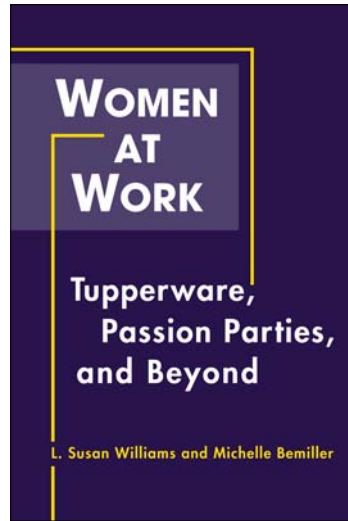


EXCERPTED FROM

**Women at Work:  
Tupperware, Passion Parties,  
and Beyond**

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and Michelle Bemiller

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ISBN: 978-1-58826-720-7 hc



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Ste. 314

Boulder, CO 80301

USA

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fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the  
Lynne Rienner Publishers website  
[www.rienner.com](http://www.rienner.com)

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# 1

## The Gendering of Parties and Markets

Fun, Friends, and Flavors: This unique, interactive party is your opportunity to see, taste, and experience the new Tupperware lifestyle—amazing products, delicious recipes, and smart, simple solutions to improve your life. Plus, what a great opportunity to exchange ideas and make new friends. Whether you're a Consultant, a host, or a guest, there's a lot to enjoy at a Tupperware Party! It's party time! —*Party Inspiration Center, Tupperware.com*

Have you ever been to a Tupperware party (promoting airtight plastic containers) and a Passion Parties event (pushing plastic dildos named Jack Rabbit or Big Thriller) in the same week? The above excerpt from a Tupperware website leaves no doubt—a party is on! Now, picture a line of young women, poised before individual mirrored cosmetic cases the size of a lunch box (pink, of course), being carefully schooled in the (Mary Kay) art of sculpting and blending. Most at least pretend to take in the lesson; others giggle, and one yells out, “Hey look, I’m Bozo!” as she draws high eyebrows above her already rosy, rosy cheeks. Again, echoing from the Tupperware quote above, we are reminded that a product party is not *just* a party, it’s a lifestyle.

This book is about gender parties: gatherings in which products are sold or made, while ideas about culturally appropriate male/female arrangements are constructed. And more.

Gender parties reside in all kinds of communities. Consider women milling around in home gatherings that feature flowing wine and fancy food, along with hundreds of designer handbags displayed on a staircase; then envision buying a handsome Louis Vuitton bag or a blue French leather Prada coin purse for \$50—counterfeit replicas of bags that sell for hundreds or thousands of dollars. Excitement builds as more purses are ushered in, some in a familiar plaid, others with the Kate Spade logo or the Gucci G. Soon, the host (a woman) maneuvers an attendee (a woman) into the kitchen, where she explains the advantage of “joining” the multilevel marketing family; the solicitation phase has begun.

Yet all of these occasions are described not as work, but as a party.

The framework outlined in this book, together with its field studies, represents the first scholarly exploration of what we term the *party plan economy*.<sup>1</sup> As such, we refer to a loosely organized segment of a global informal economy, but we start by describing a mostly Westernized version of a multilevel marketing scheme in which a host (almost always a woman) invites friends into her home to purchase products shown by a company consultant (also usually a woman). The occasion is referred to as a party, complete with décor, food, drinks, games, and the chance to win free products. Another agenda, mostly subterranean, is to recruit other women into a pyramid-like structure in which graduated commissions are distributed hierarchically. Even this brief description reveals difficult-to-categorize facets of the party plan economy. Is it professional or personal? Hobby or hard work? Formal or informal work? Rule- or relationship-driven?

Certainly an air of fun permeates the party venue. But gender parties are about much more than the food and fun to which the word *party* alludes; parties are, in fact, work and networking, business and pleasure, public and private. The party plan economy, more than any other labor market segment, depends on roughly equal parts of economics and relationships. The problem is that traditional scholarship has neither language nor literature to deal with such a structure. Yet one underlying, largely unspoken and unacknowledged message comes through pretty clear: parties are what women do.

Not only are parties what women do, the term itself is gendered. On the one hand, the term *parties* conjures up feminine images such as social, ritual, celebration, decoration, fun, and festival. On the other hand, the term *markets* commands a masculine persona—market forces, stock market, bull markets, market data, competition. The concept and practice of gender accomplishes an almost complete (though artificial) segregation between the two terms: *market* is about serious work, clearly within a masculine domain, and *party* belongs to women and feminine venues.

*Market* portrays a degree of permanence and scope not attached to parties. To complement the economic structure of gender parties, we offer the concept *marketplaces of interaction*<sup>2</sup>—referring to a structure that is at once relational and utilitarian. It is this reference that situates *parties* in a more expansive context, while also retaining the concept of relations as critical to the party plan economy. By marketplaces of interaction, we refer to an organizational arrangement of relations that includes both professional and personal associations; these associations guide economic transactions but also incorporate friendship, reciprocity, and loosely structured social networks. The term also includes a culture of fun, though fun may not be primary or even present. Marketplaces of interaction can be related to physical locations, such as the home or streets or booths but also may reside in digital space (such as Facebook) and/or other interfaces such as organizations, clubs, or spaces for brief encounters.

The purpose of *Women at Work* is to bridge the traditionally male-modeled world of economics and the largely invisible work of relations, advancing the idea of a party plan economy that includes both formal and informal transactions. Recognizing the uniqueness of the party plan economy, wedged between formal labor and informal relationships, this book highlights overlapping circumstances of women's work and personal lives, whether participating in a cosmetic party in the United States or weaving a tapestry in Guatemala. These transactions are deeply gendered and distinct from male-centered arrangements, which have dominated labor market studies. To illustrate this idea, top scholars across several disciplines conducted original case studies specifically for this project, giving you a rare on-the-ground view of women's work in this part economic, part relational niche.

Twelve field studies illustrate intriguing facets of the party plan economy as they exist in somewhat dissimilar forms around the world. We expose two structures that are seemingly distinct—the party plan economy and marketplaces of interaction—and at once blur their boundaries; the two concepts are interdependent. Illustrating these two concepts through case studies, we tour women's experiences in a deeply gendered economy—from women vendors in the street markets of Brazil to piece workers in the Czech Republic to a comparative study of US party plan markets and “kitty parties” (a form of pooled resources) in India. Still other contributors' work yields situations as seemingly disparate as cloth weavers in Guatemala, African American book clubs, and drag queens gathering to sew costumes.

By situating the party plan economy within a global framework, we argue that women's experiences are marked by a common strand: individuals working within a mostly unregulated system that produces and sustains a deeply gendered system. In particular, women's informal work is often unacknowledged and/or trivialized (think about the party mode just described), yet it holds great promise for raising its members' group consciousness of themselves as women and, ultimately, as humanists, thus carrying potential for collective action.

### How It All Began

As a professor of sociology, I (Sue) first became interested in the work/party phenomenon when listening to graduate students as they described themselves at a makeup party. In fact, the description of the Mary Kay scene at the beginning of this introduction came from these young students. They laughed at themselves as inept makeup artists, deliberated at seeming conflicts between being “girly” and being young feminists, and empathized (a little) with the party consultant, who obviously had no idea what to do with this group of young activists.

I could relate. Just previously, I had been to a Passion Parties gathering with a dozen or so of my colleagues. There must have been twelve PhDs in the

room, and I can tell you it was not the demographic the Passion Parties consultant had been trained to manage. We laughed, made fun, tried on pink boas, and wondered aloud how our lesbian colleagues in the room felt about constant references to pleasing their “husbands.” Poor consultant.

Intrigued, I took notice. It seemed that the party plan phenomenon was everywhere. My daughter in San Diego was invited to a shoe party that may have been as suspect as the illegal designer purse parties I had read about. I was urged to attend another Passion Parties event for a bride (does one register for vibrators?), then got an e-mail asking me to please come by the department office and shop through the Home and Garden Party catalog, generously placed there by an office employee. Someone else brought in their PartyLite candles catalog with the same request. I turned on late-night television, only to discover Suzanne Somers smilingly announce her new company, Mommy’s Work at Home Place, where “thousands of mommies have left the daily grind of jobs to run their own businesses.” It was everywhere. Except in scholarly literature.

Curious to test experiences of the college set, I informally polled my undergraduate classes. Virtually all women but none of the men related to the party plan, and I asked some of my Sociology of Women students to join ad hoc focus groups. One common wisdom that emerged from this group was that an “alcohol served” invitation gets the crowd to a product party. They specifically mentioned “Margarita Mary Kay parties,” an interesting observation, given that the company discourages alcohol at product parties.<sup>3</sup> One young woman was actually a Mary Kay consultant and referred to the company as the Mary Kay Cult. Most invitations go out via online social groups such as Facebook and MySpace, as well as through cell phone chains; this is not surprising, given the social networking habits of this generation. Several women mentioned that they were approached in a store about their “remarkable face” or “unbelievable smile” that would make them the perfect model at a product party—a largely unethical solicitation device known as “warm chattering.”<sup>4</sup>

This group also enlightened me to the only male party version I heard about, termed “corn and porn.” Guys gather at someone’s apartment, or perhaps at a frat house, eat popcorn and watch porn together. Of course, cold beverages are also involved. I suppose pornography is a type of product, but we decided this category is definitely beyond the scope of this project!

And then I thought about my own experiences. I went back to my own days as a Classique Creations jewelry consultant and later as a “beauty” consultant with Mary Kay in my small Texas hometown. The photo shows my “premiere” appearance as a Mary Kay “lady”; it was held in the bank community room because that was the largest venue I could find outside the high school gymnasium! Interestingly, at the time I never thought of these parties as *real* work (though it was actually exhausting); nor did I consider them to be particularly gendered or think of the women on both sides of the globe who are exploited through globalization, consumerism, and slave labor conditions. I do remember



Figure 1.1 Coauthor Sue Williams at her Mary Kay premier in 1982. Note the little twin girls watching, intrigued. (Dr. Sue's Photos)

taking pride in what I did and being happy when my clients were pleased with the results.

After becoming aware of gender parties as a phenomenon, I searched for anything scholarly about this newfound discovery (though the party plan itself literally had been right under my nose for decades) but found nothing. I did note one critical thought—piece on the Internet that described a particular irony.<sup>5</sup> Mary Kay—now with huge mass production in China—sells skin lighteners to women there while marketing skin bronzers, manufactured in China, to white women in the United States. This is a vivid illustration of global exploitation as a by-product of such gender systems.

### Our Gendered Eyes

Visiting with my coauthor, Michelle, we soon recognized that only a comprehensive analysis, based on a social constructionist gender perspective, would make sense of the party plan phenomenon. As gender scholars, we usually *see* gender everywhere (unlike my own blindness to the party plan phenomenon). The inevitability of recognizing gender arises because the expression of gender is embedded in action and practice. That is, people—all people—*do* gender, though the quality of such practices may vary significantly by culture.

This simple but profound concept comes from a 1987 article entitled “Doing Gender,” which, among other important works in the 1970s and 1980s, marks a pivotal era in contemporary gender scholarship.<sup>6</sup> Candace West and Don Zimmerman, in “Doing Gender,” note that although gender is learned (socialized), and gender is embedded in organizations and institutions (structure), it is individuals who *do* gender. It is individuals who, through daily practices, maintain gender. Once we consider gender as a verb, not a noun, the concept becomes crystal clear: I gender, you gender, my students at the Mary Kay party gendered, men who are disinterested (or pretend to be) are gendering, the host who invites and the women who attend and buy and book parties gender.<sup>7</sup> We all gender. It’s a powerful, practice-based concept that helps recognize gender as embedded in relations. The challenge is to make gendering, while it hides beneath individual skirts and pants (metaphorically speaking), visible as a structure. It is equally important to recognize that it is through human initiative—referred to as agency—that resistance to power structures takes place. This book brings a structural gender analysis to the party plan economy while incorporating the role of individual motivation and contributions.

We conceive of the party plan economy as a gendered structure, identifying gender at the interactional level (individuals *do* gender) and the structural level (as an economic entity). Both are socially constructed. However, gender as a theoretical concept is more than the sum of its parts. In resisting an essentialist position, such as “we are born that way” and “that’s just the way things are,” gender scholars consider gender as a system of differentiation that divides people into two categories, male and female, regardless of similarities between or differences among each category.<sup>8</sup> That is, women and men are more alike than, say, women and oranges. And although it is true that, on average, men are taller than women, there is much greater variation *among* men and *among* women. Nevertheless, we are well conditioned to emphasize differences, not sameness, between the sexes. This practice, among others, maintains a system of power based on constructed gender that nonetheless exists under the guise of natural differences.

In considering gender as socially constructed, it is useful to think in terms of masculinities and femininities (note the plural; more than one template exists) rather than male/female.<sup>9</sup> Recently, I asked my students—both women and men—to write down ideal (conventional) masculine and feminine characteristics and then to rank their own gendered selves on a percentage scale.<sup>10</sup> I used femininity as the standard. No one ranked her/himself as 0 percent feminine, and no one ranked 100 percent feminine. We exist, as social beings, on a complex, socially constructed, and shifting continuum. Most women ranked themselves below 60 percent feminine, and most men “admitted” to incorporating at least 20 percent feminine characteristics into their identity. This brief example demonstrates that gender is not only constructed (and complex) but also a system of power. The masculine (and by association most men) is afforded greater



status than the feminine. By attachment to the undervalued feminine, women are most often relegated to lower-status jobs, and much of their work is trivialized or rendered invisible. These concepts will become useful in understanding a global system of gender differentiation, one that shapes individual women's experiences as well as the entire party plan economy.

### Gendering the Party Plan Economy

In many respects, the party plan economy is a financial boon. The US party plan economy alone accounts for more than \$30 billion annually; Mary Kay Cosmetics, one of the direct marketing giants, declares 1.8 million independent consultants in more than thirty-five markets around the world and accounted for \$2.4 billion in wholesale dollars (\$4.8 billion retail) in 2007.<sup>11</sup> Although the study of economic forces generally characterizes markets as rational, formalized entities, sociological studies expand market research to also incorporate irrational moves such as discriminatory practices. For example, transactions in informal markets may enjoy a freer hand in more loosely defined environments such as piecework or caregiving. Many multilevel marketing companies now boost sales and recruitment through global development, where work is even less regulated. The \$2.4 billion in Mary Kay sales number is from 2007. The company did not provide years for the other numbers. In 2009, Avon claimed to have "over 5 million" consultants in 100 countries.<sup>12</sup> During the same year, Arbonne averaged "752,052 . . . consultants worldwide and 680,449 in the United States."<sup>13</sup> In 2010, Pampered Chef reported 60,000 consultants in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Mexico.<sup>14</sup> These brief snapshots suggest a quite sizable labor market.

Yet, no one took notice, despite the seemingly obvious gendered character of the party plan economy. The language is gendered (in addition to party terms, references abound to love, romance, dreams, hearth, and other connotations associated with the feminine), and colors are almost always pink or other pastels—marks of femininity in modern society. Other imagery includes petals, hearts, patterns, florals, and demure photos of smiling women. Parties are in homes, by women and for women, and products are largely for women or for women who like to give others (usually men) pleasure.

Despite these feminine characteristics, a shadow structure with a heavily masculinist bias exists. While the party plan economy is supported almost exclusively by women's labor and women's consumer habits, the power structure looks different. For example, the home party-plan structure was the brainchild of a woman, Brownie Wise, who teamed with Mr. Tupper to boost sagging sales of his plasticware on retail store shelves, yet (as illustrated later) she was edged out early on. Even though the *portrayal* of the contemporary party plan corpo-

rations almost always includes women at the top, some claim this is a façade. For example, the president of cosmetic company Arbonne, Rita Davenport, is reported to be a figurehead who rarely if ever attends business meetings,<sup>15</sup> which are dominated by male executives.<sup>16</sup> Even the matriarch of cosmetics, Mary Kay Ash, appointed her son to manage the business. Christine Williams was the first to note a “glass escalator effect,” documenting invisible forces that propel men to the top, especially in female-dominated work structures.<sup>17</sup> The party plan economy is dominated by men at the top and women at the bottom, a deeply hierarchical and gendered arrangement.

It's not the case that we lack scholarship to address the gendered nature of such broad-based structures. In fact, one of the earliest and most enduring gender/work concepts is the “glass ceiling,” describing a transparent but impenetrable gendered barrier through which few women ascend in the work world.<sup>18</sup> However, it was not until around 1990 that social science developed a theory of gendered organizations. A rich set of studies emerged, led by Joan Acker. Acker convincingly argued that organizational structures are not gender neutral.<sup>19</sup> Assumptions about gender underlie virtually every aspect of organizations, though they are made to appear neutral by assuming a “universal” worker. On closer examination, a plethora of studies demonstrate that the image of work and workers is almost wholly masculinized (though not always in a straightforward manner).<sup>20</sup> For example, the ideal-type manager comes in early, stays late, works best in a highly competitive, hierarchical environment, wears a suit and tie, gives orders, appears rational and unemotional, drinks after work, plays golf with the executives, and is never expected to check on children, care for elderly parents, or pick up the dry cleaning; s/he *is* expected to have a partner at home who arranges lovely dinner parties. In other words, s/he is male or at least gendered to resemble a male.

These brief illustrations reflect a gendered party plan economy that reaches into the hundreds of billions of dollars in sales per year. Even more difficult to estimate is illegal markets. For example, knockoff purses are part of a global counterfeit trade that accounts for another \$500 billion a year (though not all are sold under the party plan). Some are marketed legally, but Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents who investigate purse parties state that not only are many products smuggled into the country, but some participants are under suspicion as part of organized crime rings. Several convictions have ensued: a recent bust occurred in Omaha, Nebraska,<sup>21</sup> where women who sold the purses face a possible \$2 million fine and several years in prison. Not so much of a party. Yet the party plan economy exists behind what some characterize as “smoke and mirrors,” as one author specifically refers to the Amway organization's marketing ploys.<sup>22</sup> The party plan economy is big business, incorporating the glitz, glam, and sometimes questionable underbelly of a Hollywood production. Taken together, its deeply gendered character calls for a comprehensive gender analysis.

## Marketplaces of Interaction

Recall that we refer to marketplaces of interaction as an organizational arrangement of relations, including both professional and personal associations that guide economic transactions. The party plan economy provides the structural arrangement for a gender analysis, but it is the interactional component that is most visible and action-based. Although it is a mischaracterization to think of the two segments—structure and interaction—as distinct, a gender analysis typically pulls the two apart. In general, the structure, here the party plan economy, gives the object of inquiry a framework within which to work, while interaction provides action and agency, or room for exploration. In particular, marketplaces of interaction accommodate a place to think about agency and resistance, whereas the party plan economy works as barriers to such movement. In reality, the two are interrelated and interdependent: as an entity, marketplaces of interaction underscore how our individual actions become embedded in structural constraints. A few personal illustrations emphasize this relationship.

Readers of this book may already be thinking about product-based parties as a part of a personal repertoire of experiences (even if actual attendance did not occur). But, if you are a woman, have you thought about your interconnectedness *as women* at these parties? If you are a man, perhaps you are curious (or not) about the absence of men in the party format. After all, one could just as easily buy tools, fishing gear, or other “manly” products while hanging out and having a barbecue in a friend’s backyard. These brief wonderings elicit a decidedly gendered and local characterization of parties that includes individual and group-level features.

We’ve just discussed how individuals do gender, but West and Zimmerman also assert that these “doings” are situated in contexts, which lend channeling and character to the doings. Some contexts are best considered as historical and institutional, others as cultural, some as time- or geography-sensitive. All are complex, layered, multifaceted. Here, marketplaces of interaction lends itself well to thinking about situated doings. Marketplaces (the entity), like other physical places, carry history, tradition, practices, culture, institutions, trends, and conditions. The *concept* of marketplaces, however, is much broader and provides a proxy for considering ways in which social structure shapes gender and channels practices; it includes social practices and may invoke different levels of analysis.

In one sense, we can consider parties as local and markets as global. Once we envision party scenes as gendered, it becomes relatively easy to detect gendered interactions. On a global level, the connections may be further removed and more difficult to discern. How many of us stop to think about ties with workers cross-culturally? If you take a look at the products that you purchase at home-based parties, you will probably find that they were made in another country, and although the products will not explicitly state this, they are made

by women whose labor is exploited. You won't readily find information that 99 percent of direct sales consultants lose money, or that Amway is being sued for antitrust violations and racketeering, or that winning on a snake-eyes roll in Vegas is about 600 times more likely than turning a profit in a multilevel marketing scheme.<sup>23</sup> Suddenly, the party becomes not only work but something more complex, layered and textured with a hint of the sinister or, conversely, with optimism and hope. Marketplaces of interaction provide a mechanism to assess such complexities.

### The Party Plan Economy

The party plan economy sits in a peculiar position between formal and informal work: it incorporates public and private space and includes individual and collective efforts. Some follow corporate models, but others avoid bureaucratic forms. Some facets of the party plan economy defy even basic organizational conventions. This section addresses such junctures.

Worldwide, the vast majority of part-time workers are women; women represent 98 percent of this category in Sweden, 80 percent in the United Kingdom, and 68 percent in Japan and the United States. In developing countries, the informal employment comprises 50 percent to 80 percent of total nonagricultural employment.<sup>24</sup> Globally, women account for 30 percent to 90 percent of street vendors and about 80 percent of all home-based labor.<sup>25</sup>

Chances are that readers of this book have already participated in the informal labor economy. Babysitting or mowing lawns for neighbors are examples of work for which teens are often paid in cash, which may not be reported as income. There may be a benefit for the payee by not paying taxes on earnings, but the individuals who paid for the services benefited more—they escaped payroll taxes, or, saving even more, they avoided hiring a professional nanny or a landscape company. Corporations have the same desires as those neighbors—to minimize what they spend on labor—and, as a result, some build their entire enterprise around the informal marketplace. After all, why hire employees who will demand a salary, request benefits, and require a human resources department to oversee them when there are people willing to work solely on commissions?

Although the percentage of the gross domestic product (GDP) generated by informal markets is lower in the United States than in developing countries, it accounts for around 10 percent, or about \$1.4 trillion dollars.<sup>26</sup> *Women at Work* addresses one thin slice of the informal economy—a party plan economy that seems rooted in the United States but demonstrates clear ties to other forms of women's work across the globe, which are often regarded as trivial.

Globalization movements often sit uneasily between formal and informal economies. Hernando De Soto argues that the informality of property rights in developing countries is the reason for their failure of formal capitalism to suc-



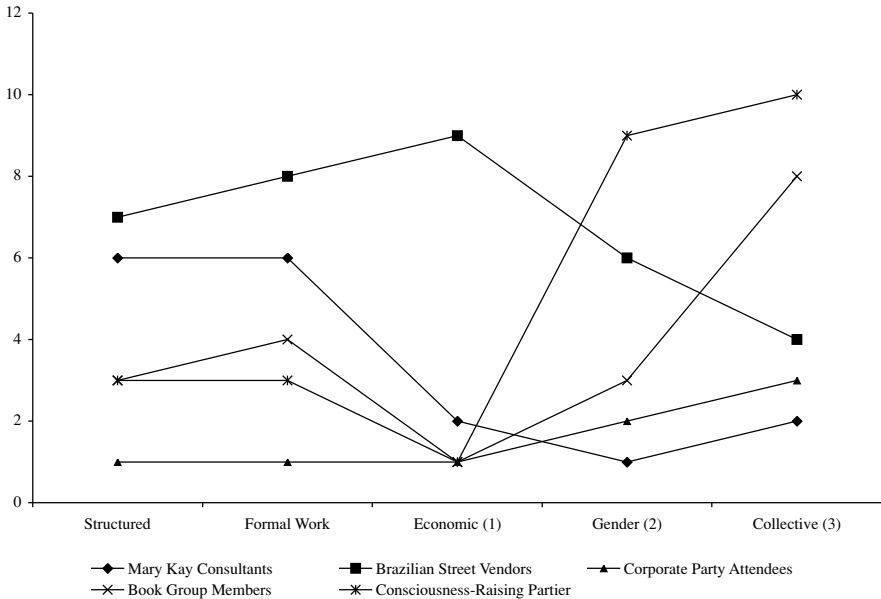
product parties, but to get the most out of a book club meeting, members are required to have done reading beforehand. The horizontal axis denotes the degree to which the work is considered formal. In Table 1.1, the formal work designation is a combination of the degree to which the work is considered a “real” job and how readily one would identify herself as an official participant. A Guatemalan woman whose only source of income is weaving blankets would designate “participant in fair-trade textiles” as part of her identity much sooner than an American who uses the fair-trade blanket as a cover while reading.<sup>30</sup>

However, focusing on labor alone is limiting. We are also interested in using parties as a space for empowerment. By empowerment, we mean a bottom-up ability to exercise control over various aspects of one’s social, political, economic, and personal world; the emphasis is on “power to” rather than “power over.”<sup>31</sup> Empowerment can be approximated in different ways, and in Figure 1.2 are three types: individual economic, individual gendered, and collective. Economic empowerment requires little elaboration; financial independence invokes an overall sense of self-determination. The second dimension refers to a sense of gender empowerment when women practice autonomy, assert their right to decisionmaking, and reinforce the value of women’s work.<sup>32</sup> In other words, they come to gain an appreciation of the historical and constructionist character of gender and how it is maintained. At the collective level, women (and others in the organization) practice empowerment when they fulfill significant commitments to social change that addresses issues especially relevant to women’s lives.

Again, the usefulness of Figure 1.2 will become apparent as field studies are introduced throughout the book. However, some explanation is necessary at this point. First, understand that we subjectively judge where the various party plan “players” sit on the grid in Figure 1.2. Judgment comes from our knowledge of the positions, as conveyed by researchers who studied and wrote about them. Second, the plotted roles are neither comprehensive nor generalizable; they serve as illustrations relative to other positions in the chart. Third, the placements illustrate a vision of the party plan economy overall, as well as the unevenness among dimensions typically used to conceive of labor markets. To provide some baseline and continuity, we include the position of each unit on structure and formality as taken from Table 1.1.

Here we take evaluations of structure and formality from Table 1.1 and add assessments of gender empowerment to illustrate distinctions among several role positions. Comparing the vertical axis in Table 1.1 to the horizontal axis in Figure 1.2, observe that the position of Mary Kay consultants is scaled at six on structure and on formality. Even though one is tempted to evaluate Mary Kay as highly corporate (because it is, after all, a major corporation), the Mary Kay consultant is not. Considering that the Mary Kay consultant is specified as independent (with no corporate ties in terms of position, salary, or benefits), but is somewhat obligated to corporate principles, a six seems about right (again, relative to other roles on the grid). Moving across the horizontal axis, we see

**Figure 1.2** Relative position of units in the party plan economy, by three dimensions of empowerment, individual economic (1), individual gendered (2), and collective (3)



that the Mary Kay consultant scores low on individual economic empowerment (as you will learn, most make very little money on sales), even lower on individual gender empowerment (typically, they are encouraged to play a traditional feminine role), and also low on collective empowerment (even though the Mary Kay corporation professes to donate to women’s causes, individual consultants are not encouraged to get involved).

Comparatively, Brazilian street vendors score higher on formality and structure measures, not because they are part of a large corporation but because they must show up to work at the same time every day, follow certain rules of the market association, and pay rent for their booth. In terms of Table 1.1 (and relative to Mary Kay consultants), they tend more toward “This is my job” and slightly more toward “It’s very corporate.” The street vendors score much higher on individual economic empowerment than Mary Kay consultants, higher on individual gendered empowerment (they are encouraged to be more independent-minded and autonomous), and somewhat higher on collective empowerment (they are aware of and network with other women in the same position to gain power).

Briefly, if we consider a consciousness-raising partier (including, for example, a gathering of women organized around a specific issue such as breast cancer or a political campaign), formality and structure (or corporate involvement)

would be relatively low, individual economic empowerment near zero, but individual gendered empowerment and collective empowerment very high. An example we consider later in the book is women's book clubs, also plotted in Figure 1.2. The corporate party attendees (for example, guests at, say, a Pampered Chef party) are shown to emphasize their contrast to the consciousness-raising partier.

Although the methods utilized in Table 1.1 and Figure 1.2 do not allow a comprehensive analysis of the party plan economy per se, they represent a modest foundation from which to envision different entities within the party plan economy and where they lie along these dimensions relative to others. Just as the party plan economy itself is found along the hazy border between the formal and informal markets, these graphs should not be taken as absolute. Rather, use them as a tool, a conceptualization for why the party plan economy can include the work of women that certainly doesn't come to mind when one thinks of a party.

## What to Expect

In *Women at Work* we look at the party plan economy within a global framework, examining connections of women around the world as they perform work that is largely invisible or seen as disconnected from structures that, nevertheless, bind together with common characteristics. We structure *Women at Work* to optimize three kinds of contributions. First, we provide seven chapters, each supplying background, context, and theoretical grit to frame issues related to gender parties and women's informal work. Second, we include case studies in Chapters 2–6, offering an exciting set of lenses that invoke curiosity and detail about how women's so-called party work functions, as well as the various configurations it takes on within different contexts and global regions. The chapters and case studies feature several photos and figures that illustrate ideas being presented. Third, we end each chapter with a short section titled “Beyond the Party,” which ties the pieces together and provokes critical thought. Finally, we leave the text relatively unfettered with citations but provide ample endnotes. Below is a description of the chapters that follow.

### Chapter 2: Staging the Study of Parties and Markets

*Emphasizes historical, global, and local contexts and provides tools to understand the party plan economy and marketplaces of interaction.*

Chapter 2 provides background to a party plan economy and introduces gender scholarship as a collective, interdisciplinary, and interdependent project established by women scholars through time and space. Exploring layered meanings of markets, parties, and gender, this chapter frames the case studies as grounded in a practice-based theory of gender. The “From the Field” section



is historian Sue Zschoche's exploration of the intersections of domestic space and women's communal activities, of domesticity and commerce, intersections with deep roots in the history of women. Indeed, the idea of gendered markets—understood as spaces and products organized by and for women—brings together several essential strands in the history of women and work.

### **Chapter 3: How the Party Plan Economy Mutes Women's Work**

*Demonstrates how economic forces relegate (some) women to informal, invisible work; illustrates the party plan economy as shaping women's interactions; provides examples of how intersectionality (race, class, nationality) matters.*

This chapter focuses on how the party plan economy molds many interactions among and for women. It leads off with “Now You See It, Now You Don't,” illuminating a ritual of contemporary life—gender parties—through which women's production is rendered mostly invisible. The invisibility is accomplished within a context of hyper-consumerism, taking advantage of women's needs to provide for personal and family financial demands as well as their connections to one another. These gender parties, although decidedly woman-centered, work to divide women within a class-stratified culture.

Three case studies accompany this chapter. Kimber Williams, an attorney in San Diego, looks into the legal and illegal world of purse parties (“The Power of the Purse”), interviewing women in three states who report somewhat different experiences, but almost all of whom exhibit some form of status-seeking behavior. The study treads the territory between cultural trends and legal parameters. The second study, conducted by Akiko Yoshida, is entitled “A Gendered American Dream: Why Women Sell Mary Kay.” Utilizing in-depth interviews, Yoshida looks at the connection between beliefs and gendered expectations, revealing gendered ideological mechanisms that contribute to the invisible nature of consultant work. Finally, in “Brazilian Women, Invisible Workers,” Adryanna Siqueira observes women street vendors in her native country, researching two contemporary street markets in Goinia, Feira de Lua, and Feira Hippie and focusing on survival strategies.

### **Chapter 4: How Marketplaces of Interaction Modify the Party Plan Economy**

*Demonstrates how the structure of women's personal networks operates; illustrates how women's resistance and networks change the party plan economy; provides examples of different forms of the party plan economy.*

Although Chapter 3 shows how the party plan economy shapes interac-

tions, this chapter demonstrates how the opposite is also true. That is, women—through individual resistance and through collective networks—change the way the party plan economy works. The section “Gender Dealings: Moving Between Public and Private Spaces,” focuses on ways in which the party plan economy creates “wiggle room” between public and private lives. Women are often conflicted between professional and private demands but sometimes find space for creative “knowing strategies” and common goals. In “From the Field,” Michelle Bemiller examines women’s participation as consumers of party plan products in “Women Helping Women on the Party Line,” discussing why women participate in the party plan. The chapter ends with a collaborative event between US and Czech Republic scholars, “Womanhood and Home-Based Work in the Czech Republic.” Karen Kapusta-Pofahl, Eva Kavková, Ivana Šindlerová, and Jana Smiggels-Kavková examine women’s search for common ground through shared experiences as they engage in home-based work in the Czech Republic, viewing women’s work as an emerging facet of globalization.

### **Chapter 5: When Consumption, Markets, and Movements Meet**

*Suggests outcomes that result from the melding of economic and interaction structures; illustrates how ideological, personal, and political forces work in concert; further promotes ideas of empowerment.*

The personal is political. This famous phrase marked the second wave of the women’s movement in the United States and still stands as testament to the many-faceted and overlapping character of women’s lives. The section entitled “The Political Is Personal: When Personal Ideology and Markets Collide” explores the intersection of the personal and political for women. It examines how women engage in political subversion (though not always in a straightforward path) through everyday resistance. This concept is well illustrated in Leigh Fine’s case study, “Sex Toy Parties, Compulsory Heterosexuality, and ‘Being’ in Community.” Fine provides an intriguing examination of ways in which lesbians traverse sex-toy parties designed for heterosexual women. The second case study provides an apt demonstration of the politicization of everyday life when activists come together. In “Challenging the Global Economy Through Home-Based Labor,” Summer Lewis focuses on groups that produce and promote fair-trade products.

### **Chapter 6: When the Party Reaches Beyond Products**

*Introduces alternative forms of “products” beyond consumerism; provides glimpses into conscious raising and idea formation; suggests groundwork for change.*

The first section in this chapter, “The Promise of Parties, the Gender of Markets,” turns to ways in which gender structures—defined through parties and global marketplaces—provide space for progressive change by connecting women to one another. This is not to suggest the work is easy or the outcome always favorable. But these “structural holes,” which represent fissures or fault lines in a gendered system, provide promise for undermining entrenched patriarchal arrangements. The first case study, by Mangala Subramaniam, Gregory Gibson, and Beth Williford, presents an international comparative study. In “Indian Kitty Parties as Models of Women’s Empowerment,” the authors critically examine forms of economic empowerment for women in two countries. They compare house parties in the United States to “kitty parties” in India, a gathering in which middle-class women socialize, play games, and take turns winning a weekly money collection. The second case study, “Lasting Legacies and Sister Friends: Literacy in African American Communities,” by BeEtta Stoney, conceives of African American women as “keepers of the culture,” with book clubs as the venue. Following closely is Dena Wallerson’s study, “The Politics and Power of African American Women’s Book Groups,” examining their potential for “quiet activism.” The “From the Field” section concludes with Dusty Garner’s “Instant Family—Just Add Eyeliner.” Turning a sharp corner, Garner’s contribution challenges the reader to step into a world where gender is fluid, blended, changing, daring. Exploring a community of drag queens, he finds that gender becomes muted as categories of male and female fade and as family comes first.

## Chapter 7: Taking Back, Talking Back

The final chapter starts where most books end. Gathering bits of wisdom from introspection, field notes, and reflections, the authors incorporate insight from experiences gathered throughout this project to illustrate the practice and promise of gender. Integrating these revelations, this collection inspires hope toward collective practice, finding that “action is the antidote to despair.”

Ultimately, the aim of this book is to bring together a multitude of diverse women’s voices as they speak, in solidarity, for the recognition and celebration of women’s contributions to the informal economy, the home, and our world existence. We do not presume that this little book will cause a transcendence of consumerism or capitalism, but we hope that it will prove transformative for individual women and create collective awareness for others.

## Notes

1. Although some authors have written about experiences within specific companies, such as Bob Kealing’s *Tupperware Unsealed* (Gainesville: University Press

of Florida, 2008), Doris Christopher's *The Pampered Chef* (New York: Doubleday Business, 2005), and Ruth Carter's *Amway Motivational Organizations* (Winter Park, FL: Backstreet Publishing, 1999), all are either journalistic or singularly based on personal accounts; none is research-based; and none covers a range of party-plan companies. Further, as far as we can determine, we are the first to use the term *party plan economy*.

2. We believe this is the first instance of using the term *marketplaces of interaction*. We sought to develop a concept that captures individual agency, networking, resistance, and determination while also advancing a term that accommodates distinct forms and patterns of interaction.

3. Apparently, the flushing of the face caused by alcohol makes it difficult to properly match products to skin tone. eHow, "How to Host a Mary Kay Party," May 2007, <http://www.ehow.com> (June 15, 2009).

4. Pink Lighthouse, "Warm Chatter Training," April 2008, <http://www.pinklighthouse.com> (June 29, 2009).

5. Sarah Wyatt, "Mary Kay Global Expansion Raises Hope, Concerns," *Women's International Perspective*, June 25, 2007, <http://thewip.net> (May 20, 2009).

6. Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender & Society* 1, no. 2 (1987): 125–151.

7. Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

8. Beth B. Hess and Myra Marx Ferree, *Analyzing Gender: A Handbook of Social Science Research* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987).

9. Patricia Yancey Martin, "'Said and Done' Versus 'Saying and Doing': Gendering Practices, Practicing Gender at Work," *Gender & Society* 17, no. 3 (2003): 342–366.

10. The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) pioneered independent assessments of masculinity and femininity by asking a series of questions on sex-linked socially desirable personality characteristics. Hundreds of studies have been conducted using the BSRI, with mixed results. In general, feminine traits are more concentrated with female respondents, while masculine traits are more variable; see Carol J. Auster and Susan C. Ohm, "Masculinity and Femininity in Contemporary American Society: A Reevaluation Using the Bem Sex-Role Inventory," *Sex Roles* 43 (2000): 499–528. The BSRI has been critiqued on several points, including its heavy reliance on categories and stereotypes; little to no consideration of situational, interactional, and overlapping gender construction; and lack of applicability to transsexual and transgender people. For examples of this discussion, see Rose Marie Hoffman and L. DiAnne Borders, "Twenty-Five Years After the Bem Sex-Role Inventory: A Reassessment and New Issues Regarding Classification Variability," *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development* 34, no. 1 (2001): 39–55; Murray Webster Jr. and Lisa Slattery Rashotte, "Fixed Roles and Situated Actions," *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 61 (2009): 325–337.

11. Mary Kay, "Global Growth Quick Facts," <http://www.marykay.com> (June 15, 2009).

12. Avon, "Avon Around the World," <http://www.avoncompany.com> (June 20, 2009).

13. Arbonne, "Arbonne International," <http://www.arbonne.com> (June 8, 2009).

14. Pampered Chef, "Company Facts," <http://www.pamperedchef.com> (May 29, 2009).

15. Arbonne, "Arbonne International: Taking It to the Next Level," *Direct Selling News*, July 2006, <http://www.arbonnemarketing.com> (June 8, 2009).

16. Arbonne, "Global Office Executive Team," <http://www.arbonne.com> (June 8, 2009).

17. Christine L. Williams, "The Glass Escalator: Hidden Advantages for Men in Nontraditional Occupations," *Social Problems* 39 (1992): 253–267.

18. "Good for Business: Making Full Use of the Nation's Human Capital," A Fact-Finding Report of the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, March 1995, <http://www.dol.gov> (June 30, 2010).

19. Joan Acker, "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations," *Gender & Society* 4 (1990): 139–158.

20. For example, Lorber finds that "in work organizations, position in the hierarchy does and does not override a worker's gender. The behavior of men and women doctors sometimes reflects their professional status and sometimes their gender, and it is important to look at both aspects to understand their relationships with patients." Judith Lorber, "Beyond the Binaries: Depolarizing the Categories of Sex, Sexuality, and Gender," *Sociological Inquiry* 66, no. 2 (1996): 154.

21. "Purse Parties Funding Organized Crime?" WFTV (Omaha), July 2008, <http://www.wftv.com> (May 7, 2009).

22. Ruth Carter, *Amway Motivational Organizations: Beyond the Smoke and Mirrors* (Winter Park, FL: Backstreet Publishing, 1999).

23. John M. Taylor, "Some Shocking Statistics: Comparing Recruiting MLM's with No-Product Pyramid Schemes, and with Gambling," Consumer Awareness Institute, <http://www.mlm-thetruth.com> (June 1, 2009).

24. Martha Chen, Joann Vanek, Francie Lund, and James Heintz, *Progress of the World's Women 2005* (New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2005), 8.

25. Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing, "Main Findings," <http://www.wiego.org> (July 2, 2010).

26. Friedrich Schneider and Dominik H. Enste, *The Shadow Economy: An International Survey* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

27. Hernando De Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

28. Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat 3.0: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Picador, 2007), 10.

29. Valentine Moghadam, *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 2.

30. Fair trade is a social movement as well as a market approach that helps producers in developing countries promote sustainability. The movement has been particularly helpful to women, who otherwise would be unable to find a market or fair price for their wares. Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International, "About Fair Trade," 2006, <http://www.fairtrade.net> (June 30, 2010).

31. Opposing empowerment is exploitation. Briefly, exploitation is characterized as hierarchical, uncooperative, and undemocratic, with practices and values centered on domination, competition, manipulation, and control. See Myra Marx Ferree, Judith Lorber, and Beth B. Hess, *Revisioning Gender* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), 161–183.

32. United Nations, "Guidelines to Women's Empowerment," <http://www.un.org> (June 5, 2009).