
During the past decades hundreds of books and articles have been written on recent changes in the position of married women. Thistle’s book is not special in this way. However, the author focuses not only on the growing numbers of American women who left their homes to work for pay, but tries to connect their new role on the labour market to changes in women’s role in the household.

Thistle starts with women’s entrée into the workforce in an earlier phase in American history, when the work of men transformed from self-employed into work for wages. Then, women were exempted from paid work and relegated to the tasks of housework, whereas the recent changes freed women from many of their household duties in favour of paid work. The author stresses that these changes did not affect all groups in the same way; throughout the book she pays explicit and systematic attention to the differences in the position of black and white women and of women of different educational levels.

The main concept to analyse the changes is ‘support for women’. Thistle argues that in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century the greatest part of women’s support came from men. Men brought in their wages, while their wives stayed home to care for the family, although this arrangement was less strict for black women of whom many worked for wages as they had no husbands to support them. This gender division of labour was underpinned by customs and laws. In the course of the twentieth century, women’s household work was gradually made easier by the spread of household appliances and ready-made consumer goods. After the Second World War more and more women chafed against their confinement to the home and demanded the right to make use of new labour market opportunities offered by the flourishing economy. But not only women were eager to enter the workforce. According to Thistle, they were also forced to do so because men and the government were no longer willing to give lifelong support to the household tasks of married women. The author points to the diminishing support for married women by the state,
although it remains unclear how extensive this support was in the first place, and how and in what ways it changed or disappeared to the detriment of the role of housewife.

More important in her argument is the withdrawal of support for women's household duties by men. The rising divorce rate is seen as one of the indications of this unwillingness. The rising number of poor female-headed households shows that many women must do without financial support from men; black women and women with little schooling are overrepresented among these single parents.

But the main sign of the disappearance of men's support for women's household tasks is found in the fact that married women nowadays earn enough money to pay for their own upkeep. In the book these women are seen as 'supported by their own earnings'. Thistle presents a number of tables and figures in which she compares the sources of support for women in the years 1970 and 2000: own income, income from husbands and other income. She concludes that “women's own earnings rather than marriage with access to men's income, now provide the central source of support for most African American and white women” (p. 121). Surprisingly, she does not point to the fact that married women with a job are part of dual earning households, and that husbands also contribute to the family income. Only on pages 146–152 we find several tables in which the total family income is presented, for married and unmarried black and white mothers of different educational levels. There it becomes clear that the total family income of married mothers, both black and white, is much higher than that of single mothers, and that husbands contribute about two times as much money to the family income as wives. Therefore, it is misleading to say that married women are no longer supported by men: women also profit from their husband’s earnings.

The book offers a lot of detailed and interesting information on the changes in the position of different groups of women, but the focus on equality of labour market participation between the sexes, with diminishing financial support for women as a result, is not attended by an analysis of what has happened in the home. The author pays little attention to family dynamics; the consequences of the changes for children are left out completely. In the concluding chapters, Thistle looks for solutions for the plight of women. There she advocates that, like in European welfare states,