Introduction: A Century of Women’s ILO

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“In general the problems of women workers are indistinguishable from those of men”, the International Labour Organization (ILO) announced in 1964—yet additional measures were still required because of women’s “manifold responsibilities, particularly those relating to their maternity and motherhood...[and] the evolution of their civic, economic and social status”.1 From the founding of the ILO in 1919, women sought a voice in ILO’s deliberations, and they wanted to use the ILO for advancing their own agendas.

As we celebrate the centennial of the ILO, it is time to consider the past and present of what we have named ‘Women’s ILO’ with regard to a shifting global political economy, the twists and turns of women’s movements, and the changing nature of work itself. This collection addresses a century of ILO engagement with women’s work, gender equity, and gender policy in an unevenly developing world and a century of intertwined encounters of women and the ILO. It illuminates both the interaction between the ILO and international women’s networks and the history of women at the ILO in their capacities as staff, delegates and advisers. It uncovers a history far richer and engaging than previously recognized—a history that is central for thinking about the boundaries of feminism, the uneven advancement of gender equity, and the significant role that women experts and activists have played in creating a more humane world of work. We explore the gendered dimensions and dynamics of international labour law forged by the ILO and the resulting debates, negotiations, and practices in various local contexts. The original research presented in the fourteen, roughly chronological, chapters in this volume show the centrality of the ILO to the production of labour standards—and the difficulty of implementing policies on gender and work in light of an unequal distribution of power and resources among nations, regions, and classes. Written by historians, legal scholars, and social scientists, the chapters offer an interdisciplinary approach that should appeal to academic communities and policy experts alike, as well as to non-specialist readers interested in the ILO.

The past and present of the ‘Women’s ILO’ is a topic hitherto outside the core of the new scholarship on women’s and labour internationalism,

women’s transnational networks, global labour history, and gendered global governance. Scholarship on women and the ILO, and the history of the ILO and gender, has developed sporadically over the past decades, while growing research on the history of the ILO has paid scarce attention to the role of women and gender. One milestone in this regard was the overarching institutional narrative offered in Social Justice for Women: The International Labor Organization and Women (1990), an account written by insiders: Carol Riegelman Lubin, who worked for the ILO between 1935 and 1952, and Anne Winslow, who served in various capacities with the United Nations (UN). Like other books authored by participants, this study lacks the wider frameworks and critical perspective that historical and interdisciplinary scholarship provides.

Since then, more specialized articles have begun to address the gendered history of the ILO. In this Introduction, we build on ongoing and existing scholarship, including the writings by our contributors, to offer a global and gendered analysis of a century of international labour policy.

Women’s ILO advances our knowledge in four important directions. First, the collection combines an intersectional with a transnational or global approach. It not only enhances thinking about the relationship between gender and class in the history of women, women’s work, and the ILO; it also investigates how global labour policies both addressed and neglected such issues as race, development and other inequalities in a worldwide context. Second, while documenting how the ILO over time has broadened its conceptualizations of what constitutes work in a ‘women-friendly’ manner, this collection also considers why and how the ILO has refused to address important topics related

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2 Relevant titles that address the ILO from a gendered perspective include Whitworth 1994; Berkovitch 1999; Prügl 1999; Vosko 2010; Fonow and Franzway 2011. Recent work on women’s and labour internationalism, women’s transnational networks, global labour history, and global governance that do not provide a systematic analysis of the ILO includes Lucassen 2006; Reilly 2009; Hawkesworth 2012; Caglar, Prügl, and Zwingel 2013; Sluga 2013b.

3 Van Daele et al. 2010; Maul 2012; Kott and Droux 2013.

4 Lubin and Winslow 1990. More recent introductory overviews are Boris and Jensen 2013 and Boris and Zimmermann 2016.

5 Lubin and Winslow 1990; see also Jain 2005; Fraser and Tinker 1984.

6 Individual contributions on women and the ILO, written by scholars other than the editors of the current volume, have appeared in a number of recent issues of journals and various anthologies. These studies include Thébaud 2006 and 2014; Schmidt 2007; Wikander 2010; Natchkova and Schoeni 2013; Cobble 2015.

7 Too often these approaches appear to be detached from each other. See Coogan-Gehr 2011; Hancock 2016; Schmidt 2007a.

8 For the term ‘women-friendly’, see Hernes 1987.