Women and the ASA: Degendering Organizational Structures and Processes, 1964-1974.¹

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Contrary to the assumptions of most sociological and feminist writing, Joan Acker has argued that "organizational structure is not gender neutral" (1990, 139). Does this assertion pertain to professional associations? If so, how and to what extent does it apply? And how do changes occur in professional associations' gendered structures and processes?

Reviewing the history of the development of professions, Carr-Saunders observed in his classic study that as soon as a profession emerges, members try to form a professional association to serve their common interests including establishing qualifications which distinguish between them and "unqualified persons," maintaining a standard of professional conduct, and raising the status and remuneration of the profession (7-11, 495). Although there has been considerable debate within the sociology of professions concerning the structural and attitudinal attributes of professions, there is general agreement that associations are a necessary part of professionalization (Goode; Bucher and Strauss; Wilensky; Gilb; Hall 1968, 1979; Moore; Friedson; Sarpatti-Larson). Furthermore, sociologists and historians have documented that once professional associations are created, they tend to be characterized by continuous change (Bloom, Carr-Saunders, Gilb, Glazer, Levine, Meiksins).

Scholars who have written generally about professional associations have not discussed their gendered structures and processes.² In the 1980s, Judith Lorber and Cynthia Epstein published outstanding studies focused specifically on women in professions. In her study of women physicians, Lorber touches briefly on women's place in the American Medical Association. She notes,
As early as 1904, Dr. Bertha Van Hoosen felt that the women who attended the American Medical Association’s annual meeting were isolated and ineffectual. She said, “A generation earlier, women doctors were on the outside standing together. Now they were on the inside sitting alone. Their influence was nil” (23; quoted in Walsh).

Epstein devotes a chapter of her book on women lawyers to women’s exclusion from and marginal position in lawyer’s professional associations. She reports:

Although women were eligible to become lawyers in 1886, the ABA [founded in 1878] admitted women only in 1918....The prestigious Association of the Bar of the City of New York, founded in 1879, did not admit women until 1937, and New York’s Queens County Bar Association, founded in 1876, did not admit women until 1960 (248)....

Permission to enter the bar association did not mean enthusiastic reception; up until the 1970s and into the 1980s, women were barred from full participation at decision-making levels, and they were seldom elected to prestigious committees or to executive posts. It was only in February 1981 that a woman was elected to the twenty-three member board of governors of the American Bar Association. No woman has chaired its policy-setting House of Delegates, nor have any of the association’s 104 presidents or other officers been women (254).

The historic and continuing absence of women as officers of the leading medical and bar associations may be attributed to the under-representation of women within these professions. This can not be said for teachers’ organizations. At a national level, these associations, which have been and continue to be comprised primarily of women, are also led primarily by men.

Although Lorber, Epstein and Gilb describe women’s status within professional associations as marginal, they do not suggest that the structure and processes of professional associations are gendered. To say that an organization is gendered means, Acker explains, “that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine. Gender is not an addition to ongoing processes, conceived as gender neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of those processes...” (146; cf. Acker 1988). Although the patterns and degree of gender divisions vary greatly from one organization to another, Acker points out that “men are almost always in the highest positions of power” (146).

Examining feminist perspectives on gender inequality including that of Acker, Amy Wharton suggests that existing approaches could be improved by “linking gender as a structural property of social organization and as a property of actors” and conceptualizing “capitalism and gender from a perspective that recognizes these social relations as both a motivator of action and a property of structural position” (373, 375, 386; cf. Acker 1988; Laslett and Brenner; West...