

Book Review

THE RISE OF CORPORATE FEMINISM: Women in the American Office, 1960-1990. By Allison Elias. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022.

When the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) first opened its doors in 1965, over a thousand complaints about sex discrimination from women across the country poured into its office. In their letters, this term encompassed a multitude of experiences—low pay in feminized jobs, lack of respect, sexual harassment, lack of childcare, safety on the job, barriers to promotion, no leave for pregnancy, and inadequate bathroom facilities. By the early 1970s, the under-staffed agency narrowed its definition of the term to focus on industry-wide statistical analyses of women's access to and inclusion within male-dominated jobs. As historian Katherine Turk argues in her award-winning book, *Equality on Trial: Gender and Rights in the Modern Workplace*, this "narrow definition" of discrimination sought to increase women's access to "men's jobs" and/or equalize their wages in these positions. This definition benefited white, middle-class women moving into predominantly male occupations such as management and, at the same time, failed to address the problems women working in feminized occupations faced—low wages and lack of career ladders. Historian Allison Elias's excellent new book also recognizes that secretaries were left behind in feminist efforts to transform the effects of sex segregation between 1960 and 1990, but she provides a different lens on this historical process by examining the work corporations were prompted to do to comply with affirmative action guidelines. In her argument, both the second wave women's movement and corporations advanced women with college degrees into management positions and, at the same time, unintentionally reinforced the segregation of women without degrees in dead-end, low paid secretarial work. By placing clerical work at the center of her analysis, Elias's finely crafted, historical account not only charts how

this bifurcated result came about, but also spotlights the moments when possibilities for more equitable feminist outcomes existed.

Elias begins by examining the training manuals of secretarial schools in the 1950s and 1960s where women were encouraged to be feminine, yet ambitious helpmates to their male bosses. By the mid-1960s, feminists critiqued this understanding of secretarial work. For some, because low-paid secretarial included demeaning practices such as "serving" men, it was a job to avoid. If men didn't have to learn how to type, why should women, Gloria Steinem asked graduates at Smith College's 1971 commencement address. Of course, being able to "opt out" of this feminized occupation pointed to the differences between privileged women who were educated and had professional aspirations and working-class women who did not. By contrast, the National Organization for Women (NOW) pursued women's access to male dominated jobs *and* worked to improve the status and pay of women in feminized occupations. Other workplace feminists like Karen Nussbaum, one of the founders of *9to5*, focused on economic justice for secretaries calling for better wages and respect for their work.

Significantly, clerical and professional paths to gender equity did not have to be antithetical. In chapter 3 on the publishing industry, Elias finds that in the first half of the twentieth Century Ivy League educated women began their careers in clerical positions, while men with the same degrees moved out of these positions to become editors. With the passage of EEO law, publishers were required to do work to incorporate women into higher level positions. When publishers failed to do so, secretaries and women editors united in protest. In 1974, together they waged a strike against Harper & Row in New York. Their demands included job descriptions and job postings as well as 20 percent raises and better health benefits. Given the increased public attention, there hadn't been a strike in the publishing industry in 50 years, as well as the fact that employees in 12 other publishing houses across the city struck in solidarity, "Harper executives wanted to negotiate as quickly as possible." (74). The final agreement attempted to address the demands of professional and clerical workers including not only raises, but internal job postings and greater transparency in hiring and promotions. Because most hires in the past had been made through the old-boy network, requiring job postings, equitable hiring practices, and better pay for clericals were enormous changes. Ultimately, this alliance between secretaries and professional women came to an end when Human Resources management came to the fore in the late 70s and focused only on the concerns of professional women.

In chapter 4 on the banking industry, Elias shows how secretaries and professional women leveraged affirmative action policy to gain a wide range of benefits. That changed in 1971 when the Department of Labor under President Richard Nixon issued Revised Order No. 4 which

required federal contractors to “correct the underutilization of women in previously restricted job categories” (p. 106). The Order compelled employers to conduct audits of their workforce and the local population, devise numerical targets, and endeavor to establish statistical parity between the percentages of women in the surrounding metropolitan area and those in male dominated job categories. Once the Order went into practice, corporations paid little attention to the mobility of secretaries into management positions. Overrepresentation in a feminized occupation did not trigger an underutilization analysis. Once again, women’s access to and inclusion in male dominated management positions took precedence.

Elias’ book helps us to understand why secretarial work has remained a highly feminized occupation over time and how the individualistic strategies for success found in corporate feminist treatises that celebrate meritocracy are compatible with capitalism. Women in high level corporate positions like Sheryl Sandberg not only celebrate individualism but urge women to adjust to the world of work (or “lean in”), and denounce the very federal regulations (i.e., affirmative action and antidiscrimination law) that got them into male-dominated fields in the first place. In outlining how corporations let clerical workers down, this outstanding book highlights a tension in gender equity that persists to this day, a tension between “career” women’s emphasis on individualistic meritocracy and labor feminism’s focus on organizing.

My only quibble is with the book’s title which is a bit of a misnomer. Rather than explaining the rise of corporate feminism, it provides a complex argument about how corporations, federal underutilization analyses that relied upon the EEOC’s “narrow definition” of sex discrimination, and some feminists *failed* to bring about economic justice for clerical workers. Further, as Elias demonstrates, the “rise” of corporate feminism was not inevitable; feminist strategies along the way benefited both secretaries and professional women. How policy makers and feminists failed secretaries might be a more accurate as a title, but it may not serve the publisher’s indebtedness to capitalism.

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