"Tigers and Oranges": The Interactions of the Federal Women's Bureau with Management

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Henry George's observation [1, p. 11] that "those bent on raising wages by moral suasion alone are likely those who would tell you of tigers that live on oranges" succinctly describes the dilemma faced by the United States Women's Bureau. In 1920, coincident with the final ratification of the 19th Amendment, Congress formally established this special agency with the US Department of Labor. Although mandated by Congress to investigate and "improve" conditions under which women worked, the Women's Bureau had no authority to impose its suggestions for changes in wages and factory conditions. Until World War II, its small investigative staff averaged 60 professional women -- lawyers, economists, statisticians, former social workers, teachers, and a few former labor organizers. While this earnest, well-educated handful of female government bureaucrats possessed no real power enabling them to dictate conditions under which women worked, employers solicited or received their speical expertise. As women became a more important element of the labor force, some employers suggested special bureau bulletins and requested conferences with bureau agents. Others stood accused by the bureau of exploitation of women.

An examination of the bureau's relationships with management during the period roughly spanned by the two world wars provides an interesting study of a government agency playing the role of unofficial arbitrator as both unions and employers reacted to the increasingly significant phenomenon of women in the work force. The Women's Bureau, in effect, walked a tightrope: trying to exert influence without power, and all the while maintain amicable relations with both management and labor.

The decades spanned by the two world wars pose interesting contrasts in management's perceptions and treatment of women workers. The percentage of women workers in the labor force remained fairly stable throughout the 1920s and 1930s. A member of a group accounting for one-fifth of all workers, the average female worker before World War II was young, single, and poor. The period saw hard times for labor in general; women workers, overwhelmingly nonunionized and often unskilled, if anything faced lower wages than male workers

and equally dangerous conditions. The number of women in professions declined relatively and sometimes absolutely during these years. More wives entered paid work during the 1930s as the depression deepened, but a working wife, until World War II, indicated real family poverty. Statistically, she took the most menial kinds of work. Popular myth, however, portrayed her as a selfish job-stealer, someone willing to work for scab wages, someone able to take bread from the rightful male bread-winners. Dr. Win-The-War, and not Dr. New Deal, cured unemployment. He also achieved a miraculous transformation in the American image of the woman worker. By war's end one in every three workers was a woman, a woman who appeared in posters, movies, and songs as an angel who answered the nation's call to enter the factories (see [2, 4, 8, and 6]).

Manufacturers certainly did not stand solely responsible for all these economic trends and the resulting important consequences for women workers. However, an examination of employer contacts with the government agency established to collect information and offer advice about female labor provides insights into the complexity of the problem of defining and achieving equitable conditions for women workers, both from an employer and government viewpoint. Given no official mediatory authority and unable to compel management compliance with any of its suggestions, the Women's Bureau sought to maintain a delicate balance of criticism and praise. Its record of questionable success during these turbulent decades illustrates the difficulty of achieving voluntary improvement of industrial conditions for women.

Some employers charged the Women's Bureau with a pro-union bias. Mary Anderson, from 1920-44 the director of the bureau, and herself a former organizer for both the Boot and Shoe Workers and the National Women's Trade Union League, clearly maintained a certain loyalty to her trade union background. A Swedish immigrant whose only formal education consisted of trade union night school, Anderson, however, was an exception to her own staff. Most Women's Bureau agents possessed at least a college degree and many had finished graduate work in economics or had studied law. They were most usually from middle-class families. Despite frequent ideological differences, the average Women's Bureau investigator was more likely to feel socially comfortable in a board room than in a union hall.[1] Some bureau members belonged to management organizations such as the American Management Association and the Taylor Society.[2] Many applauded the use of paid industrial experts, hired to examine factory conditions scientifically to determine the most efficient means of operation.[3] Despite open union sympathies and ties, which included a founding role in the American Federation of Government Employees,[4] even Mary Anderson formed personal friendships with employers. Josephine Roche, President of the Rocky Mountain Coal Company, exchanged a long series of friendly first-name letters with Mary Anderson, discussing apartments and vacation plans as

well as attempts to improve working conditions.[5] Also, Alvin Dodd, President of the American Management Association, addressed messages to Anderson, "Dearest Mary."[6]

The new law setting up the Women's Bureau did not compel employers to cooperate in any way. Those who did won bureau praise. Many published studies echo the tone of the thanks registered in *Bulletin 30* [11, p. 37]:

> Too much credit can hardly be given to the manufacturers whose cooperation made it possible to get this information. They permitted agents of the Women's Bureau to interview their employees during work hours and gave much assistance in securing information from pay rolls.

Field agents reporting back to Washington cited the names of particularly helpful employers.[7] Just as frequently, however, bureau file reports noted confrontations. Despite bureau assurances of confidentiality, many firms wrote the Women's Bureau expressing fear that the government agency would take advantage of their cooperation and misuse divulged information.[8] In 1927, Ethel Erickson wrote a long letter to Mary Anderson reporting a "stormy session" with James Dougherty, Director of Industrial Relations at General Motors. Dougherty at first refused to sanction Erickson's visits to local plants as an agent of the Women's Bureau, as he said he had a written agreement with Secretary of Labor James Davis that all labor statistics given the federal government would be cleared through the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Erickson reported[9]

> His secretary spent almost an hour hunting up this correspondence (with Davis), and in the meantime he had a grand time giving vent to his opinion of all studies and investigations and those of the government in particular. He did not offer to let me see the correspondence, and after much hedging admitted that perhaps our present study was entirely different from the data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and at least was harmless....

Clearly the explanation that the Women's Bureau acted either as a spokesperson for labor or for management presents an excessively simple characterization of the bureau's complicated position. The decades here considered, moreover, were ones of crisis for women workers, the first a crisis of deprivation caused by national depression, the second a crisis of dislocation, responsibility, and unplanned opportunity caused by the urgent labor needs of World War II. The boom-and-bust cycles of job opportunity for women seen during these decades provide an interesting framework for examination of the interactions between management and a government agency as a kind of self-appointed *Ombudsman* for women workers.

The cooperation during the 1920s between the Women's Bureau and industry which resulted in dozens of jointly funded investigations declined by 1930, as the Depression pressured both workers

and owners. Bureau agents who during the early 1920s had helped manufacturers retool cafeterias and locker rooms, make time-motion studies, or survey female workers' opinions, expressed growing concern about the increasingly desperate position of women in the labor force.[10]

The Depression reinforced Anderson's ideas abour her agency's proper role:

> [There] are still so many employers who sit back until compelled by legislation or by a strike...that we must keep on discussing and criticizing instead of giving praise or the large numbers of women employed under poor working conditions will be forgotten.[11]

During the 1930s, bureau agents continued to travel, investigate, and consult with business. Often they returned home deeply affected by the sufferings of "forgotten" women workers. They saw women faint from hunger in factories and heard some threaten suicide. They sat in home after home transcribing stories of distress and bewilderment. "Women," concluded one worried bureau official, "simply can't go on like this."[12] The bureau found sweatshop conditions common throughout the country. Southern Appalachian mountain women, working steadily on piece-work items such as hand-made blouses and quilts, averaged a yearly income of $52 [9]. Mexican-American women in Texas sometimes received less than 5 cents a day [14 and 7]. In 1934, the bureau announced plans to lobby for both federal and state minimum wage laws and condemned, "unscrupulous employers, [who] by paying much less than a living wage, have had their industries subsidized by community and federal relief funds."[13] The minimum wage was one bureau solution to bad industrial conditions. Split-shifts and redirected industry were other, more short-term and specific, suggestions to help women workers.[14] When the Boston Chamber of Commerce requested its advice on ways to reemploy women, the bureau suggested that regional industries retool. New England merchants had in early days built a whaling industry. When that disappeared, they had build a cotton industry. Since the cotton and textiles industries had begun to migrate to the South, New England industries should once again reassess opportunities. The bureau argued that potential markets could be found for low- to medium-priced canned fish in all parts of the nation where fresh fish was not attainable. Many immigrant groups, such as the Portuguese, had settled in New England, bringing with them long fish-processing experience. Many kinds of fish which were not in demand as fresh or frozen fish could give New England a potential advantage over Alaskan and West Coast seasonal canning operations. The bureau advocated that some fish canning be of salt and spiced fish products: "Because this is primarily a hand industry and requires ingenuity and infinite care in preparation of products, it is a skilled woman's industry" [10]. This survey of job opportunities for women in New

England was, as were most bureau studies written during the Depression, plausible and imaginative, even though some suggestions relied on stereotypical notions of "women's work." The Boston Chamber of Commerce recommended "careful study" of the bureau's report. The bureau, of course, could not demand acceptance.

World War II erased the need for bureau studies suggesting elaborate schemes for the reemployment of women. During the 1930s with millions desperate for work, federal officials spent little time drawing up plans for labor mobilization. As late as 1941, unemployment remained high. The vast requirements of World War II punctured the myth of endless labor supplies but found both the federal government and industry unprepared to recruit women effectively.

The Women's Bureau sought to aid employers in making the adjustments to female labor demanded by national mobilization. Bureau agents sought especially to advise employers in heavy industries such as shipbuilding, who had before the war managed traditionally male work forces. They often kept seven-day workweeks, as they traveled throughout the country as consultants discussing with employers proper kinds of seating, particular health hazards posed to women by such chemicals as lead oxide, the effect of pneumatic tools and arc welding on women's health, or necessary clothing regulations for women doing heavy physical work. Bureau field agents formally divided the task of securing technical advice and expertise in the requirements of a particular war industry.[15] When in 1942, War Department officials suddenly ordered the ordnance depots to employ work forces composed of at least two-thirds women, Ethel Erickson, a self-taught ordnance expert, traveled to every major defense site to offer counsel during the necessary adjustment period. She and other Women's Bureau agents sympathized with the problems employers faced in hiring and transferring women to defense industry. Erickson, for instance, agreed with the objections of foremen and employers in ordnance depots that older women could not adequately perform their assigned tasks. She reported, "They have been slow, not adjusted well, done considerable complaining, and, as I have watched them work, I have felt that the complaints of the foremen have been justified."[16] Erickson, however, supported bureau statements which argued that the blame did not lie, necessarily, with the women workers themselves. Indeed, the bureau noted, war work certainly caused dislocation and readjustments to thousands of women workers as well as to industries and employers. In 1941, defense demands withdrew vital materials from certain production areas and temporarily threw women out of jobs all over the country. War work pushed 11,000 women out of employment in the Pennsylvania silk mills, 16,000 from hosiery mills with the curtailment of silk production, over 30,000 in radio, and 41,000 in the curtailment of auto manufacture. Most of these women reentered

the labor force, but the first six months of declared warfare brought great hardship to thousands. Many found themselves forced to move to areas where new war industries demanded the services of women. Thousands of Philadelphia textile workers transferred to new war plants in Elkton, Maryland. Even in areas which became centers of war production women faced temporary unemployment, because most did not have union seniority.[17]

Too, the Women's Bureau noted acidly, since 1939 it had warned employers and government agencies that training programs for women should be immediately begun. The bureau had accurately predicted that, unless trained, thousands of women would contribute enthusiasm but not industrial skills to a major war effort. As early as 1939, Mary Anderson decreed that her agents shelve other studies and begin to systematically survey the demands for women's services that would take place in new war industries and to analyze how industry could shift already employed women most advantageously.[18] By and large, government officials and industrialists greeted those initial surveys condescendingly and argued that the large numbers of unemployed men in the nation would provide a huge pool for war production.

In its wartime relations with employers, the bureau continued to occupy its established, but precarious, position of invited critic. Bureau observers charged that in many war plants women did men's jobs and received women's wages. The title of the job might be changed in order to pay women a different wage than men, but a title change did not change the nature of the work. A woman who operated a speed lathe by day would under this system receive a lower wage than her male counterpart who operated the same lathe on the night shift. Another ploy the bureau condemned was payment of laborer's wages and assignment of supervisor's duties. May Bagwell, investigating war work on the Penn Central Railroad asked the company personnel director about the women she observed directing the work of groups of pipefitters, machinists, and icers for air-conditioned cars. He answered, Bagwell reported, "That this could not be the arrangement, as no women could be gang leaders under their agreement with the union. Many, however, are evidently doing the work."[19]

The efforts of the Women's Bureau to fulfill one of its designated functions of collecting information and offering advice led to complicated relationships with employers, involving both veiled clashes and genuine cooperation.

The bureau, as a government champion of women workers, was fully aware of the fact that it could not afford to alienate management completely. No company had to let the bureau see records, talk with workers, or even walk through its doors. During decades when even Secretaries of Labor, much less company owners, repeated the myth that women worked for pin money, the fact that Mary Anderson and her staff achieved limited success in persuading

some employers to supply proper working conditions and fair wages to women provides an illustration of the uses of indirect power.[20] It certainly provides a clear illustration of its limits.

NOTES

1. See interview files kept by Caroline Manning, Ethel Best, Ethel Erickson, unsigned...WB, NA, 1926-35; Ethel Best, handwritten memo, 1926, Bx. 47, Records of the Women's Bureau (R.G. 86), National Archives, Washington D.C. (hereafter WB, NA). For a detailed examination of bureau personnel, see [5].

2. "Staff Qualifications," 11 November 1933: Notes, handwritten, included in folder with pamphlets, WB, NA.

3. See statements WB, NA, Bx. 70-77; also the tone of advice given in bulletins: "A carefully worked out policy of employment management is one of the best ways of securing labor and maintaining satisfactory relationships" [13, p. 40].

4. Mary Anderson to Mary Van Kleeck, Mary Anderson Papers, Folder 23, 31 October 1932. Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA. (hereafter SL); Anderson to Van Kleeck, Anderson Papers, Folder 23, 31 October 1932, SL.

5. Miss Roche defies simple categorization as merely a sympathetic employer. Scion of a wealthy family, she did indeed run the family business. She also earned a M.A. in social work, worked for Colorado Judge Ben Lindsey, and in 1934 came to Washington as FDR's Assistant Secretary of the Treasury. For further biographical information see Mary Van Kleeck Papers, Sophia Smith Mss. Collection, Smith College, Bx. 4 (hereafter SS).

6. Dodd to Anderson, Anderson Papers, Folder 34, 23 November 1942. SL.

7. See for representative letters, Ethel Best to Mary Anderson, 12 November 1926, WB, NA, Bx. 47; Caroline Manning, Memo to Staff, 27 November 1926, WB, NA, Bx. 47.

8. Emphasized in staff instructions: see memo signed by Assistant Director, Bertha Nienburg, 19 July 1935, WB, NA, Bx. 1280: "Remember the Bureau never allows the names of parties furnishing facts to be given in its reports. Thus confidence is secured, from the knowledge that in none of the reports have private interests been endangered. Through this confidence, management in this and other countries have opened their books of account, their pay rolls, and their records to the agents of the Bureau."

9. Erickson to Anderson, 26 February 1927, Bx. 46, WB, NA.

10. For summaries of specific projects during the 1920s see *Annual Reports* of the Women's Bureau, 1920-29, and the Women's Bureau *Annual Reports* included within the *Annual Report of the*

Secretary of the Department of Labor (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1925-45); Ethel Best, notes (handwritten and typed) marked, "Outlines for Survey 65," 12 December 1926, WB, NA, Bx. 47; Ethel Erickson, interview with me, 6 January 1976, Washington, D.C. (hereafter, Erickson interview). See also blueprints found in "Posters and Charts Files," WB, NA.

11. "Address by Mary Anderson at the Annual Conference of the National Association of Manufacturers," 5 October 1926, Bx. 69, WB, NA.

12. Mary Robinson, memo, "The Return of the Sweatshop" (typescript), c. June 1933, WB, NA.

13. Radio Talk (typescript), "The Role of the Women's Bureau in the Recovery Program," 17 May 1934, radio script file, "341-S-130," WB, NA.

14. See Ethel Best, "Memo for Split-Shift Study," 15 May 1933, "Schedule Files for *Bulletin 116*," WB, NA; and [12].

15. Bertha Nienburg, "War History Statement," 26 May 1945, Office of the Secretary, Information Division, World War II Administrative Histories of Program Series II, Drafts, Bx. 10, Nienburg to Secretary of Labor Perkins (R.G. 174), Perkins, NA. (hereafter Nienburg War History); the bureau schedule files for its wartime bulletins "Schedule Files - Bulletins 189-211" include everything from architectural blueprints of factories to medical reports on the ability of women to lift heavy metal cores, WB, NA.

16. "Excerpts from Miss Manning's Notes to Field Agents," Opal Gooden to Mary Cannon, 28 April 1943, "International Files," Bx. 913, WB, NA.

17. Nienburg War History, 2; also Report of Senator O'Mahoney on the Work of the Women's Bureau in US Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record*, 77th Cong., 1st Sess., V. 87 Part 8, 8189, 23 October 1941.

18. Nienburg War History, pp. 5-10.

19. Ethel Erickson, Field Report (confidential) 18 December 1942, Buick Motor Aircraft Engine Co., Melrose Park, Chicago. "Regional Field Offices Files," WB, NA; May Bagwell to Mary Anderson, memo, 21 August 1943, "Field Office Files," WB, NA.

20. Records of the Secretaries of Labor, R.G. 174, NA (especially the Doak, Wilson, and Perkins Files), and [3).

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1. Henry George, *On the Condition of Labor* (New York: 1893).

2. James Kennealy, *Women and American Trade Unions* (Quebec: Eden Press, 1978).

3. George Martin, *Madame Secretary: Frances Perkins* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).

4. Valerie Oppenheimer, *The Female Labor Force in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976).

5. Judith Sealander, "The Women's Bureau, 1920-1950: Federal Reaction to Female Wage Earning," Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1977.

6. US President, *Economic Report of the President* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1973).

7. US, Women's Bureau, Bulletin 113, *Employment Fluctuations and Unemployment of Women, 1928-1931* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1933).

8. ________, Bulletin 294, *Handbook on Women Workers* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1936),

9. ________, Bulletin 128, *The Potential Earning Power of Southern Mountaineers Handicraft* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1934).

10. ________, Bulletin 140, *Reemployment of New England Women in Private Industry* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1936), pp. 3-45.

11. ________, Bulletin 30, *The Share of Wage-Earning Women in Family Support* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1923).

12. ________, Bulletin 116, *A Study of a Change From One Shift of 9 Hours to Two Shifts of 6 Hours Each* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1933).

13. ________, Bulletin 24, *Women in Maryland Industries* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1922).

14. ________, Bulletin 126, *Women in Texas Industries* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1935).