

“INEQUALITY ON THE RAILS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF WOMEN’S  
EXPERIENCES IN THE RAILROAD INDUSTRY”

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of  
Texas State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
with a Major in Sociology  
December 2013

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## **DEDICATION**

### **Sisters**

We connect  
Like tracks  
'Cross mountains  
Prairies and plains

We find each other  
In the dark and light  
Of blinking  
Computer screens

We "face" a book  
And make it ours  
We trace our steps  
To moons and stars

We ride alone  
In cabs of trains  
We are conductors  
We fight snow and rain

We work in the shops  
Building'n taking apart  
We are ALL  
Sister Rails  
In our hearts

© 2012 Sue Doro, Oakland CA  
Retired Machinist  
Milwaukee Road Railroad

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Undertaking a project such as this one, takes a dedicated team to complete. I have many people to thank; friends, family, and professors. My husband, Marc, has been my biggest cheerleader during my entire college experience. Marc, I wouldn't have come this far without your help and encouragement. Moreover, thanks to my family for their love and support. I don't know what direction I'll go from here but I know you're with me.

The Sociology department at Texas State University deserves special recognition and thanks as well. Faculty and staff have patiently guided me through this journey, always encouraging me to push myself and finish what I set out to achieve. Dr. Patti Giuffre warrants much deserved thanks and appreciation for her skill (and patience) in helping me become the best writer and researcher I can possibly be. Thank you.

Finally thanks to the brave women that participated in this research. I hope this is a stepping stone towards future changes in the railroad industry.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study focuses on women who work in the railroad industry as a case study of male-dominated occupations. My theoretical approach utilizes Acker's theory of gendered organizations to explore how the railroad industry continues to marginalize women by incorporating structures that are modeled by male ideology. I use qualitative methods that include face-to-face interviews and email correspondence with 18 women who are either currently employed or have previously worked for a railroad. My findings reveal several gendered practices in railroad work. Harassment towards the women I interviewed from male coworkers is common, particularly by their immediate supervisors. Inadequate layoff policies adversely affect women with children forcing some to choose between their jobs or having a family. Unions do very little to protect women railroad workers, leaving them vulnerable to unfair treatment by their employers. I conclude with the shortcomings of my study and suggestions for future research to examine why women do not seek out the high paying jobs railroads offer.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

Sociologists have documented the gender wage gap: women as a group earn less than men. One reason for the wage gap is occupational segregation. Men and women in the United States are concentrated in different jobs and male-dominated jobs pay more than female-dominated jobs. Why are men and women concentrated in different jobs? Despite much advancement for women workers, gender segregation persists fueled by discriminatory and gendered practices and assumptions (Baunach 2002). Kmec (2005) theorizes occupational segregation is caused by employer's bias and recruitment; the cumulative effect of gender bias plays a major role for explaining the gender wage gap. There are few occupations where women earn wages equal to their male coworkers. Studies have found many female-dominated jobs continue to be devalued therefore, pay less than male-dominated work (England 2010; Reid 1998).

Occupations previously considered too physically demanding for women have incorporated modern technology, which should have encouraged more females to seek out those jobs out. In fact, the number of females working in male-dominated occupations for a railroad has declined significantly in recent years. For instance, in 2009 the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported women comprised 7.5% of the 115,000 train operation positions listed. In contrast, BLS statistics for 2011 indicate a drop in overall railroad operation jobs with the percentage of women engineers decreasing to a statistically insignificant number.

One explanation may be industries such as railroads have policies that fail to address issues unique to women. Federal mandates such as the Family Medical Leave Act

(FMLA) of 1993 were designed to allow women and men to take unpaid leave from work; however, women continue to make up the vast majority of those who actually use family leave, thereby placing themselves at risk of being reprimanded in the workplace (Baird and Reynolds 2004). Union agreements remain gender neutral; therefore, tend to exclude subjects distinctive to female workers (e.g. available child care).

There are several sociological studies of women in male-dominated jobs but none of women in the railroad industry. The railroad industry presents an interesting case study of women in male-dominated work because railroads are a continuous service industry in that round-the-clock services and delivery of merchandise are required year round, women working as train crew members, as well as other male-dominated railroad occupations, are faced with challenges unique to the railroad industry. Variations in weather, traffic congestion, derailments and mechanical failure make predictable scheduling of freight operations virtually impossible to accomplish. Consequently, a majority of train crews are on-call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (Pilcher and Coplen 2000). For women with children, such erratic hours deems it practically unworkable to uphold familial responsibilities in addition to their job.

This thesis explores the experiences of women in the railroad industry and how railroad work is “gendered.” Specifically, I examine the following research questions: How do females employed in blue collar railroad occupations manage unpredictable work schedules? How do these workers perceive company policies and union agreements? Do these women experience unequal treatment? If so, how do they deal with it? I used semi-structured-in-depth interviews to explore the experiences of current and recently retired women railroad workers.

The interview data reveal many women railroad employees encounter unequal treatment by employers in the form of excessive discipline and sexual harassment. The data also find that gender-neutral company policies and union contracts serve to constrain potential changes to the patriarchal structure of these male-dominated organizations.

## CHAPTER II

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Perspective**

There is little information about the role women have played in the railroad industry. Non-sociological commentaries were written in the early 1900's during the advent of World War I with more recent studies focusing on issues such as safety and sleep concerns of railroad employees in general. Nevertheless, numerous articles exist pertaining to women who work in male-dominated occupations; thus, I will draw on those to explore similarities to, and differences from, women's experiences working for a railroad. This chapter describes the historical aspects of women railroad employees, women's experiences working in other male-dominated jobs, and the impact company policies and union contracts have on female workers.

#### ***Women and the Railroad Industry***

Most of the research on gender and railroad work is outdated. Some of the earliest research conducted on the subject was completed in the early 1900's by Pauline Goldmark (1919). Her work focused on World War I and the emergence of women into the workforce. As men were deployed overseas, employers found themselves searching for replacements and women were considered an easily accessible source of labor. Though women had been working in various service jobs prior to World War I, the railroads began to vigorously recruit them as men left to fight overseas. Initially hired for less pay than men, women's wages were increased to be equivalent to those of their male coworkers after the government placed the railroads under federal control. By 1918, the number of females employed by railroads had increased to approximately 100,000 with a large percentage working as clerks, accountants, and ticket sellers. To oversee the

growing population of women entering the workforce, the government created the Women's Service Section to ensure working conditions "fitted their needs". Laws were put in place that were designed to protect women workers actually prohibited night work for women, limited the hours women could work each day and each week, and removed women from certain occupations altogether. Some states also required minimum wages be applied to women only, though this was declared unconstitutional in 1923 by the Supreme Court (Freeman 1995). Subsequently, women's wages were the same as their male coworkers for the same class and scope of work. Ironically, jobs that required employees to work outside the terminal such as tie crews were deemed unseemly for women by the Women's Service Section thus further limiting their opportunities for higher pay.

According to Maurine Greenwald (1975), the railroad industry reflects the history of women's labor in several important ways. First, women's employment with railroads corresponded to trends in other occupations that typically employ men. Women were employed if men were unavailable and only as a last resort. Second, the employment of women in railroads during wartime revealed problems many women faced in the labor market overall. Poor working conditions, harassment from male coworkers, and little chance of job advancement were not uncommon. Finally, work relations between men and women employed by the railroads reflected similar work relationships in other industries. Men typically resented women's presence and sought to marginalize them through social closure or relegated them to work considered as status inferior to their own. Similar to Goldmark's findings, Greenwald writes that as long as women and men worked at non-competing jobs, relations between them were normally comfortable.

Until recently, nepotism was common in railroad hiring practices. Fathers were encouraged to introduce their sons into railroad work at an early age giving the young men a general knowledge of the industry. Kinship networks are not uncommon and are crucial to the recruitment and retention of workers in many industries. Skill becomes kin-defined with families gaining substantial resources within particular employment venues (Greene, et al. 2002; Grieco, 1987). Though women gained employment in these plants, they then divided into typical gender roles (Greene et al. 2002). Goldmark (1919) points out that once trained for various tasks women often exceed the expectations of their supervisors. Indeed, as long as women and men performed different tasks, relations between them were relaxed.

Research about the persistence of gender segregation in the railroad industry fails to examine why it persists despite technological improvements that render the work less physically demanding. Women are essentially non-existent in occupations such as track workers and signalmen (BLS 2009).

**Table 1. Employed Persons by Detailed Occupation and Sex, 2009**

Women	Occupation	Total Employed (in thousands)	Percent
	Locomotive engineers and operators	58	2.8
	Railroad brake, signal, and switch operators	5	-
	Railroad conductors and yardmasters	53	4.7

Women	Occupation	Total Employed (in thousands)	Percent
	Locomotive engineers and operators	45	-
	Railroad brake, signal, and switch operators	5	-
	Railroad conductors and yardmasters	52	6.6

These occupations require crews to be away from home for extended periods of time proving to be difficult for women. Track workers are often on the road for months at a time, living in campers at remote locations. Theoretically, women have access to these jobs yet; workplace environment can prove hostile to females. Harsh living conditions in addition to antagonistic behavior from male coworkers towards women on the crew contribute to explanations of the absence of females in these occupations. As Table I suggests, in 2009 women represented a small percentage of engineer, yardmaster and conductor employees. Table 2 indicates a significant decrease of females in the more lucrative positions and an increase of women in the lower paying occupations. According to both tables, female signalmen and track workers are practically non-existent. Understanding the effects of inequity in occupations dominated by men is essential because it is precisely these effects that influence the BLS statistics cited earlier confirming the prevalence of gender discrimination (King et al. 2010).

Railroad occupations such as Engineer and Conductor offer women an opportunity to earn wages equal to those of their male counterparts although attaining these positions are dependent on union membership. It is not evident if women working for non-union short line railroads earn wages equal to those of men assigned an identical task. Most train service personnel working for railroads, regardless of size, are required to

be away from home, are continuously “on call,” and short rest periods between trips are common. This work schedule makes it difficult for married women, and women with children, to fulfill household responsibilities. Random scheduling carries significant occupational consequences for females by finding it necessary to leave a particular job, resulting in a discontinuous work history. Departure from work can make advancement in the job sectors difficult due to lost seniority and benefit provisions (Rhode 1988).

### ***Women’s Experiences in Other Male-Dominated Occupations***

The women’s movement in the 1960’s brought attention to women’s rights but despite the formation of the President’s Commission on the Status of Women, the Expansion of the Fair Employment Standards Act to include low-paid and marginalized workers, and the Equal Pay Act, wage inequality continues to exist in the United States, particularly for women (Cobble 2004). In recent years as the rate of marriage has declined due to postponement of marriage and higher incidences of divorce, an increasing number of women have entered the workforce (Bramlett and Mosher 2002). According to the BLS, “. . .61 percent of all women were in the labor market in 2009 (compared to 40 percent in 1975) and that women outnumbered men in the workforce for the first time in 2010. BLS data revealed that 64.2 million payroll employees were women (just 63.4 million were men) in January 2010” (Parker 2011: 58).

Recognizing trade occupations as an opportunity for women to obtain higher paying work, federal programs were initiated during the 1980’s and 1990’s to provide training for women in non-traditional jobs. Additionally, in 2004 the United States Department of Education partnered with the U.S. Department of Labor to create the “Skills to Build America’s Future Initiative.” This project was “. . .designed to increase

awareness of the skilled trades and the education, training, and apprenticeship opportunities available to prepare individuals for these occupations” (Ericksen and Schultheiss 2009:71). Nevertheless, the presence of women working in male-dominated occupations remains static at best. Many sociologists believe this phenomenon can be explained by gender disparity in the status of male-dominated work versus female-dominated occupations. England and Dunn (1988) argue that measures chosen for assessing the merits of work favor interests of the dominant group, men. For example, men often have privileged access to better paying jobs which in turn bestows power to males thus ultimately providing the basis for patriarchal dominance within society (Russell 1991). Levine’s (2009) research about women who work in a manufacturing plant supports this idea. She found that women are converted into a narrow set of departments and job titles. Their work is lower-skilled and lower-paid than the jobs held by male counterparts. Most male workers work on the third floor of the plant where the higher-skill jobs are performed while many female employees are located on the second floor. The placement of workers also hinders a woman’s opportunity for promotion since it works as an invisible barrier between men and women employees.

Numerous studies explore the experiences of women in male-dominated occupations and much of this research finds that women tolerate sexual harassment since their supervisors are often male thus, removing or reducing support for retribution. Forms of sexual harassment fall into three broad categories; sexual coercion using the promise of reward or punishment; gender harassment which includes behaviors conveying degrading or sexist attitudes; and unwanted sexual attention (Thomas 2006). For instance, Dennisen (2010) studied women employed in construction who report they often endure

sexual harassment at the workplace because they are working in a “man’s world.”

Women seafarers frequently report encountering some form of sexual harassment by an officer that is senior to them (Thomas 2006). And Britton (1997) found that male prison officers typically consider masculinity as a primary job requirement and oppose the presence of female employees at the facility. Women in these studies allege they must be willing to overlook interactions that make them uncomfortable since the use of formal sanctions in response to sexual harassment and discrimination are rare. Women fear reprisal in the form of retaliation through losing their job or being publicly humiliated. Instead, females are often pressured to ignore or tolerate adverse behavior from male co-workers (Denissen 2010). And when men participate in gendering practices consistent with established norms and stereotypes of masculinity, they create social closure and oppression by subjecting female workers to hostile and unfriendly behaviors. Consequently, structured gender groups may lead some men to make unwelcome sexual advances, further alienating women from higher paying jobs (Levine 2009). Though women who follow feminine stereotypes that label women as subordinate may gain acceptance from men, they frequently do not achieve equal status from male counterparts (Martin 2003).

Women working in non-traditional occupations also encounter gender bias and discrimination. On Wall Street, for example, gender discrimination from male supervisors, clients, and coworkers is not uncommon to women working in the commodities industry (Roth 2004). Women employed in male-dominated work experience discrimination based on gender, particularly women with children. The “motherhood penalty” is a workplace bias experienced by women who work away from

home. While many factors are certainly responsible for its persistence, cultural beliefs about the strain between the motherhood and “ideal worker” roles often play a part in reproducing inequality (Correll et al.2007). Women who work the manufacturing industry are often forced to choose remaining in lower wage jobs since the higher paying work is normally on the third shift. According to Levine, “The difficulty of arranging child care during night hours may make it hard or even impossible for women with children, especially single mothers, to accept third-shift positions” (2009:268). For instance, a study researching how transit shift workers cope with family responsibilities found that inner-city bus drivers are faced with challenges similar to many females employed in male-dominated occupations. Most transit employees, for example, work either straight or rotating shifts. Those that work rotating shifts often aren’t informed of their schedule until 24 hours prior to the first work period of the week. They handle the dilemma of childcare by working shifts opposite of their spouse, leaving children with extended family, utilizing formal childcare, or taking their children on their bus during working hours (Grosswald 2002). Except for leaving their children with other family members, these options are virtually impossible for female railroad workers. Unlike a majority of the bus drivers, most train operation personnel do not have any type of work schedule they can plan around. And leaving their children with other family members presents its own set of issues; how to get the kids to school, extracurricular activities, or doctor appointments (Grosswald 2002).

Differences in company structure can affect how many women remain employed in their organization over time. In their study of Pan American Airways (PAA), Dye and Mills (2011) find support of Acker’s notion of substructure by comparing dominant

discourses used by the airline in the 50's, 70's, and 1980's. During the 1950's, PAA sought to encourage commitment and motivation from employees by referring to them as part of the PAA "family." Senior male employees were portrayed as "strong leaders" who were the head of the company's "household" thus perpetuating the gendering of the organization (Dye and Mills 2011). In contrast, PAA employees during the 1980's were considered cogs in the company wheel therefore; their objectives were expected to correspond with their employers. The notion that PAA and its employees were a "family" disappeared and competition was encouraged; however, this only served to outline gender differences "...according to new understandings of the relative abilities of men and women to be competitive..." (Dye and Mills 2011:430). The outcome implied women could not be as competitive due to familial responsibilities and lacked aggression to compete with men. Expectations of stereotypical differences between male and female employees often serve to explain occupational segregation in employment opportunities.

Women are affected by occupational segregation in two ways; horizontal segregation separates work into "women's" and "men's" jobs whereas vertical segregation denotes women are typically guided towards lower level positions and men work in higher grade jobs with better wages (Greene et al. 2002; Hakim 1979,1992). Women who work in jobs deemed more appropriate for females encounter lower pay, receive less training, and are frequently passed over for promotions (Maume Jr. and Houston 2001). Jacobs (1989) contends certain occupations are instilled with social controls such as attitudes and behaviors that serve to remind women they don't belong. Britton's (1997) study about women who work in the prison system and Greene's et al. (2002) research addressing workers at two manufacturing plants are among many viable

studies that illustrate this point. Past company policies in numerous male-dominated jobs often allowed employers to use controls such as weight and height restrictions, to exclude women from specific jobs (Maume Jr. and Houston 2001). Women firefighters point to the height of vehicles and equipment which makes it difficult to perform their tasks essential to their job. Burdensome uniforms, ill-fitting helmets and boots are of poor design for women, forcing them to literally strip to use the bathroom (Batty and Burchielli 2011).

### ***Company Policies***

Company policies and union agreements fail to address the unique issues women face as primary caregivers. Creating a gap that neither organization has so far been willing to confront, women are at risk of disciplinary sanctions or possible loss of employment. Limited efforts to resolve this dilemma such as FMLA are constantly challenged by the railroad industry and remain at risk of elimination by politicians who are friendly to the trade (Anthony 2008). In addition, the 84 leave days allowed by FMLA are without compensation thus making it difficult for women and male caregivers to take time off as needed (Union Pacific Railroad 2012). Work-family policies that include caregiver allowances are absent in the railroad industry though scholars and policy makers promote them as key factors behind the influx of women, especially women with children, into the work force (Misra, et al. 2007).

### ***Union Agreements***

Historically, the increase of women into the workforce can be explained by single motherhood, inadequate social programs, cheaper labor pool, changes in traditional views about women in industrial professions, and simplification of mechanical occupations. As

the employment of females increased in the 1940's, unions sought to recruit them into their membership. Dickason (1947) argued that, "Unions have done and are doing much to solve the special problems of women workers, not only through collective bargaining but by drawing attention to these problems and pressing for legislative action" (1947:73). This may be true in service sector unions, as Brofenbrenner (2005) found. The growth of women in the service industry has resulted in an increase in representation by unions willing to protect their interests.

In contrast, unions that represent railroad workers continue to utilize agreements that are gender-neutral thus fail to address issues unique to female employees. In the early part of the twentieth century, numerous unions limited membership to English-speaking, white, native-born men (Leymon 2011). Therefore historically, few women actively participated in labor unions. Women seeking a union career often face the same barriers as tradeswomen; union structure is male-dominated, particularly at the higher levels. Consequently, women who belong to labor unions have limited power to influence policy direction therefore, more difficult for them to make a difference (Kirton, 2006; Healy and Kirton, 2000). Though unions are beginning to recruit more women workers, it remains unclear to what degree they will act to reflect the interests of female members (Blum 1983). So far, labor unions have avoided becoming involved in discrimination and harassment issues, leaving this territory to women's advocacy groups, lawyers, or ultimately management, to address (Blum 2008; Crain 1994). This is augmented by union representatives being drawn from the union's workforce therefore, likely to link their social identity to the dominant culture. As a result, union delegates often seem challenged to competently protect and ensure a harassment free and non-discriminatory work

environment (Paap 2008). Subsequently, many members fear the union movement has instead joined the “establishment,” thus becoming part of the problem (Cooper and Sureau 2008).

### ***Theoretical Framework: Gendered Organizations Theory***

Joan Acker’s (1990; 2006) gendered organizations framework has shaped sociological understanding about the persistence of gender inequality in the workplace. Her theory centers on the premise that masculinity is valued over femininity in work organizations. Women are consistently disadvantaged in the workplace regardless of expertise. She identifies five processes that contribute to gendered organizations: gendering practices and structure, gendering interactions, gendering cultures, creating and conceptualizing gender cultures, and internalizing gender cultures (Dye and Mills 2011). Acker contends this theory explains divisions between unpaid and paid work, status and income differences between women and men, and maintains individual gender identity, chiefly masculinity, may be explicated by organizational processes and pressures. Additionally, Acker’s gendered organizations theory asserts structure and policies of many organizations can be defined in which gender is not significant thus obscuring the means of producing change (Britton 2000). In other words, because gender is not acknowledged, policy changes focusing on women’s issues are absent. For example, due to bilateral union agreement rules, railroad occupations pay women train crew employees equal to the male workers for the same class of work. Joan Acker argues that “...work is organized on the image of a white man ...” who is dedicated to his job and assumes no other responsibilities other than to provide for his family (2006:448). Hence, most union agreements lack stipulations addressing issues unique to working women. Though the

growth of women participating in unions has increased, they continue to be underrepresented in leadership and staff positions. Being underrepresented in labor organizations distorts the true composition of women membership, further perpetuating the barriers in place initiated by gender and race. Acker further claims unions may be the single major institutions equipped to aid females surmount these impediments in the workplace (Bronfenbrenner 2005).

Acker (1990) and Britton (2000) contend organizational structures are not gender neutral (see also Martin 2003). Acker asserts, "Since men in organizations take their behavior and perspectives to represent the human... [They] take as reality the world as seen from that standpoint" (Acker 1990:142). She reasons gender is an integral part of a set of processes in which meaning and control, action and emotion, advantage and disadvantage are defined. Generally, identity is rendered in terms of male and female, femininity and masculinity (Acker 1990).

Acker's theory is based on a broader conceptualization of gender inequality in society. Epstein (2007) maintains that societies and subgroups such as work organizations preserve their boundaries through the use of unfair discrepancies between men and women. Subsequently, "...women's subordination is basic to maintaining the social cohesion and stratification systems of ruling and governing groups-male groups..." (Epstein 2007:4). Some sociologists hypothesized that subordination of women emerged from capitalism and existing ideologies of male dominance. Complications encountered by this relationship were resolved in ways disadvantageous to women (Creighton 1996). Russell (1991) argued that in order for capitalism to succeed, specific social regimes are enacted that limit alternatives for participants. Likewise, he asserts the existence of a

dominant belief system which accepts the division of labor whereas married women in households reproduce and men as the perceived head of household, are given the best wage opportunities. Subsequently, gender composition of jobs plays a significant role in wage inequality (Huffman 2004). Married or single mothers are generally expected to handle domestic duties, often while employed elsewhere. In fact, women on average work longer hours for significantly less pay when paid labor and unpaid household work is combined (Rhode 1988). Working women are expected to be as dedicated to their jobs as men yet culture demands they give priority to their family. This creates a double standard in that men can be fully absorbed in their job without being told they are not devoted to their families. This reasoning plays an important role explaining the shortage of women in male-dominated jobs such as railroad workers even though devaluation of female occupations provide viable incentives for women to choose “men’s” work (England 2010).

Women who are employed in the construction industry experience many similar difficulties as women who work for railroads. Gendered terminology remains strong, e.g. foreman or craftsman, which serves to perpetuate the perception that construction jobs are for men (Fielden et al. 2000). In addition, women are frequently dissuaded from construction work by the use of sexist attitudes and discriminatory selection process. For instance, in labor-intensive trades, workers need sufficient strength for lifting thus, this requirement is often used by employers to deter women from applying. The use of mechanical equipment to lift heavy materials has lessened the need for physical strength, yet the perception of the construction industry as physically demanding, continues. Women commonly experience harassment at job locations but because supervisors are

male, receive little support if the harassment is report. Finally, construction work is rarely permanent and often entails traveling to different job locations, sometimes quite a distance from home. Working 10 hours a day is not uncommon and the construction industry tends to treat work and family as completely separate. As a result, the number of women employed in construction is miniscule and leads to the conclusion that the construction industry is virtually devoid of female workers (Fielden et al. 2000).

Firefighting is another gendered occupation where females are underrepresented. Similar to the construction industry, gendered terminology is common. According to one study, “The term “fireman” and populist images of men running into burning buildings, facing roaring fires, wearing heavy protective clothing, carrying heavy hoses and climbing up and down ladders are clearly gendered” (Batty and Burchiell 2011:311; see also Ellen, Miller, and Barber 1995). Women employed as firefighters experience harassment and bullying from their male co-workers, yet receive little support from supervisors with resolving issues. As a rule, firefighting equipment and clothing is unwieldy, heavy, and ill-fitting for women. For example, the fit and size of fire-fighting helmets are uncomfortable for women, often moving loosely even on the smallest setting. Fire trucks are designed to carry substantial weight therefore, sit higher than ordinary vehicles. This makes it difficult for women to board the truck or reach equipment. Additionally, women firefighters complain about the lack of sanitary conditions and protection from hostile conduct by co-workers. Women employed as firefighters are few and likely to remain so until the work environment changes (Batty and Burchiell 2011).

All male-dominated occupations demonstrate Acker’s (1990) theory of gendered organizations. Though these occupations are publicized as gender neutral, the very nature

of their organization belies the fact that they are anything but gender neutral. Most male-dominated professions actually exclude women by claiming modification of work environment, equipment, and union agreements to accommodate females would deem one gender given more consideration than another. Acker claims that jobs are abstract in that they have "...no occupants, no human bodies, no gender" (1990:149). Similarly, she argues that filling the hypothetical job is a worker that exists only for that job. This interpretation of organizations is based on the concept of male workers whose life revolves around his job while someone else, probably a woman, takes care of his children and personal needs (Acker 1990).

Women who work in the railroad industry share many similar experiences as other women who work in male-dominated jobs; harassment, job requirements that discourage women from entering certain occupations, and wage inequity, to name just a few. That being said, the culture of the railroad remains closed to outsiders hence the lack of research on the subject.

The purpose of my study is to identify and explore gaps in existing research relevant to women employed in non-traditional work focusing on women in the railroad industry. Studies on the subject are few, very general in content and none are based on qualitative research. Acker's examination of gendered organization theory provides the basis for other studies; however, further exploration of the application of gender processes using interviews from women experienced in the railroad industry may furnish new information about male-dominated occupations.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

My study is constructed from semi-structured interviews with 18 women who work for a railroad or have worked for a railroad in the past. I used this method because it allows a topic to be explored openly and gives interviewees freedom to convey their thoughts using their own words. Semi-structured interviews also permit a more open exchange between the scholar and participant (Doody and Noonan 2013).

No other sociological studies examine experiences of women who work for a railroad. Because this is an exploratory study, I employed qualitative methods. A qualitative approach is best when exploring a subject in which we seek to grasp the meanings, reasons, patterns and motives usually unnoticed in standardized approaches, like those from a survey, for example (Doody and Noonan 2013). Moreover, a qualitative approach finds, and gives meaning to differences in data. Quantitative methods are best when you want to compare data in an efficient manner and make generalizations applicable to whole populations. A quantitative approach is also ideal to test theories with hypothesis (Esterberg 2002). In contrast, qualitative studies do not seek to generalize findings to a population; rather, they strive to understand the participant's experience from their point of view.

My goal throughout college has been to find a way to bring attention to women who work in the railroad industry and to find a way to enact changes that improve working conditions for them. When I began recruiting women for this study, I discovered my project would be much more difficult than I initially thought. Having been employed as a locomotive engineer for a number of years, I took for granted that my experiences

were reflective of other female railroad workers therefore, this project would simply be a matter of semantics. I was wrong. I encountered deep mistrust and suspicion from many of the potential respondents; one woman sent a list of questions gathered from female coworkers including a query asking if I was a spy for the company. Others insisted on phone chats in which I was quizzed using lingo only fellow “rails” would understand. Though somewhat surprised, after reading their answers to questions in the interview guide I sent them, I came to understand their rationale. Contrary to my previous beliefs, many respondents fear retaliation by their employers if it is discovered they participated in my study. For these women, retaliation means possible termination thus, losing benefits and pay.

This experience reveals an “insider’s” dilemma many researchers encounter when conducting a study on a topic they are intimately connected with (Allen 1997). It is extremely difficult to distance ourselves when researching a subject we are deeply familiar with. I had no choice but to be honest about my railroad background. If I had attempted to deceive the women, I would have been shut out and my project unattainable. In fact, if I had simply been a social researcher interested in investigating railroad women, I doubt I would have gained access for the reasons given in the previous paragraph.

Except for two interviews, all were conducted via email. In retrospect, this proved to be a blessing in disguise. During the two face-to-face interviews, I found myself attempting to manipulate interview questions so their responses mirrored my experiences. Thankfully, I quickly became aware of what I was doing and stopped. Nonetheless, during phone conversations with several potential respondents, sharing certain events

proved to be necessary to ally suspicion and distrust, and create a bond as fellow “rails.” Some researchers argue that maintaining an objective stance while doing research can be more harmful than building some sort of emotional connection. They claim a power shift occurs when participants share intimate information with the researcher, consequently perpetuating inequalities between the investigator and respondents (Irwin 2006; Oakley 1981). In this case, forming a bond with the women proved pertinent for the success of my research.

### ***Sampling Procedure***

I used snowball sampling, or chain referral sampling to contact my respondents. This technique is an accepted sociological research approach well suited for studies that require the knowledge of insiders to locate individuals willing to participate. The purpose of this project is to gain an in-depth understanding, instead of a broad overview, about women railroad workers thus; snowball sampling was more suitable than random sampling to recruit respondents (Biernaki and Waldorf 1981).

In addition to snowballing, I made requests for participants through the use of social networks after the Institutional Review Board approved the project. Social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace allow people with similar interests to connect and share life experiences (Dwyer 2007). Ideally, my goal was to interview all respondents face-to-face. Because potential respondents for this study are scattered throughout the United States, this approach proved difficult to achieve. Unforeseen difficulties arose when women who had previously expressed interest in participating, became reluctant and backed out of the study.

To further expand recruitment, I posted requests for research participants on private and public railroad pages on Facebook, railroad magazines and private forums. Initially, the response was very positive however, the number of women that actually completed the interview questions was small. Concurrently, I contacted by telephone or email, 15 women referred to me by other participants which have been employed or currently work in the railroad industry. Some women expressed concern about their supervisors discovering they participated in this study. Although my consent forms note that their superiors would not find out, it is understandable why women in a highly male-dominated job feel concerned about participating in a study in which they talk about experiences of discrimination and gender bias.

### ***Interview Guide***

I utilized a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix I) with primarily open-ended questions which allowed respondents to expand on their answers, particularly in the face-to-face interviews. I performed face-to-face interviews with 2 respondents and conducted interviews via email with 16 respondents. I asked respondents about their position and length of employment in the railroad industry; working conditions and treatment from male co-workers, company policies and union agreements, plus encouraged suggestions to improve overall conditions for women railroad workers. In order to explore how females employed in blue-collar railroad occupations manage unpredictable work schedules and do company policies and union agreements perpetuate gender bias in male-dominated jobs, I asked participants about their experiences managing familial obligations in this environment. I also explored occurrences of

disciplinary measures against female workers caused by the absence of policies addressing situations unique to women.

### *Sample Characteristics*

The respondents in this research hold various railroad positions that are male-dominated, for example locomotive engineer and machinist. Their ages range from early 20's to late 70's. The names of the women are pseudonyms. I omitted some information because it would be fairly simple for their supervisors to identify them, given their unique experiences. Fear of retaliation is a concern for women working in the railroad industry so every effort has been made to ensure they remain completely and absolutely anonymous. For this reason, I did not include more specific demographic information for each respondent in this study.

### *Analysis Technique*

I transcribed the interviews performed via face-to-face and together with the email interviews categorized based on common themes. An integral part of the research process is coding the interviews in order to unearth similarities between the responses given to interview questions. Esterberg (2002) describes a two-step process of coding: open and focused. In open coding, data is analyzed by searching for and identifying shared patterns and themes that seem of interest, even if they don't appear relevant to the research at the time. Having identified several recurring themes, I refined the process using focused coding. This analytical process involved going through my data line by line, concentrating on themes I identified during open coding. This analysis also aids in reducing data down into a manageable size (Esterberg 2002). As I read each transcript, I focused on whether they were treated differently as women, and if so, how.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

Acker's theory of gendered organizations provides a framework for scholars who seek to understand how masculinity is valued over femininity in countless work organizations. Through the years, laws have been put in place that promotes gender equality and in many male-dominated jobs, the number of women employees continue to increase (Longley 2005). Yet, despite federal laws that seek to allow, and protect, women who work in male-dominated occupations, the railroad industry has somehow circumvented those edicts. Common themes emerge that highlight how gendering practices remain firmly entrenched in the railroad industry. Common themes include difficulty getting hired, harassment, working conditions, and seemingly gender neutral policies that in reality, adversely affect female employees.

Women who participated in this study have either been employed by a railroad in the past or currently work for a railroad. Length of employment ranges from 2 months to 35 years. Asked what compelled them to apply for a job in the industry, the overwhelming response was pay and benefits. One respondent commented that in this economy a decent paying job is hard to come by. She added, "...the salary offered was significantly higher than salaries for state and local government administration positions." Several women are single mothers with no formal education; consequently, a job with the railroad was very attractive to them. Wage compensation for railroad employees varies by location and occupation. For example, the national average for railroad conductors is from \$44,000-\$57,000 a year with the potential to earn much more (BLS 2012). Railroad jobs offer women the potential to earn a lucrative salary however; the overall structure of the railroad industry serves to provide a textbook model of

Acker's gendered organizations theory. My findings support her argument and are examined below.

### ***Hiring Biases***

Women working in male-dominated fields are often referred to as "tokens." Tokens are denoted as individuals whose social group is underrepresented in certain contexts therefore, face negative incidents such as heightened visibility and social seclusion (King et al. 2010). Additionally, women that work in male-dominated occupations are more likely to be perceived a representative of her group rather than as an individual. Large railroads will seek to hire groups of 20 or more individuals to fill vacancies in specific locations. These groups are referred to as a "class" since the new employees are often trained at the same pace over time. When asked how many women were hired in their group, many participants replied they were the only woman in their class. A few stated there were 2 or 3 women in their group as a result; they were the only one to complete the initial training. Consequently, their movements are more apt to be noticed and retained to the degree that they fit in with the men's preconceived notions of women thus, subject to stereotyping (Mastekaasa 2005).

All respondents in this study felt they were hired because of their gender, and in some instances, their race and appearance. Several women wrote that interviewers seemed reluctant to consider them for employment; in a few instances mentioned that affirmative action allowed them to get hired but then they felt they were only hired because of it, not in recognition of their skills. Affirmative Action (AA) functions to remove gender and racial barriers to allow entry into occupations in which women and minorities are underrepresented. According to the Department of Labor, the goal of AA is

to ensure women and minorities are represented "... based on the availability of qualified applicants in the job market or qualified candidates in the employer's work force"

(Department of Labor 2002) Nonetheless, it often fails to address the male modeling of the workplace (Acker 2006). For example, when asked about her job interview with a Class I railroad, Cindy responded:

I'd been putting it (application) in for 8 years ...It (the interview) went alright. I knew the person that was interviewing me because I had grown up in (un named town) and so, uh, it was (laughs) a little bit of discrimination there and I mean, they were not happy about having to hire me uh, in fact, he made the comment that he wished I was Spanish and a woman because then he'd have two minorities covered.

Another participant, Ann, wrote:

At that time the Hispanic Human Resource person was more concerned about me losing weight, by stating that I might have to climb on engines. Suggested I work on losing a few pounds. I don't feel the interview was professional. And a friend of mine, a Black lady, applied at the same time, and she said at her interview, the same HR person kept bring up the use of drugs and alcohol. She never got hired.

Other women couldn't remember anything significant about the hiring process except feeling they weren't welcome. They cite affirmative action as the reason they were even considered for a job with a railroad. Amber applied for a job as a machinist and during the interview was told the company had to hire a female to comply with government contracts. Likewise, when asked if she felt welcome and was treated fairly during the interview process, Norma reflects:

I don't think it was so much as being treated fairly or welcomed as it was mandated by the federal government. The railroad didn't have the prerequisite minorities. Since I was the first woman hired in my area, I felt like I was on display.

Nearly all participants' reported feeling unwelcome during the hiring process. Leah remembers sitting in a room, the lone female in a group 25 people competing for 6 jobs offered by a large railroad company. One man began talking very loudly to his companion, stating women should be at home taking care of the house and had no right to work for a railroad. Leah writes that unbeknownst to her, that was just the beginning of the chauvinism she faced by men during her railroad career as a locomotive engineer. Similar to many respondents, Leah experienced rude and chauvinistic behavior from railroad management. For example, Sandy recounts being in the middle of an interview with a railroad official when a Trainmaster walked in and made a comment about her long legs.

Conversely, although a few participants felt they were treated fairly during the hiring process, the women universally attribute this to the federal requirement that railroads hire a certain number of women and minorities. Though Nikki feels she is treated fairly by her supervisors, she resents being told she got her job because she is a woman. She said:

...I was used to fill a quota. When companies hire only on affirmative action and not on merit, then that's discrimination itself. What does it mean to a woman if they can get good jobs just because they are women? Doesn't say much for respecting a women's mind, eh?

Participants clearly feel being hired by the railroad is directly related to federal requirements requiring companies to employ women in jobs formerly dominated by men. They noted feeling somewhat humiliated during the initial interview since in many cases, the company official pointed out they were only being considered because they were

female instead of their job skills. In essence, sexist remarks and disdain by company representatives comprised the hiring experiences of my respondents.

### ***Gender and Sexual Harassment***

The women in this study were primarily given on-the-job training by male co-workers regardless of craft. Acker (1990) argues one process that produces gendered social structures, including organizations, is interactions between women and men. Some women described gender harassment, which refers to a derogatory attitude towards someone based on their gender, while others also reported sexual harassment; defined as physical or verbal conduct of a sexual nature that interferes with an individual's job performance (Routudo et al. 2001). Harassment is fostered through behavior and language; it takes physical, visual, and verbal forms, including sexually explicit photos of women openly presented as locker room or office decorations (Fielden et al. 2000). Most respondents asserted they were harassed by men, particularly supervisors, during training. One woman describes her foreman telling her "...every day, every hour that the railroad was not a place for women." Another participant noted that one man spent more time making sexual advances on her than training and others thought she should be at home on welfare, raising her two boys. A third example is from a respondent who was asked, "Don't you feel guilty taking a job away from a man?" Epstein (2007) argues women face male hostility when they traverse established boundaries. She contends the work environment in male-dominated jobs is inhospitable toward women co-workers due to men being wary of women's ability to perform and also visibly disapprove of their supposed neglect of their families.

In contrast, two participants felt welcomed by their male co-workers during training though some behavior could certainly be considered harassment by others. Sarah writes:

Do I feel harassed? No. Could half my days be considered harassment? Probably. Could I be accused of harassment for the same language and dirty jokes? Yes. All's far in love, war, and railroading, unless someone were to put their hands on me in a way I found threatening, I am fine.

She added that being the only woman in her class of 70, the men were more nervous about her presence than she was. Dennison (2010) maintains women blur genders by acting masculine in an attempt to achieve acceptance by showing they are no different than their male counterparts.

Sarah elucidates this by coping with working in a male-dominated occupation by being one of "the boys."

Conversely, Cindy worked to be accepted by treating her fellow trainees as her "children." She was older than most of them and often did their laundry when away from home for job training. However, when the men decided to wash her clothes, they carried things further by hanging Cindy's undergarments off doorknobs and her slip on the podium. She feels this wasn't done maliciously nevertheless; she goes on to say the young men felt threatened by her presence and it "...stepped on their egos a little bit." Although Cindy's approach to being accepted is to "take care" of the young male co-workers, they still endeavored to exert control over Cindy by sexualizing her. Cindy's colleagues displayed male behavior referred to as "manhood acts" by some scholars. These manhood acts serve to denote heterosexuality, define gender boundaries, and test women's authority (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

Harassment continued after the probation period was over. Several women feel they were singled out and “made an example of.” Nina was investigated for numerous rule infractions stemming from going to lunch with two male train crew members. Although her coworkers were never disciplined she “...was subjected to severe discipline that exceeded what was called for in [the] discipline policy in effect at the time.” She commented that this type of harassment has occurred many times during her railroad career. Unlike her male counterparts, Nina was relentlessly questioned on rule implementation. She states she was constantly watched by management and attempted to stay one step ahead of them at all times. Dennisen (2010) argues that reporting hostile interactions in the workplace can prove costly because coworkers and supervisors often fail to support allegations of harassment. Complaints filed with management are frequently ignored or deemed unsubstantiated by human resource departments. Women are frequently pressured to quietly ignore or tolerate harassment for fear of losing their job. In contrast, men that harass are habitually allowed to remain on the job. Harassment is often tolerated as a condition of the job, both a cause and consequence of gender hierarchy (Acker 1990; MacKinnon 1979). When asked if they had ever observed or experienced harassment from supervisors, almost all respondents replied to the affirmative. Ann described a recent incident:

A supervisor was turned in for harassment, making inappropriate comments in front of women and towards other male co-workers, and when the investigation was complete, it was told that maybe the situation was a case [of] overthinking, an exaggeration of sorts. Basically was said it was all an hallucination. Was all made up. Thought it was going on but had no supporting evidence.

Other women depicted situations where they were asked to wear skirts to work and in one case, asked to sit on her co-worker's lap during a trip while being asked improper questions. The woman commented, "I have no option but to remain in the cab of the locomotive...going to management was not an option. Reports are ignored and women who make reports are perceived as troublemakers." She finally began carrying a tape recorder with her at the end of her career since every report she turned in was deemed unsubstantiated by the Human Resource department.

Women I interviewed describe being constantly "second guessed" by their male counterparts. Trish holds a management position and explains:

No matter what I do, I will NEVER be perceived to be as competent as a man. I not only have to master my job, but the jobs of two ranks above me and three ranks below me to be seen as "able." I am really, REALLY good at my job. I'm not being arrogant; I am taking ownership of my accomplishments. I HATE that the glass ceiling is so low in my industry. I've watched a boss be transferred from bankers' hours to pure night shift because she had a baby. I've watched a boss train an unqualified male replacement for a position SHE filled in on for over a year on a "temporary basis" but for which she did not receive an interview and I can't help wonder if it's because she is a lesbian. I despise that I am so dependent on a company that devalues me strictly because I have a vagina.

Nikki worked for two months in a management trainee position and states, "Railroad managers yell, angrily and often. I suppose it would be like expecting the Army drill sergeants to speak in soft tones, but I found it unprofessional regardless of its 100 plus years of acceptance." Out of the 18 women interviewed, three said they were treated fairly by their supervisors. Laura said she feels she was treated like the rest of the crew. Jordan remarks," Again, I think if you do a good job and are a quality employee, that demands respect regardless of your sex." Then again, Jordan admits to experiencing sexual harassment from a few co-workers but claims she was quick to block unwelcome

advances. She told her male counterparts that she was out there to make a living just like they were and after a period of time she was accepted by most of the men.

One form of harassment that appears to be unique to women railroad workers is that several women revealed that a coworker or supervisor had purposely put their life in danger at some point in their railroad career. Amber writes that one male coworker tried to kill her and though injured and off work for a few months, she was able to return to her job. Laura disclosed some of her supervisors disliked her because of her father's status in the company and claims one man tried to kill her by blowing up her cutting torch because he thought she was a spy for the company. A third woman tells of a male supervisor giving her jobs that required two people yet would not allow anyone to help her with them. "That boy tried to get me hurt," she wrote. When asked why she didn't report him, she wrote, "Why didn't I say anything? There were only two of us. No proof and the railroad takes the complainer and makes them the target. Easier to get rid of me than fix their problem." Similarly, Amber describes treatment by management:

Railroads aren't really serious about recruiting and retaining women. Management doesn't follow through on complaints re sexual harassment, etc. Doesn't really investigate properly. Doesn't really care. Management would rather that women just go away and leave the jobs to men.

Several women filed complaints of harassment by managers to their employer; one woman actually sued her company and won. Her success is rare since most complaints are ignored. Sandy filed two EEOC reports and consulted with an attorney who advised her against suing since "...this company is huge and without a "smoking gun" it would be rather pointless and would only put a target on my back."

Women who work for railroads often experience sexual harassment from supervisors and co-workers while on the job. Though many protest, their complaints are routinely ignored and in some cases, the provocation actually increases. The women feel they have little recourse but to put up with this treatment since unions rarely step in to protect them and most supervisors are male. Those that have filed formal complaints frequently find themselves written up for petty infractions, while male workers do not.

### ***Gendered Working Conditions***

All respondents described having to work in situations where sanitary conditions are non-existent. In the past, locomotives were routinely cleaned and stocked at "roundhouse facilities." "Roundhouse" is a railroad term for an area where maintenance crews clean incoming locomotives for outbound trains. A majority of maintenance personnel have been eliminated forcing train crews to clean them as best they can. Leah worked for a Class I railroad that equipped the bathrooms with a urinal and a pedestal with a plastic bag attached. She comments, "I had to either not drink anything or hope that I could find a private place to take care of business." Pat expressed frustration over the dirty bathrooms on locomotives:

They're horrible. Horrible. Bathrooms are unacceptable. They smell. They're dirty. The engines are dirty and just a little housekeeping could do. They're horrible. And you just go with it.

Cindy gave an even more vivid description:

The bathroom(s) on the engine were not very clean. In fact, I went to the legislature to give representation on the conditions of the bathrooms because, you know, they're in the nose and a lot of times they were too full and would slosh over. And then you go down there and you're stepping in it, then you come up on the engine and that's where you eat your lunch and where you're having to work and you're tracking stuff all over the floor.

The experience with unsanitary conditions shared by Leah, Pat, and Cindy represent what the majority of participants that hold train crew positions have encountered while employed by a railroad. Organizations such as railroads claim to be gender neutral nonetheless, the structure of the workplace is masculine since individuals with a “job” are considered to be male (Acker 1990). This approach allows railroads to claim male workers are also subjected to unsanitary conditions but in reality this is not the case. Often, male workers have other alternatives to unclean restrooms while women crew members do not. Plus, many yard switch engines are not equipped with a bathroom, forcing women to work long hours without the ability to relieve themselves when necessary. Jordan explains:

Some of the yard engines don't have toilets on them and if I catch a job that uses these locomotives you are screwed as a female. I've been very creative. I have seen times when the whole crew is female and if the issue is pushed, a locomotive with a toilet is provided. It usually is easier to just go outside and avoid the controversy but they (management) will make changes to accommodate. I'm sure it is the topic of the day if a train is delayed or overtime is made.

Management fails to provide an engine equipped with a bathroom then blames the female crew members if the work is delayed. Dirty and unsanitary working conditions contribute to inequality regimes within organizations. Inequality regimes include disparities between individuals within organizations in power and control, including respect (Acker 2006).

The elimination of roundhouse personnel is a clear signal that the railroad industry does not consider the needs of their female train operation members. Sandy writes that, “...almost every engineer and conductor I have worked with locally always carry their own packages of Clorox wipes, supply of crew packs, 12 pack of water, and 3-4 new

garbage bags.” She adds that morale is very low at her terminal due to unfair treatment by supervisors. The denigration of women is a key mechanism in fortifying male bonds and protecting the organizations that favor them (Epstein 2007).

Long hours and lack of a regular work schedule are the norm in the railroad industry. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) stated in 2009 that most train employees are subject to be called for work 24 hours a day and only 5 percent have a limited call window (e.g. 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.) when the railroad may contact them to work.

“Trish” offers insight into the long hours:

Railroad crews live in a perpetual state of jetlag. We are tired ALL OF THE TIME. Being federally “rested” by railroad standards does not take into account the things a person must do to survive. People have Kids, dogs, houses, yards, aging parents, medical conditions. None of these factors matter to railroads. Most railroaders simply do not sleep enough. We work day and night, on call, in all kinds of weather conditions. Often we spend 12+ hours in an 8x8 cell with a person we would ordinarily NEVER speak to. While not difficult, the work is unforgiving. If a mistake is made it can kill you or one of your coworkers. We are hunted by our bosses, and punishment consists of being suspended without pay, or termination. Continued Education is provided by memos issued by lawyers, for which a person would need a lawyer to understand them. It is lunacy at its finest. Hostile place, hostile people, yet nobody ever seems to leave voluntarily.

Acker argues that large work organizations deem jobs as an abstract category, filled by an ethereal worker who “exists only for the work” (1990:149). Hypothetically, this person has no outside obligations that impinge upon the job; too many imperatives outside the job make the worker unsuitable for the job. This scenario fits the idea that men are ideal workers since supposedly his life revolves around his job while his girlfriend or wife attends to his personal needs and children. This concept marginalizes women because

they often are the primary caretakers of their families. Nina describes how she juggled her job with the needs of her children:

When the children were young, we had a list of babysitters to call in the event that I was called out unexpectedly, which happened often. In the event that my husband was at work and I was called out but could not find a babysitter, I would have to deal with the consequences. Because of his work schedule, he could schedule babysitters ahead of time if I was gone. I did not have that ability. It was always stressful and I did the best I could to comply and rarely had [an] issue. In the rare instance it did happen, I was called in to explain myself; at the time I know of no man that was called in to explain himself.

Road crews are typically away from home at least 14 to 15 days a month, making it difficult to schedule appointments or recreational plans. Women in the railroad industry find it extremely difficult to remain employed since employees are expected to be available for work 24 hours a day. Cha argues that strong enforcement of this norm is particularly prevalent in male-dominated occupations "... in which jobs are built on the normative conceptions of the 'separate spheres' consisting of breadwinning men and homemaking women (2013:160). Train crews and train managers average 40 to 100 hours per week on the job. Consequently, long hours reinforce occupational segregation and underrepresentation of females in the railroad business.

Maintaining relationships and family life outside of the railroad is extremely difficult for females out in the field. This is due partly to the fact that while men tend to insulate their career from familial responsibilities, women frequently lack a support system that allows them to do the same (Keene and Reynolds 2005). Participants reiterate the impossibility of balancing family and work, particularly if they are the primary breadwinner for their family. Pat, who has two school age sons writes, "I am the primary

caretaker but obviously I can't balance things too well because I've been fired for not working. But I don't know how else to take care of my family." Some of the women whose children are grown describe them as still being resentful that their mother was away working all the time. And others opted not to have children because of their job. Brianna conveys her desire to have children "...but if I stay in this field, it will never happen. If I had to balance or act as a primary caregiver, I could no longer stay in the railroad industry." If the women have children, they sometimes opt to allow them to live with other family members or if divorced, with their father given the unpredictable work hours.

The attitudes of managers are central to a company's receptiveness to work-family needs (Burgess, et al. 2005). Deanna's response, "Pregnancy is treated like a sickness," is typical of a majority of the respondents in this study. Likewise, Norma writes:

Well, it is extremely difficult to have a family and work here. If you are single and have the right frame of mind, this could be the job for you. If you decide to get pregnant, the company doesn't know what to do with you. Every terminal has their own idea of how to handle pregnant women.

When asked if their employer offered some type of support services to address issues unique to female workers, the universal reply was "no." Women railroad workers are discouraged from seeking policies that are more family friendly. Several women noted they were told not to expect "special treatment" from their bosses. Mastekaasa contends, "The presence of one or a few minority members makes the commonalities among the majority members more obvious, and the minority members appear as a deviant contrast" (2004:2262). Nina's testimony supports this notion:

One of the first things that was drilled into your head is that women are treated no differently than men, working conditions are harsh for both women and men. This is not truthful but women tend to buy into this because the reality is that working conditions are harsh. What is not true is that men suffer equally under these conditions. So women begin to believe that if they complain or ask for something that specifically addresses their needs, they are asking for special treatment when in reality they require different treatment due to their gender. The company, the union, and male coworkers has been so effective that they have got women believing if they ask or request changes be made to accommodate their needs, they are receiving special treatment, not equitable treatment. To address needs specific to women is “special treatment,” to address needs specific to men is common everyday practice.

Trish writes that her boss claims gender bias does not exist but tells of being denied access to her company’s medical department when she became ill. According to Trish, only after sharing intimate details of her condition with her boss was she allowed to miss work without being disciplined. Women employees who work out in the field are often more affected than their male counterparts by the company’s approach to absenteeism.

Interestingly, no participants complained about working in adverse weather conditions although weather certainly affects their work. The women seem to expect this as part of the job and enjoy working outside. Many participants noted that one significant advantage of being employed by a railroad is the opportunity to work independently, free from excessive supervision by management. Nevertheless, unsanitary conditions, long hours, and constant pressure to balance work and family obligations without one being detrimental to the other, force some women to choose between their career and children. Company policies and union agreements fail to address issues unique to female railroad workers.

### ***“Gender-Neutral” Union and Company Policies***

For railroad companies and unions, policies are gender neutral and as such, can be construed as discriminatory towards female employees. Acker argues that organizational logic “...has material forms in written work rules, labor contracts, managerial directives, and other documentary tools for running large organizations...” (1990:147). Railroads have particularly harsh absenteeism rules that managers use at their discretion, often to the detriment of female workers. Male employees can leave childcare and familial responsibilities to their wife, girlfriend, or mother. In contrast, women are considered by society to be primary caregivers therefore, rigid absenteeism policies affect them much more directly than men. Carol describes her company policy as one that is representative of the railroad industry:

It is hard to explain how detailed their (sic) policy is, how inflexible and unreasonable. By marking onto the scheduled job the last week of a 12 week measuring period allegedly put me over the policy guidelines, an investigation notice was issued.

Sarah adds that her employer’s policy is, “No more than 3 days off without pay or a doctor’s excuse in a rolling 60 day period. Most railroads have similar policies, either a 60 or 90 day rolling period are common. However, policy guidelines are often unclear regarding absenteeism. For example, Pat shared that her company strongly frowns on weekend layoffs and unofficially declare a weekend is from Thursday to Tuesday, leaving Wednesdays the single day employees can lay off without fear of penalty. This can be extremely confusing and Trish attempted to explain:

My craft only allows one layoff per month, even if a person is forced to work 80 hours a week. One must be careful to make sure their layoffs don’t “touch” a weekend day by more than 15 minutes or they will be charged a full weekend day and exceed their allocation. Four “active” violations lead to termination, but the only

way to deactivate a violation is to go 12 months without violating again. Violations are calculated on a rolling three month basis, so a violation in January can lead to “charges” for November, December, January; December, January, February; and January, February, March. Essentially, one violation can lead to three citations.

A majority of respondents have children and strict absenteeism guidelines cause many to find themselves one violation away from being “fired.” For railroad employees who are union members, “fired” is interpreted as being off for a designated period of time, usually without compensation or availability of health insurance. Depending on the length of time an employee is off, “fired” workers can lose vacation time, impeding a path for women to take time off without threat of disciplinary sanctions.

Balancing work responsibilities with family obligations is extremely difficult for women that work for railroads. One woman disclosed that some of her children are still angry at her for being away from home a majority of time. Another participant revealed that she wants to have children however, she will have to choose between her job or children. Carol speaks of missing important milestones in her children’s lives, “ I have too many regrets of missing valuable dates such as their birthdays, Christmas’s and personal achievements such as graduations.” Only one woman said her company offered support services for women. All but one articulated that their union extended no help or support. Organizations that promote full-time employment for women without childcare provisions, clearly disadvantage mothers (Misra et al. 2005).

Inaccurate train lineups play a key role in railroad employees’ inability to schedule events away from the job. Described as archaic, train lineups are rarely, if ever, up to date yet this method is the only available means for workers to have an idea of when they will go to work. This practice adversely affects all railroad employees but

female workers experience much more difficulty since they are often the primary caretakers in their family. Brianna succinctly wrote in regards to the railroads layoff policy,” If you’re male, you’re fine. If you’re female, you better not miss a single day.”

Nina has firsthand experience with discriminatory applications of absenteeism policies. Both she and her husband work for the same railroad thus allowing them unique insight as to how caregiving is addressed by their company. They have two children and Nina writes how the birth of her children proved detrimental for her in regards to her job:

My husband and I work for the same railroad. My husband has never been harassed or questioned about time off. I have been harassed and questioned numerous times, investigation notices issued and fought by me. He has never had to deal with the same issues I have had to fight. Strange, don’t you think? We do.

Trish described a very similar experience:

In the past, I received record suspensions; even when I was working 90 hours a week, I was still out of compliance and a part-time employee. My husband at the time received no discipline and his record was expunged. We took the exact same days off.

Pat’s husband does not work for the railroad however; her experiences are otherwise similar to Nina’s. At one point in her career, both parents were being treated for cancer plus her husband injured his knee, leaving her to assume total responsibility of their two young sons in addition to driving her parents to San Antonio for treatment. She applied for, and received FMLA, but after that ran out, she began to be written up for excessive absenteeism. After she collected a third letter from the company informing her she had once again, violated company policy, she was fired for over a year. She discussed what she feels is the “good ole boy” environment at her job:

I kind of think they use me as an example at times. So I the guys, if a guy was fired, he wouldn't be fired as long. There's been guys that have gone up four times for absenteeism and there's supposed to be a straight through policy and their still working. Whereas with me, it was three strikes and you're out.

Norma describes her employer's absenteeism policy as harsh but feels it affects male and female employees equally:

Only allowed one day off if you have a regular job (yard), 25% of the month if you are working the road which equates to 4 days off. If you exceed your threshold, there is an investigation and discipline is assessed. What is really disgusting about this is that I know of one man who is constantly going to investigations because he has a court mandated parenting plan where he has to take care of his daughters every other weekend. I think they don't want to fire him because that would cause a big stink. In the meantime, he has to live with an inordinate amount of stress because of this policy. I know of some women that have experienced the same.

Railroad companies have to offer FMLA by law yet often disregard protocol by forcing the affected employee to apply for it multiple times before it is approved. Ann describes her employer's tactics:

First, submit a 30 day letter of intent. This covers you for 30 days to get the doctor's certification filled out by the doctor. Then if the [company's] medical department disagrees with your doctors diagnosis, or the number of days requested, intermittent leave, the company will deny your FMLA and make you go back to the doctor to get it filled out the way they want it filled out. Sometimes it takes three or four times to get it approved. The company interferes with an employee trying to get approved for FMLA, especially intermittent. They violate the federal law all the time, manipulating the law to their advantage.

Protection from the unions is virtually non-existent for women in the railroad industry. All of the participants are either currently, or have in the past, belonged to unions that represent railroad workers. Two unions represent railroad train personnel; United Transportation Union (UTU) and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers

(BLE). Prior to the Reagan administration, unions, including those for railroad workers, were strong and held strong negotiating power. After the air travel controller strike in 1981 and Reagan's subsequent actions, unions have steadily declined in power and membership (Farber and Western 2002). Coupled with union representatives who are often drawn from the workforce thus, identify with the dominant culture, women are often hard pressed to obtain fair representation in cases involving discrimination and harassment (Paap 2008) . Asked if unions address the issue of the railroad's attendance policies, every participant replied that unions have no provisions that protect members from being fired for absenteeism. As a result, female train crew members often find themselves with weak or non-existent union representation. Sandy describes her experiences:

Our previous local chairman did NOT treat women equally, nor did he think women had a problem in being treated fairly. He would not go with me to the superintendent's office to fill out an injury report, when my chair on the locomotive broke underneath me. He would not work with my lawyer to help me get back to work.

Pat's local chairman became mysteriously absent when she discovered several male co-workers had laid off more often than she yet they had not been disciplined or fired for the infractions. She requested the names of the employees in order to build her discrimination case and when finally confronted, the local chairman stated it was better to sacrifice one worker to protect the others.

Asked if they felt they were treated the same as male union members, a majority of the women answered, "no." Most claim the unions purposely ignore issues pertinent to female members yet; most of the respondents believe strongly in their unions but wish they were better represented. This trend may be changing as women begin to participate

in their unions. Jordan served as the president of her local for several years and now is a member of a safety committee in her terminal. Nonetheless, of the 18 respondents, she is the only woman that participates in her union in some capacity. Even in unions whose members are predominately women, the ratio of women in staff and leadership positions remains low (Brofenbrenner 2005). Consequently, most of the women feel their union does a poor job of protecting them against harassment and unfair treatment by the railroad they work for.

Balancing work responsibilities with family obligations is extremely difficult for women that work for railroads. Asked what they have given up to work in the railroad, the replies were comparable. One woman disclosed that some of her children are still angry at her for being away from home a majority of time. Another participant revealed that she wants to have children however; she will have to choose between her job and children. Brianna writes:

I've given up everything. I never see my family. I'm lucky to get 3 to 4 hours of sleep a night. I've had to move thousands of miles away from home just to keep my job.

Trish's reply is blunt:

I haven't seen my best friend in five years. I haven't had children; it's not too late but the goddamned clock is ticking, and I've married, divorced, and dated almost exclusively within my industry. Men on the "outside" can be intolerant of any woman's career, but it is especially challenging when the railroad demands so much of my time and I am surrounded almost exclusively by men. I've missed holidays, birthdays, but I made sure I made it to my baby sister's graduation! I've had to give up the part of myself that is tender and caring; to be successful in my job, I have to be a raging bitch for eight hours a day, sometimes sixteen hours. To be nice, as a woman, is to be weak. It sucks.

Most of the women say that having thick skin is a requirement to succeed in the railroad industry. Sandy sums it up for a majority of the respondents:

Thick skin with a determination to take care of your home no matter what. Warm jackets and a reliable babysitter or supportive husband who will be there at all hours of the day and holidays.

Asked what they disliked about working for a railroad, the respondents cited many of the issues already discussed in this paper; unsanitary conditions, harassment, out dated union agreements, and archaic company absenteeism policies. Brianna, a manager, therefore non-union, offers her opinion from a different perspective:

Do you have 30 days to listen? I am tasked with goals that my male counterparts are not tasked with. I work 100 hour weeks and that is not exaggerated. I know my salary is significantly less than my male counterparts; both in same positions, salary bands, and also lower salary bands. There is no one to vent to. All my “leaders” are male and quite frankly misogynistic. I am berated every day. When I stand up for my employees, I am referred to as a bitch or too feisty.

Brianna was one of two respondents in this study that holds a non-union management position; nevertheless, her views are very similar to the other participants.

Conversely, when asked what they liked about the railroad, the topmost answer was not having a boss constantly hovering over them. Many respondents claimed they love being outside, learning something new every day, and rarely working with the same people each day. Amber expressed her pleasure in working for an “historic institution” that is over 100 years old. Most participants included the high wages and benefits as perks to working for a railroad. In fact, several wrote the pay and benefits are the only factors they enjoy about the job. Brianna wrote:

Honestly, in this economy a decent paying job is hard to come by. As I reflected on this question for quite some time, I can say

unequivocally that it comes down to my salary. That's it. The only thing.

Yet, despite the hardships participants described in this research, many women enjoy the job itself and welcome the challenge a railroad career offers. Trish writes, "I like that I am constantly challenged (mentally) and that my current position... allows me to make some really positive changes/impacts for those who work as conductors, switchman, and engineers." Likewise, Leah contends the challenge of running trains keeps the job interesting and fun. Given that a majority of the women like their job, they were asked why, in their opinion, are there so few women working today for railroads? Most identify the lack of stability and difficulty of raising children as justification women avoid a railroad career. Norma writes:

Well, it is extremely difficult to have a family and work here. If you are single and have the right frame of mind, this could be the job for you. If you decide to get pregnant, the company doesn't know what to do with you. I think there are so few women working [for] the railroad [because] starting out, the hours are lousy, never knowing when you are going to work, possibility of being furloughed, possibility of being forced to work another terminal many miles from home and not having a life.

Norma's opinion is reflective of most of the women who took part in my research. In fact, when asked what advice they would offer women who are contemplating a career in the railroad industry, many answered flatly, "Don't do it!" Robin feels the industry as a whole is unwelcoming to women and expresses regret for the years she invested to her job. Still others warned about the dangers of the job and as Deanna commented, "You are going to see things, hear things, and experience things that will give you sleepless nights. It is the career you chose. It isn't for everybody, so be sure this is where you want to be." The key to a successful railroad career, Sandy writes, "...stand your ground and take no

lip from the guys and be flexible because there are numerous opportunities to be had if you are willing.”

Finally, asked what they would change to improve working conditions, answers were varied. Nonetheless, nearly all respondents claimed that they would improve bathroom conditions on locomotives and terminals. Norma adds that if the CEO of the company she works for was a woman, working conditions would change dramatically for the better. In contrast, Jordan feels conditions have improved over the years. She states, “...we didn’t even have women’s restrooms. We now have our own restrooms and locker rooms.”

The women in this study are in consensus that holding a job with a railroad offers an opportunity to work in a unique field that is challenging and fulfilling. Yet, the railroad industry and related unions fail to review and renovate archaic work policies and agreements that can be upgraded to allow employees leeway for family obligations. Instead, both organizations claim to enact rules and policies that are gender neutral yet adversely affect women workers significantly more than their male counterparts.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Conclusion**

Using Acker's gendered organizations approach, my study has explored women's role in the modern day railroad industry. It is clear from the research that railroad's continue to be structured to support masculine ideology with very little consideration for women's dual responsibilities as employee and caretaker. Despite high wages and excellent benefits, the volume of female employees in the industry has decreased in recent years. Many participants in my project are mothers and cite archaic, ill-defined layoff policies as a constant source of intimidation by the employer and subsequent supervisors, leading several women to quit or being fired for lengthy periods of time. These policies also are a deciding factor for some women when contemplating a family and children; a few opting for career over children.

This study has focused on women who are either currently employed, or have been employed in the railroad industry. Most work as locomotive engineers or conductors, although several other occupations are represented, and a few hold management positions. Despite the diversity of professions, the women share comparable experiences; harassment from supervisors and coworkers, long hours away from home, and little time off.

My research establishes that the work environment for women out in the field continues to be strongly male-dominated. According to many respondents, harassment continues to occur with complaints to their supervisors often ignored. Several women report coping with untoward behavior by usurping male work conduct and directing it back at their male coworkers. Consequently, relieving initial tension by returning

whatever treatment they receive, the women are comfortable in their job and enjoy a rapport with their male counterparts, while others feel overwhelmed by the constant stress in the workplace.

Work related stress for railroad women is exacerbated by long hours away from home, particularly women with children. The railroad industry makes little effort to improve scheduling of trains, resulting in inaccurate and unpredictable work schedules. Acker (1990) correctly identifies the ability of male-dominated organizations to assert that their policies are gender neutral, when in fact; they view jobs as abstract and workers as disembodied entities able to fill a position at a moment's notice. Acker (1998) asserts:

The non-responsibility of organizations for human survival and reproduction, as well as for the natural environment contributes to the devaluation and marginalization of caring and reproductive activities and those, mostly women, responsible for these activities. Non-responsibility consigns caring needs to areas outside the organizations interests and, thus, helps to maintain the image of the ideal, even adequate, employee as someone without such obligations. Thus, organizational policies and practices continue to encode this gendered notion of the employee.

Consequently, women with families who have weak support systems are doubly affected since they risk losing wages and face discipline from their employer for excessive absenteeism if they are unable to locate temporary childcare.

Railroad layoff policies force workers to walk a fine line in order to adhere to the rules. The women in my study demonstrate how these policies are administered

unequally and unfairly for female railroad workers. In some cases, both husband and wife are employed by a railroad and often take off work at the same time nonetheless; the woman receives disciplinary marks on her work record while the man does not.

Finally, women in the railroad industry receive little support from their unions. Similar to railroads, union agreements are viewed as gender neutral nevertheless, adversely affect female workers by perceiving members as sexless and anonymous. According to the data in my research, few female members feel represented by their unions, claiming they are still governed by the good-ole-boy mindset. Similar to railroads, unions preserve its gendered structure by encoding supposed gender neutral agreements which reinforce the notion that members have no outside obligations and responsibilities.

Overall, data from this project support Acker's theory of gendered organizations. While other male-dominated occupations seem to slowly become more accommodating to women, the railroad industry appears firmly entrenched in masculine ideology. My research is the first sociological study conducted about women in the railroad industry to provide an opportunity of understanding how this ideology affects their personal and professional life. Nonetheless, this study fails to explain the decrease of women employed in the industry. Issues like harassment directed at women for example, have existed since females began working in male-dominated occupations therefore, cannot be considered a viable reason for the decrease.

Attempts to persuade women to participate in this project proved challenging given the suspicion and fear expressed by some of the respondents. As a consequence, the opinions and experiences shared by respondents may not reflect a majority of women

employed by railroads. Future studies on this subject are needed however; it may be difficult, if not impossible, for an outsider to gain access to female railroad workers. I worked for a large Class I railroad for a number of years and even with my status as an insider, recruiting women for this study was problematic.

Railroads are resistant to changes that would encourage more women to seek out the well-paying jobs they offer. Several approaches could increase the number of female railroad employees; hire more women for management positions, provide accurate work schedules and train lineups, eliminate and replace antiquated layoff policies modify hours-of-service rules, and finally, increase the quantity of rail employees so railroads have adequate crews to man trains. These changes would reduce adverse consequences for all employees, but particularly women. Future studies which focus on male railroad workers' views on female counterparts may help explain the decrease of women in the industry. An examination of how supervisors are trained to manage workers in the field may provide insight as to how they interpret what they learn, particularly in their treatment of female employees. Ideally, this research will serve as a catalyst to enact changes as to how women are regarded by the railroad industry.

## **APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS**

### **I. Background/Demographic Questions**

- 1.) How long have you worked in the railroad industry?
- 2.) When were you hired by the railroad?
  - a.) What is/was your position?
- 3.) Who/what influenced your decision to apply for a job with the railroad? Why did you start working for the railroad?
- 4.) Describe what aspects you like about working for a railroad.
- 5.) Describe what aspects you don't like about working for a railroad.
- 6.) Have you worked in other non-traditional occupations?

### **II. Experiences Working for a Railroad**

- 1.) Think back to your job interview. Tell me about your interview. Did you feel welcomed as a woman? Did you feel as though you were treated fairly?
- 2.) Describe your training. Were you trained by men? How were you treated during the training process?
- 3.) Describe the typical working conditions experienced by train crews.
- 4.) On average, how many hours per week/month do you work?
- 5.) How are you treated by male co-workers?

6.) Do you work with any female co-workers?

7.) Are your supervisors male or female? How have your supervisors treated you?

Do you think they treat men and women differently?

8.) Have you ever experienced or observed sexual harassment by male co-workers and supervisors?

### **III. Company Policy and Union Agreements**

1.) Describe your employer's policy regarding absenteeism.

2.) How is FMLA applied in your profession?

3.) Do you have children? Are you the primary caregiver for anyone else in your family? How do you balance the demands of your work and your caregiving or family responsibilities?

4.) Describe how you feel your union treats you. Do you think you are treated the same as men? Does the union address any concerns unique to women workers? Do you think they should?

5.) Describe how absenteeism is addressed in your union agreement.

6.) How often are you usually absent from work per month? Have you ever been disciplined for excessive absenteeism?

a.) If so, what were the circumstances?

b.) What, if any, disciplinary action did the company take?

c.) What steps did your union take to protect you?

#### **IV. Concluding Questions**

1.) If given the opportunity, how would you improve working conditions at your job?

2.) What advice would you give a woman who was considering a career in the railroad industry?

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