

THE GLASS ESCALATOR, REVISITED:

Gender Inequality in Neoliberal Times, SWS Feminist Lecturer

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When women work in male-dominated professions, they encounter a “glass ceiling” that prevents their ascension into the top jobs. Twenty years ago, I introduced the concept of the “glass escalator,” my term for the advantages that men receive in the so-called women’s professions (nursing, teaching, librarianship, and social work), including the assumption that they are better suited than women for leadership positions. In this article, I revisit my original analysis and identify two major limitations of the concept: (1) it fails to adequately address intersectionality; in particular, it fails to theorize race, sexuality, and class; and (2) it was based on the assumptions of traditional work organizations, which are undergoing rapid transformation in our neoliberal era. The glass escalator assumes stable employment, career ladders, and widespread support for public institutions (e.g., schools and libraries)—which no longer characterize the job market today. Drawing on my studies of the oil and gas industry and the retail industry, I argue that new concepts are needed to understand workplace gender inequality in the 21st century.

Keywords: *gender inequality in the workplace; glass escalator; glass ceiling; neoliberalism*

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In 1992, I published an article titled “The Glass Escalator” about the “hidden advantages” that men receive in predominately female professions. This article has been reprinted in dozens of textbooks and cited over 500 times in scholarly articles, and there are even flashcards about it.¹ Although I am proud of this acclaim, receiving the SWS Feminist Lecturer Award gives me the opportunity to revisit that work. The world of work has changed considerably in the past twenty years, and so has my understanding of gender inequality. Thanks largely to the scholarship of a new generation of gender sociologists, I now believe that the concept is of limited use in explaining men’s economic advantages over women. In this article, I attempt to further specify the contexts in which the glass escalator applies.

I will begin my discussion by defining the glass escalator and summarizing my original argument. Then I will focus on two major limitations of the concept as I see it today. First, I will argue that the concept lacks an analysis of intersectionality. The glass escalator was based on the experiences of straight, white, middle-class men. I will review three studies that demonstrate the importance of race, sexuality, and class for understanding gender inequality in the workplace, and that have transformed the way I think about the glass escalator. Second, I will argue that the concept is limited because it is based on traditional assumptions about work organizations, such as the expectation of stable employment, bureaucratic hierarchies, and widespread support for public institutions. These are no longer taken-for-granted features of work organizations. Jobs have become increasingly flexible, project-based, and temporary. The metaphor of the glass escalator may no longer apply in this new economic context. I argue that new concepts are needed to understand gender inequality in the 21st century. I will conclude with some thoughts for a new feminist agenda for the sociology of work.

THE GLASS ESCALATOR

When women work in male-dominated professions, they encounter a “glass ceiling” that prevents their ascension into the top jobs. Twenty years ago, I introduced the concept of the “glass escalator,” my term for the advantages that men receive in the so-called women’s professions (nursing, teaching, librarianship, and social work).

When I was working on that project (that culminated in my 1995 book *Still a Man’s World*), many sociologists argued that women’s disadvantages in the workplace were the result of their token status. Very few

women occupied top positions, and those who did experienced increased visibility, role encapsulation, and boundary heightening, which marginalized them and excluded them from positions of power and responsibility. The major hurdle facing women aspiring to leadership positions, according to this perspective, was numerical rarity, not gender discrimination.

The experiences of men in the so-called women's professions offered a powerful critique of this theory of tokenism. I showed that numerical rarity does not have negative consequences for men in these fields. Because men and qualities associated with masculinity are more highly valued than qualities associated with women and femininity, men in nursing, teaching, librarianship, and social work tend to benefit from their token status.

Although I was focusing on men in predominantly female professions, my goal was to understand men's advantages in the workplace in general, regardless of where they worked. In my opinion, too much attention had been paid to addressing questions like "What are the deficiencies of women?" and "What are the barriers to women?"; not enough attention was being paid to questions like "What is so great about men?" and "What are the advantages that men receive?" I argued that the mechanisms that privileged men in the workplace would be more apparent in these jobs, but that they would be common throughout the labor market.

My research showed that in predominantly female professions, men were assumed to be more competent and better leaders than women. As a result, many were drawn into higher-paying specialties and administrative positions. Supervisors, coworkers, clients, and the men themselves colluded in this reproduction of masculine privilege. I labeled this pattern the "glass escalator" (to contrast it with the "glass ceiling" experienced by women in male-dominated occupations).²

Some men did encounter discrimination in these professions, especially if they were employed in specialties closely associated with children, such as kindergarten teaching or children's librarianship. Negative stereotypes about male sexuality aroused suspicions about their possible motives, including pedophilia. Such discrimination is harmful, I argued, but since these job specialties tended to be lower paying, the consequence was to push men up to higher-paying and more prestigious specialties. Those men who wanted to stay in the most feminine-identified specialties had to struggle to stay in place—hence the metaphor of the moving glass escalator.

The overall patterns of gender inequality in the four professions I studied have not changed much in the intervening twenty years. Table 1 shows the distribution of men in nursing, teaching, librarianship, and social work from 1975 to 2011.

TABLE 1: Men in the “Women’s Professions”: Number (in Thousands) and Distribution of Men Employed in the Occupations, Selected Years

<i>Profession</i>	1975	1980	1990	2002	2011
Registered nurses					
No. of men	28	46	92	164	208
% men	3.0	3.5	5.5	7.1	8.9
Elementary school teachers					
No. of men	194	225	223	398	463*
% men	14.6	16.3	14.8	17.0	18.3
Librarians					
No. of men	34	27	32	38	21
% men	18.9	14.8	16.7	18.3	13.8
Social workers					
No. of men	116	134	179	220	141
% men	39.2	35.0	31.8	26.0	18.4

NOTE: Year 1975, 1980, and 1990 data from C.L. Williams (1995). Year 2002 data from Bureau of Labor Statistics (2004). Year 2011 data from <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat39.pdf> (accessed July 2012).

*2011 data on elementary school teachers includes middle school teachers.

As Table 1 indicates, the percentage of men in nursing has increased, from 5.5 percent in 1990 to 8.9 percent in 2011. Although this increase represents a doubling in the number of men in the profession—the topic of a front-page *New York Times* article (Dewan and Gebeloff 2012)—the percentage of men today is, in fact, similar to what it was in 1890 (9%). Nursing remains a highly gender-segregated profession. Regarding the other three professions I studied, Table 1 shows that the percentage of men in librarianship and social work has declined over the past 20 years. It is unclear if the representation of men has changed in elementary school teaching, since middle school teachers are now included in the statistics.

Just as gender segregation persists, so does the wage gap, with men enjoying an income advantage over women in each of these professions (see table 2). The income difference is not large, but that there is a difference at all is notable. (Information for male librarians is missing because the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) does not report income for jobs with fewer than 50,000 workers; nevertheless, one can deduce from the numbers that men make more than women.) Thus, the general patterns of gender inequality in these professions are similar to what I observed when I first explored the issue.

Since the original article was published, the concept of the glass escalator has been evaluated and analyzed by several other researchers. The

TABLE 2: Median Weekly Earnings of Full-Time Professional Workers by Sex and Ratio of Female–Male Earnings, 1990 and 2011, in 2011 dollars^a

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Both</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Ratio</i>
Registered nurses				
1990	\$1057	\$1070	\$1057	0.99
2011	\$1039	\$1081	\$1034	0.96
Elementary school teachers				
1990	\$902	\$999	\$892	0.89
2011 ^b	\$974	\$1022	\$933	0.91
Librarians				
1990	\$850	— ^c	\$833	— ^c
2011	\$850	— ^c	\$813	— ^c
Social workers				
1990	\$773	\$840	\$746	0.88
2011	\$817	\$902	\$798	0.88

SOURCE: C.L. Williams (1995, 82); <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat39.pdf>, accessed July 3, 2012.

a. 1990 dollars were converted to 2011 dollars via www.dollartimes.com/calculators/inflation.htm

b. Includes middle school.

c. The Labor Department does not report income averages for base sample sizes consisting of fewer than 50,000 individuals.

basic mechanism has been verified with quantitative studies, and qualitative work has shown that workplace interactions in a variety of occupations are consistent with what I found (e.g., Budig 2002; Hultin 2003; Maume 1999; Snyder and Green 2008). To say the least, I am extremely gratified by this scholarly confirmation.

However, a number of studies have re-oriented and refined my thinking about the glass escalator, and to these studies I now turn. The first set of challenges emerged from research on intersectionality.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE GLASS ESCALATOR

When I originally formulated the concept of the glass escalator, I realized that it did not apply to all men. Gay men and racial/ethnic minority men, in particular, seemed to be excluded from the benefits of the glass escalator. But I didn't theorize that exclusion—I merely mentioned that the experiences of gay men and nonwhite men were “different” and left it at that. This is an example of what Adrienne Rich (1979) would have called “white solipsism,” the notion that white experience

is the norm, the average, and the model for all other groups. To the extent that others vary from the white norm, they are considered “exceptions” that require separate studies to understand their “differences.” Clearly, the concept of intersectionality had yet to influence my thinking on workplace inequality.

Intersectionality is an approach to studying gender that takes race/ethnicity, class, and sexuality into account. Many versions of intersectionality have been developed in the past twenty years (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Choo and Ferree 2010; Collins 2000; Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz 2013). Common to all is the notion that gender is not an abstract and timeless essence, but an embodied and historical practice that is structured by other forms of inequality. Applying an intersectional framework involves at least two steps: first, sociologists who study gender are encouraged to investigate the experiences of groups who are marginalized by race, sexuality, and class in order to avoid the “unwarranted universalizing of white, middle-class American women’s experiences” (Choo and Ferree 2010, 132). Second, we are called upon to explain how the experiences of marginality are produced by the same institutional forces that privilege those in the center. In other words, we must show how social privilege is gained at the expense of social marginality. As Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall write, “what makes an analysis intersectional . . . is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power” (2013, 11). Our task, then, is to explain how power operates through socially constructed and historically specific binary oppositions.

Practicing intersectionality is hard. It requires sociologists to overcome our “ingrained habits of reductionism” (Choo and Ferree 2010, 147). The second step is especially difficult: as Choo and Ferree (2010, 145) point out, it is “easier to include multiply-marginalized groups than to analyze the relationships that affect them intersectionally.” A further complication is the fact that scholarship on race, class, sexuality, and gender developed as separate literatures with unique histories and politics, and dominant cultural beliefs treat them as “distinct systems of difference and inequality” even though they intersect in social relations (Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz 2013, 3). Consequently, intersectionality scholars may feel trapped into utilizing the language of separate systems to analyze essentially intertwined processes.

My discussion of intersectionality and the glass escalator reflects but does not resolve these conundrums, as I discuss race, sexuality, and class separately. This is not a failure of the studies I reference; each is lodged

in an intersectional framework. My goal in separating the discussion into these analytic categories is to illuminate how the experiences of specifically marginalized groups (black men in nursing, gay and lesbian teachers, working-class transmen) can further refine the study of the glass escalator. I do so not to reify these identity categories, which are “fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 11). Rather, my goal is to show how the glass escalator depends not only on gender inequality but on the exclusion and marginalization of those oppressed on the basis of race, sexuality, and class. This exercise of bringing the marginalized into the center, I hope, will illustrate the power of an intersectional analysis and specify the limitations of the glass escalator concept.

Black Men in Nursing

Perhaps the best example of the power of the intersectional perspective is the work of Adia Harvey Wingfield. In her article “Racializing the Glass Escalator” (2009), Harvey Wingfield examined the experiences of black men in nursing. She found no evidence of the glass escalator in their careers. Unlike white men, black men nurses are often seen as less skilled than women nurses. Many of the white men I interviewed said that patients confused them with doctors, but few black men encountered this assumption; they were often mistaken for orderlies or janitors. Even patients who understood that they were registered nurses treated these men with suspicion. She describes one white man who prevented his wife from receiving an injection from a black male nurse—an example that reflects sexual stereotypes about black men. Furthermore, Harvey Wingfield found that behaviors that denote “leadership” ability in white men are interpreted as “menacing” behavior from black men. Evidently, black men in nursing do not experience warm and congenial relationships with their white women colleagues, nor do they share gendered bonds with their male supervisors that ease their mobility into higher status positions. Instead, they face discrimination in the nursing profession that stymies their career development. In the predominantly white institutions where her respondents worked, they are not pressured to move up into higher-paid and more prestigious specialties.

Harvey Wingfield’s work demonstrates that we cannot fully understand the mechanism of the glass escalator without an understanding of racism. The experience of black men nurses is not simply “different” from that of white men—they are two sides of the same coin. Masculine hegemony is

based on white privilege. As Harvey Wingfield concludes, the glass escalator relies on the existence of racial inequality, and will persist as long as racism persists.

Gay and Lesbian Teachers

The same is true for homophobia: The exclusion of gay men from the glass escalator is not merely an exception to the rule; it is part of the process of reproducing hegemonic masculinity.

For this insight, I am indebted to Catherine Connell (2012), whose work on gay and lesbian teachers reveals how the glass escalator depends on homophobia. I did my research on men in nontraditional occupations from the early 1980s to the early 1990s. During this decade, there were very few legal protections for LGBT workers. These were the years of the Reagan/Bush presidencies; it was the height of the AIDS epidemic in the United States; and gays and lesbians were banned from many jobs, including those in the military (it wasn't until December 1993 that the U.S. military permitted *closeted* gays and lesbians to serve). Thus the concept of the glass escalator was developed during the heyday of the closet, and its very existence may depend upon it.

To reveal the impact of homophobia on professional careers, Connell studied gay and lesbian teachers in two settings—in California and in Texas. These two states have vastly different levels of legal protection, political activism, and cultural acceptance of LGBT workers. She found that in contexts where homophobia is rife and institutionalized, LGBT teachers face immense pressure to engage in “passing” strategies so as not to draw attention to their sexuality. This means conforming to heteronormative appearance standards and behavior—all of which support the glass escalator. For example, lesbians may feel compelled to wear make-up to work and to defer to male authority; gay men may try to avoid the use of certain mannerisms and expressions identified as gay in the classroom or feign an interest in masculine activities like sports. Conforming to these heteronormative practices can easily push men into leadership positions and women into support roles.

What happens in a context where there are legal protections for LGBT workers? Connell shows that individual teachers may be more willing to enact and disclose their sexual identities as LGBT. Granted, gay-friendly workplaces can exact a new “homonormativity.” In a study with Patti Giuffre and Kirsten Dellinger (Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 2009), we found that “gay friendly” workplaces may accept gay and lesbian workers only if they conform to conventional gender practices. So legal protections

are not enough. Connell's work demonstrates that antidiscrimination laws in the teaching profession must be accompanied by cultural acceptance made possible through political organizing, union support, and curricular changes that are LGBT confirming. Under these conditions, I would expect the glass escalator to break down. When men and women are not expected or compelled to conform to stereotypically masculine and feminine behavior, a central pillar of the glass escalator is shaken.³

Working-Class Transmen

The four occupations I studied were middle-class jobs; consequently the glass escalator reflects that particular class location. This insight comes from Kristen Schilt (2011). Her study brings an intersectional perspective to bear on the experiences of transmen in the workplace.

The transmen that Schilt interviewed had lived and worked as women before they transitioned to living as men. Many assumed that when they made the switch they would be fired, ridiculed, and harassed. Instead, Schilt found that many transmen actually benefited at work. They experienced more authority, they were assumed to be more competent, and they received greater rewards, recognition, and economic opportunities compared to when they were women. Transwomen, in contrast, do not experience these benefits. All of this is consistent with the glass escalator.

However, not all transmen ride the glass escalator. Those who enjoyed the most workplace benefits were white and achieved the most masculine presentation of self. Other transmen either experienced no changes or else more negative treatment at their workplaces. Thus, Schilt draws our attention to the importance of embodiment in the experience of the glass escalator. Those who are unable to achieve a masculine appearance are not as accepted and may face more discrimination in the workplace.

Schilt doesn't tie this observation to social class, but following Bourdieu, I would argue that class and appearance are linked. Many middle-class occupations privilege a particular habitus—workers have to look right and sound right for the job (Williams and Connell 2010). The aesthetic requirements in these jobs can include physical attributes—such as height—as well as specific mannerisms, styles, and dispositions associated with professional work. Only those who embody the appropriate class-based aesthetic can ride the glass escalator.

Schilt also discovered that occupational context determines whether or not transmen benefit after transitioning. Those employed in retail jobs, for example, didn't accrue benefits. In this case, there was no escalator; in fact, there was no career ladder at all. These dead-end jobs offered no

opportunities for advancement, status, or authority to anyone, regardless of gender. Although she did find evidence of gender segregation in these jobs—transmen were relocated from front-of-house positions to the back room stocking jobs, for example—for the most part there was “gender equity” in the treatment of employees. Not a good kind of equality, either: Everyone was treated like crap.

The glass escalator, then, applies to only certain kinds of jobs—those that contain built-in opportunities for advancement. The concept was developed based on the experiences of middle-class professionals whose jobs offered the possibility of increasing rewards. It is grounded by class just as it is by race/ethnicity and sexuality. Intersectionality enhances our understanding of gender inequality in the workplace. Without this framework, research isn’t necessarily wrong, but it is partial. That’s what I see today when I revisit my work on the glass escalator.

WORK TRANSFORMATION AND THE GLASS ESCALATOR

In addition to being based on the experiences of middle-class, straight, white men, the glass escalator concept is based on a historically specific form of work organization. As I have noted, built into the concept are assumptions about stable employment, job hierarchies, and career ladders. Furthermore, the concept was developed during a period of widespread support for public institutions. These features no longer characterize many jobs in the labor market today—not even middle-class jobs. This raises the question of whether the glass escalator is still relevant in workplaces of the 21st century, and whether new concepts are needed to analyze gender inequality.

In traditional work organizations, workers can look forward to a lifetime of loyal service to a single employer. They are rewarded for this loyalty with promotions, raises, increased benefits, and retirement pensions. Traditional work organizations are hierarchical, with entry-level positions at the bottom. Job descriptions, organizational charts, and the labor process are set in advance and controlled by managers. The image of the traditional corporation is the massive skyscraper; inside is a rational bureaucracy (as described by Weber), with power, prestige, and income increasing at each level, up to the executive offices at the top.

This traditional model of work organizations was still very much in place when I conducted my research on the glass escalator. Workers in these four professions were expected to gain their appropriate credential

Traditional Work Organization	“Neoliberal” Work Organization
Loyalty and seniority rewarded	Flexibility and adaptability rewarded
Full-time jobs with benefits	Temporary and contingent contracts
Lifetime career	Boundary-less career
Specialized job descriptions	Project based requirements
Hierarchically organized departments	Horizontal interdisciplinary teams
Career ladders	Career maps or “I-deals”

Figure 1: Major Features of 21st-Century Work Transformation

(through state-subsidized higher education), obtain an entry-level position, and acquire on-the-job training. Through loyal service, hard work, and long hours, individuals could prove their value to their organization and get rewarded with higher pay, status, and positions of authority. In some cases, public unions supported job security and ensured that those with the most seniority would receive the most rewards.

Although these features of jobs and careers appear gender-neutral on the surface, we know that this traditional organizational form is biased in favor of men (Acker 1990; Williams 2001). Rewarding uninterrupted devotion to work implicitly discriminates against women, who typically have competing family obligations that they are forced to accommodate. Furthermore, managers draw on gendered stereotypes when developing organizational charts and job descriptions, which reward characteristics associated with men and masculinity, and devalue ones associated with femininity. The result is the glass ceiling for women and the glass escalator for men. These metaphors are successful because they can be easily imagined inside that sturdy skyscraper.

This traditional model of work is increasingly anachronistic. In the past thirty years or so, organizations have undergone downsizing, restructuring, globalization, and computerization (DiMaggio 2001; Kalleberg 2000). Referred to under the heading of “work transformation,” this general and vast process of change has impacted the work lives of almost everyone. Figure 1 describes the major features of 21st-century work transformation.

Workers today expect to switch employers frequently in search of better opportunities, and in response to outsourcing, mergers, and downsizing. Employers increasingly turn to part-time or temporary workers—or “consultants”—to perform tasks that were previously carried out by workers in-house, in full-time, permanent positions. Instead of loyalty and

seniority, employers seek flexibility and adaptability in ideal employees. The result is what human relations (HR) and management literatures call the “protean” or “boundaryless” career (Arthur 1994; Hall 2004).

The nature of jobs is changing, too. Under the traditional system, workers carried out narrow and specific tasks identified by their job descriptions and they were evaluated and compensated by managers who controlled the labor process. Today, work organizations are flatter and less hierarchical. Layers of management have been removed, and work is increasingly organized into self-managed teams. Teams typically work with considerable discretion on time-bounded projects, and are judged on results and outcomes, often by peers. Career “ladders”—with clearly demarcated rungs that lead to higher-paying and more responsible positions—are being eliminated or replaced by career maps or “I-deals,” which are individualized programs of career development (Babcock and Laschever 2003; DiMaggio 2001; Powell 2001).⁴

I refer to this new model of work organization as “neoliberal.” Neoliberalism is a world view that advocates minimal government regulation of the economy, privatization of state resources, distribution of social services through the market, and exaltation of the autonomous, self-serving individual (Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Eisenstein 2010). The new organization of work is compatible with this ideological agenda. Corporations designed this new structure with minimal input from workers to shift their economic risks and responsibilities onto employees, while undercutting the protections of labor law and unions.

This new model has its advocates. The literature in management and HR celebrates these changes for heralding unprecedented opportunities for professional growth, technological innovation, and personal fulfillment. Even some feminists applaud the new model of work, as its built-in flexibility is considered more compatible with women’s nonlinear career paths (Hewlett 2007; see also Xie and Shauman 2005). But in my view, the major beneficiaries of work transformation are executives, the financial industry, and shareholders. Although a few workers do benefit from this new career model—especially high-tech professionals with specialized skills—for most the result is staggering college debt, job insecurity, increased stress and responsibility at work, and salary stagnation (Kalleberg 2000, 2009).

We can see the impact of neoliberalism on the four professions I analyzed. Each of them is dependent on the government for support. Public schools, hospitals, libraries, and welfare services are funded by taxes. In keeping with the neoliberal agenda, their budgets have all been slashed in

recent years, while the power of their unions has come under attack (e.g., Gabriel and Dillon 2011). As Table 2 demonstrates, the incomes of workers in these professions have barely kept pace with inflation. Today, college students pay exorbitant tuition to obtain credentials in these fields; gone are the days of generous state subsidies for higher education. Those in fields requiring master's degrees (social work and librarianship, but increasingly teaching and nursing as well) typically take out loans to fund their education, accumulating an average of more than \$17,000 per year in debt (College Board 2012, 21). Some evidence suggests that women have a higher debt load than men after graduation, which may be due in part to women's concentration in these professional disciplines (Dwyer, Hodson, and McCloud 2013). Newly minted graduates in some of these fields can no longer count on obtaining jobs in state institutions; they increasingly seek employment in private settings, including corporations and nonprofits, often on a contract basis.

If the old model of work organization is the sturdy high-rise filled with grey-suited bureaucrats, the new model is more like a ship at sea filled with mercenaries seeking adventure and fortune. In my more pessimistic moments, I imagine the ship buffeted by a powerful storm and in danger of sinking, with workers desperately trying to stay on board, or else grasping for life jackets (which they have to pay for themselves), while the executives get first crack at the lifeboats.

Gender inequality characterizes both the traditional and the neoliberal models of work organization. Women are not calling the shots either in the high-rise or on the ship. But I believe we need new metaphors to capture the workings of gender inequality in the neoliberal context. The glass ceiling and the glass escalator seem far too static to capture what is going on in our current era of flexible, project-based, horizontal, and contingent employment.

In a recent article I published with Chandra Muller and Kristine Kilanski (Williams, Muller, and Kilanski 2012), we identified new mechanisms that reproduce gender inequality in the neoliberal context. That article is based on our research on women geoscientists in the extremely lucrative oil and gas industry. We identified the gender, race, and sexual dynamics of the team structure, career maps, and networking as keys to understanding men's continued advantages over women in that industry.

To give one example, career maps, which have replaced career ladders in many industries, are individually negotiated—they are sometimes called “I-deals.” Geoscientists plan out long- and short-term goals with their team supervisors, who are supposed to supply them with the tools

and resources needed to achieve their goals. Workers do not know the details of each other's "I-deals"; in fact, it is against corporate policy to even discuss salary and bonuses with others. In this context, where the "rules of the game" are both variable and unknown, biases can freely proliferate. Meanwhile, a corporate embrace of "diversity" hides the systematic privileging of heterosexual white men occurring in the industry (Williams, Kilanski, and Muller, n.d.).

The case of women geoscientists in the oil and gas industry is especially interesting to us because women are graduating with master's degrees in numbers equal to men, and anecdotal evidence suggests that they are being hired in numbers equal to men in the major companies. These jobs are highly paid and the hours are reasonable, especially at the midcareer level. But after ten years or so, the women are virtually all gone. Instead of hitting their heads on a glass ceiling, they seem to be disappearing through a *trap door* (or, in keeping with the ship metaphor, perhaps they are *walking the plank*). (In contrast, conservatives have been using the term "opting out" to describe what is happening to these women.) My colleagues and I are trying to ascertain the forces that are pushing and pulling these women scientists out of the industry altogether.

Scientists in the oil and gas industry are among society's most privileged workers; the women scientists we interviewed are in the top one percent of all women income earners. I am also interested in exploring the consequences of work transformation for women at the bottom of the employment spectrum. Over the past decade, I have been studying low-wage workers in the retail industry, an industry that has exploded in size in recent decades (Williams 2006). Today, the number of retail workers *exceeds* the number of manufacturing workers in the United States (Jordan 2011).

In low-wage retail work, there are no glass ceilings or glass escalators, only *revolving doors*. Employers routinely hire part-time and temporary "at will" workers whom they "let go" the minute their store staffing needs change. Retail workers are required to work weekends and to change their hours from one week to another, exemplifying the meaning of the word "flexible" in retail. One week you might be scheduled to work 10 hours; the next week, 30. This is exactly the kind of job that is incompatible with doing anything else, such as caring for family members. Note that the problem is not the standard 40-hour work week, which has been identified as biased against women (Acker 1990; Williams 2001). "Flexible" schedules are even worse, because workers have to be available at any time, and erratic hours mean that income fluctuates from week to week (Lambert 2008). As a result of this work organization, the retail industry has one of

the highest turnover rates in the economy. At the toy stores where I worked, for example, few employees lasted through the three-month probationary period. Employers know this and expect and even cultivate it because churning the labor force prevents worker solidarity from forming and keeps wages low (Williams 2006).

I really like my image of the sinking ship, but all kidding aside, the true “role model” for the U.S. economy today is Wal-Mart (Lichtenstein 2006, 2009). Today, Wal-Mart is the single largest private employer in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. In addition to demanding “flexibility” from its workers, Wal-Mart pays workers as little as possible, encourages high turnover, fights off all unionizing efforts, offers few, if any, benefits, and externalizes employees’ health care costs. Meanwhile it touts its commitment to “diversity” and to equal opportunity for women, racial/ethnic minorities, and LGBT workers (Wal-Mart has been “gay friendly” since 2003). Its organizational model is taught in business schools and copied by high-end retailers (such as Whole Foods and Apple Computers). Even organizations not involved in the retail industry emulate the Wal-Mart model (including the hospitality and tourism industry, as represented by that ill-fated cruise ship at sea).

Wal-Mart is notorious for its sexism, despite its commitment to “diversity.” It recently fought off the largest-ever class-action lawsuit brought by women charging gender discrimination in promotions and pay (for updates on the suit, see www.walmartclass.com). But in this regard, the company is hardly unique. Gender inequality is rampant throughout the retail industry. Among retail salespersons employed full time—which is rare—women earn 75 percent of what men earn.⁵ This is partly the result of stores placing men and women in different jobs. Job-level segregation is just as extreme in low-wage occupations as in the higher-wage labor market (Lovell, Hartmann, and Werschkul 2007), and it helps to account for the gender disparities in pay. Not that men are raking in the dough. At one of the toy stores where I worked, for example, only men were hired in bicycle assembly jobs, which paid \$8 to \$9 an hour, compared to the \$7.50 that I earned as a cashier. This is an advantage, but it is not an escalator. It is more like a *higher ring in hell*.

In sum, the concept of the glass escalator was developed based on the traditional work organization. It assumes the existence of job security, full-time schedules, the availability of career ladders, and the expectation that workers will be rewarded for loyal service. These assumptions can no longer be taken for granted in our neoliberal economy. As Steve Vallas (2011) argues, the very concept of a “job” is fast becoming a thing of the

past. We need new concepts and metaphors to explain gender inequality in neoliberal times.

CONCLUSION

It has been a true honor to have this opportunity to revisit my work on the glass escalator. Since that work was first published, I have learned a great deal from the community of gender scholars. In this article, I explained how the intersectionality framework has enhanced and deepened my understanding of gender inequality in the workplace. I now believe that any discussion of the glass escalator must be attuned to how racism, homophobia, and class inequality advantage some groups of men, and exclude and discriminate against others.

I also argued that my original analysis of the glass escalator failed to take into account the economic context of the era in which it was developed. The concept was based on the assumptions of traditional work organizations, which have been fundamentally altered by work transformation. As our study of geoscientists suggests, the concept of the glass escalator may be of limited use in explaining gender inequality in workplaces today. We need new metaphors to understand the persistence of male privilege in the flexible, project-based, and flatter neoliberal organization.⁶

In the case of low-wage jobs, I believe we need a new feminist agenda altogether. Gender inequality is stubbornly persistent at the top and the bottom of the labor market, but class inequality has exploded (Cobble 2007; McCall 2007). Using the paradigmatic case of retail work, I argued that work transformation degrades the quality and pay of jobs in this ever-growing sector of the economy. These jobs are precarious, lack benefits, and do not pay a living wage.

Workers in low-wage service sector jobs need a new employment contract, one that offers security, opportunities for advancement, and a decent living standard for everyone, women and men. Employers can be forced to treat workers better. Although the shrinking number of well-paid manufacturing jobs in our economy is lamentable, it is important to remember that those jobs did not start off as good jobs. At the turn of the 20th century, manufacturing jobs were appallingly dangerous, exploitative, and dehumanizing. They became good jobs only because workers organized, fought, and bled to make them so. That same militancy is needed to upgrade jobs in the retail industry and other low-wage sectors of the economy. Nothing inherent in these jobs makes them low paid. In Sweden,

for example, retail jobs pay good wages and are not considered “bleak” jobs at all (Andersson et al. 2011).

However, upgrading these jobs may not be in the interests of all women. I do not assume that the women at the top of the occupational pyramid share common cause with the women at the bottom any more than men do. At ExxonMobil corporate headquarters in Houston, for example, janitors, who currently earn \$8.35 an hour, are fighting for a pay raise. Of course, because of the neoliberal work organization, they don’t actually work for ExxonMobil; they work for cleaning subcontractors who bid on temporary contracts to provide cleaning services, and who employ legions of women workers on an “as needed” basis. Consequently, the spokesperson for ExxonMobil can claim that his company doesn’t “have anything to do with” the low wages paid to janitors who clean their offices.⁷ But there is no question that the immense profits of the oil and gas industry and the high pay of the geoscientists who work for it come from squeezing the workers on the bottom. Outsourcing, temporalizing, and shifting risk onto workers is the essence of the neoliberal business model.

For these reasons, I believe that feminist demands for gender equality in the workplace are not enough. Do women janitors deserve to be treated the same as men janitors? Yes, of course they do. But they also deserve more than \$8.35 an hour, which will not happen unless their employers are forced to pay them more. That is why a critique of capitalism must accompany our critique of gender inequality. This is my “new” feminist agenda for the sociology of work.

This “new” agenda is in fact at least 40 years old, harkening back to the “socialist feminism” of the 1970s. That agenda has been lost in recent years, overcome by what Nancy Fraser has called the “feminist romance with capitalism” (2009, 110). This is the idea that women’s emancipation requires their entry into paid work. This idea has been used to motivate women around the world to seek dignity and equality in the labor market—even though, for the vast majority of women, paid work is synonymous with extreme exploitation and family hardship. Feminist scholars rightly criticize women’s economic dependency on men and the devaluation of women’s caring labor in the home. But we must not ignore the fact that the alternative can be just as bad. Capitalists rely on women’s unpaid work in the home to reproduce the labor force AND they exploit women’s labor to generate enormous profits. In effect, they have harnessed the dream of women’s liberation to the engine of capitalist accumulation. Feminists have been complicit with this insofar as we endorse the model of competitive individualism in the marketplace for women (Collins and Mayer 2010; Eisenstein 2010). I now believe that a feminism

that is divorced from a critique of capitalism will only make things worse for most women.

The glass escalator explains the advantages that straight white men receive in professional jobs in traditional work organizations. Because it analyzes male privilege without critiquing capitalist exploitation, it loses sight of the diminishing rewards available to most workers. It may be time to retire the concept. We need new metaphors to explain gender inequality in our neoliberal age.

NOTES

1. <http://quizlet.com/2729873/sociology-flash-cards>.
2. The mechanisms that reproduce the glass ceiling might also be subject to further specification, a topic beyond the scope of this article.
3. Work organizations do exist today that celebrate and encourage expressions of nonnormative gender and queer sexuality. However, in a recent review of the literature (Williams and Giuffre 2011), we found that most are located in the entertainment and sex work industries. "Respectably queer" organizations are still very rare, even in California (Ward 2008).
4. These categories describe organizational trends that in practice overlap considerably. It is best to treat them as "ideal types" in the Weberian sense.
5. <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat39.pdf>, p. 5.
6. Additional intriguing suggestions include the "glass obstacle course" (De Welde and Larson 2011) and the "glass cliff" (Ryan and Haslam 2005).
7. <http://www.marketplace.org/topics/wealth-poverty/houston-janitors-fight-fair-pay-economic-boom> (accessed August 7, 2012).

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