

Review: *Sisters in the Brotherhoods*

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Jane Latour, *Sisters in the Brotherhoods: Working Women Organizing for Equality in New York City*. New York: Palgrave Macmillian Press, 2009. 276 pp. ISBN: 978-0-230-61918-0.

Among the most vivid images of the 9/11 disaster are those of New York firefighters charging into the burning twin towers or trudging along the city's devastated, eerily silent streets with face and clothes cloaked in grey dust and soot. What is also remarkable thinking back on these images was that there were few if any women among their numbers. That is because as author Jane Latour in *Sisters in Brotherhood* states even after more than a quarter century of women's struggle for greater access to jobs in firefighting and even with the force of equal opportunity legislation behind them, as recently as 2008, of the 11,500 firefighters in New York only 30 were women. The oral history interviews Latour collected suggest that greatest resistance to women taking up firefighting came from men who dominated the hiring process in the fire halls and often from their wives. Concerns about the ability of women to meet the physical and mental stress of fire fighting were given constant voice even after women demonstrated clearly their fitness for the work. Sexism within the United Firefighters Association proved to be rampant. JoAnn Jacob's interviewed about her experiences as a firefighter on the job observed:

The unions refused to stand up and resist the harassment that was occurring against women firefighters. In fact, a union delegate... was one of the prime investigators of the harassment that was going on in my firehouse. It causes me some pain to see that the UFA's offices are named after him. There were a large number of physical assaults that occurred on women firefighters by male firefighters. And whenever that occurred, the union defended the male firefighters and did not help the women firefighters. In fact, in one particularly egregious assault, where a woman was cut by a knife by a male firefighter, when the man was suspended, the union found him a job. (p.141)

That Jacob's and the other women interviewed for this study not only survived such harassment but managed to carve out a career in firefighting is remarkable. The fact that several of these women were African- American and faced racial prejudice as well as sexism makes for some compelling life stories. They survived by banding together, finding supportive male firefighters, and using whatever

legal means were available to them. But as the women note in their interviews it was ultimately going to work each day and doing their work well that won at least grudging respect for them.

This story of Jacob and her sister firefighters is one dimension of this fascinating and important oral history project of women who sought work in what are traditionally referred to as the brotherhoods: unions of predominantly male skilled trades workers in New York city. The interviews focus on the first wave of women who began in the 1960s and early 1970s to seek entry into the traditional blue-collar, male trades. They sought out these trades for the same reasons that their male counterparts did: job satisfaction, good wages and pensions, and long-term security. These pioneering women carved out employment in the building trades as carpenters, electricians, and plumbers, as well as in law enforcement, public transportation, and the mechanical trades, in addition to firefighting. The obstacles challenging these women in their workplaces it is clear from the interviews seldom related to the physical demands of their chosen trade. Sexual harassment and prejudice created hostile work environments that the women confronted on a daily basis. Heading home at night created yet another dilemma for these women where traditional expectations of femininity ground against the image of them as workers in traditional male trades.

The compelling stories of these women were collected by historian and longtime feminist union activist Jane Latour. *Sisters in the Brotherhoods* originated in an oral history project that Latour began in 1989 and continued with some interruptions until 2006. In this book, she lists among her interviewees 25 women from the trades and another 12 interviewees described as “expert allies.” Latour is not explicit in the book about her methodology; however, it appears that a combination of life story and recovery interviewing practices were used in her research. Some of the women were interviewed on more than one occasion and re-interviewed over the length of the project. There is, for example, an interesting epilogue in which the author brings the lives of the now mostly retired interviewees up to date. The significance of the interviews is enriched by the extensive supplemental research undertaken for this project in the union records, public documents, and other related sources. It also contains a useful bibliography that includes a number of websites of which especially notable is one dedicated to the *Sisters in the Brotherhoods* oral history project.

<http://www.talkinghistory.org/sisters/index.html> This resource rich website includes the audio and transcripts of the women interviewed for the project, photographs, art work and information on the brotherhoods. I highly recommend a visit to the website. The book itself is published in the very fine Palgrave Studies in Oral History series edited by Linda Shopes and Bruce Stave.

Latour reflecting on the significance of *Sisters in the Brotherhoods* observes that “although these stories contain many individual triumphs, the point is not to

create a mood of triumphalism... The oral histories that unfold in these pages demonstrate the deep divide that still exists between rights and liberty; between promise and performance... The point of sharing this knowledge is to reduce the isolation and invisibility of the women who went first into unchartered, difficult, and ultimately-for the most part-rewarding territory. It's not simply a matter of celebration. Other women need to know about them."