Women's Decline in Commercial Fishing

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Women's entry into high-wage work has increased steadily since the 1970s. This is true across most occupations, but policy and technology can push women out of certain jobs. This paper documents how a policy capping the number of licenses and new, more capital intensive, technology interact to reduce women's participation in a large commercial fishery in Alaska. At the onset of the licensing cap in 1975, women held 53 percent of permits in the Bristol Bay set net salmon fishery. The policy allowed these tradable licenses to be purchased from incumbents by new entrants. Over the following five decades, women's participation share fell to 30 percent. Prior to the licensing policy, this shore-based style of fishing was compatible with caregiving, where families rotated fishing and care duties across members. By tying access to a single named license holder, the policy made the occupation "greedy," eliminating within-family substitutability and concentrating rights and responsibilities onto one person. Simultaneously, the policy transformed access into a property right worth tens of thousands of dollars, creating a capital barrier to entry and a financial incentive to exit. The empirical setting offers rich identifying variation for disentangling these channels as both harvest quantities and prices are largely exogenously determined from the perspective of the fisherman. Technological change in fishing methods opened more lucrative but dangerous sites incompatible with caregiving. Fifty years of administrative records tracking every permit from initial allocation through subsequent transfers allow us to document how a policy designed to protect fishing livelihoods eroded women's historical claims to a fishery they had worked for generations. Preliminary findings indicate that the decline in women's share was driven not by women exiting at higher rates than men, but by men's disproportionate entry through the transfer market, where the purchase price compounds against women across generations, a distributional consequence absent from the literature on skill-based occupational licensing. When women do exit, they time departures strategically, leaving during strong harvests and high prices rather than downturns, consistent with cashing out rather than forced liquidation. The results extend the greedy jobs framework from labor markets to property rights, showing how institutional design, not just occupational structure, can create and sustain gender gaps.

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