female labor. For example, look at the concept called use value. This means that products made and services rendered within families are not sold and do not have a monetary value. They have a “value” only in private domestic settings. This contrasts
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sharp with exchange value work, which is the production of commodities or services for sale in the marketplace. When goods or services are exchanged for money or other financial considerations, then people say they have value.

The underlying economic principle is this: The ability to distribute, exchange, and control valuable goods and services to people who are not in our own domestic unit buys whatever we treasure: status, time, privacy, power, prestige, income, or goodies. This is true in each and every human group. Just working hard within our domestic units is only that: just working hard within our domestic units. This work, however hard, exciting, or crucial to survival it may be, does not automatically translate into power, control, status, money, or whatever. If women produce wonderful services or objects and cannot market them or keep the proceeds, then there is little or no exchange value or power. This principle applies to the products of women’s bodies, too. After all, the term “labor” refers to birthing an infant. This is also why sex workers sometimes claim that offering sex in return for marriage is much the same as selling it in a free market.

But the control or power any woman has over the process and the product of her labor varies greatly between cultures. In most societies, men seem to have greater rights than women to distribute goods outside their domestic networks. So the best question is not about how hard women are working; ask instead if women control access to the resources they need. Resources typically include education, employment, child care, legal standing, landownership, the freedom to marry and divorce, and access to the tools of survival or the means of production, as Karl Marx called them.

In this chapter we have started to recognize women’s work in different ways. As subsistence changes, so does the division of labor. As industrialization and wage labor draw people out of the home and into a nondomestic work world, our ideas about what constitutes domestic and public activities changes as well. With the rise of postindustrial and global economies, these concepts about space, work, and the roles of men and women are bound to shift again. As they do, the influence of culture on work and gender become more apparent. Furthermore, questions about individuality, culture, personhood, and who fits the stereotypes of feminine or masculine seem to increase exponentially. The next chapter is a special story about two foremothers in the field of anthropology, who struggled heroically to find their answers to these questions in their time and set the stage for how we answer them in ours.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Here are a few questions to help you think about women’s work in new ways:

1. Why do we say “relationships take a lot of work”?
2. If you could, would you establish a salary scale for mothers? What would it look like?
3. How was labor gendered in the household you grew up in? Do you think your adult household is or will be gendered in the same way?
4. Is being a student a form of work?
5. What do you think is the most undervalued or least acknowledged form of work?
A FEW OF THE MANY BOOKS YOU MAY WANT TO READ

Seeing women’s work in prehistory and women studying prehistory are both fairly recent happenings. Archaeologists are writing innovative and much-needed works that make women visible. The following volumes are particularly helpful. Sarah Milledge Nelson has edited the volume *Worlds of Gender: The Archaeology of Women’s Lives around the Globe* (2007). Organized regionally, this volume provides comprehensive coverage of what archaeologists have uncovered about women’s lives in recent decades. The very special collection edited by Annette Weiner and Jan Schneider, *Cloth and the Human Experience* (1989), honors women’s work around cloth, clothing, and the production of fabrics, and the reproduction of people, society, and ideologies in material goods. The emotional, spiritual, anthropological, and historic associations of fabrics, women, and weaving are one of the golden threads you will be able to pick up throughout this book.

In *Kitchenspace: Women, Fiestas, and Everyday Life in Central Mexico* (2008), Maria Elisa Christie delves into the foodscapes of central Mexico. She describes the ways in which women facilitate daily life, community events, religious celebrations, and relationships through food preparation and feasting. The production and consumption of food is integrated into power structures and gender ideologies that extend far beyond simple sustenance. In a similar vein, Tressa Berman (2003) writes about the importance of understanding women’s work and production in relation to ceremonial, kinship, and social obligations. She also addresses the responses of American Indian women in North Dakota to colonial and postcolonial policies that have encroached upon their livelihoods. Her book is titled *Circle of Goods: Women, Work, and Welfare in a Reservation Community.*