

Women and the labor market: the link grows stronger

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even mothers of very young children*

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Women's attachment to the labor market has increased dramatically since the end of World War II—especially for those between age 25 and 54. More than 7 of 10 women in this age group are now in the labor force, up from about 3 of 10 four decades earlier. The rise in women's attachment to market work is clearly both a product and a cause of many profound social and economic changes that have occurred in the United States over the last 40 years.

One result of this surge has been a narrowing of the gap between male and female participation rates. Also, women today display a pattern of labor force participation by age group that is very different from that evident 15 years ago. Until the mid-1970's, female participation rates by age formed an "M" shape, dipping between the early twenties and the main child-bearing years of 25 to 34. That pattern has now shifted to an inverted "U" and thus is very similar to that for men. (See chart 1.)

Another result is that labor market activity has become the norm for most women today. This is true for women in each 10-year group in the 25 to 54 age bracket, for whites, for blacks, and for all marital status groups. Moreover, the majority of mothers are in the labor force today—even mothers of infants and toddlers. As recently as 1975, a Bureau of Labor Statistics study found sharp differences in participation rates of women by marital status and presence and age of children.¹ Such differences have been reduced very substantially over the ensuing decade.

Finally, women today work more hours per week and more weeks per year than they did 10 or 20 years ago. The

majority of 25- to 54-year-old women who worked in 1986 did so full time, year round.

This article focuses on women 25 to 54, the age group where job market links are especially strong. Most people in these "prime working ages" have completed school and not yet started to withdraw (permanently) from the labor force. Women in these ages increased their labor market participation throughout the post-World War II period, and the rate of increase accelerated in the mid-1960's. Labor force participation rates of women are projected to continue rising to the year 2000, although at a slower pace than during the past two decades.

Historical trends

Women in the United States have been entering the labor market in increasing numbers over the past century, but, until the advent of the Second World War, the changes were small and gradual. However, between 1940 and 1944, the number of women in the labor force jumped by 5 million—or more than one-third.² Over the same period, about 10 million men entered the Armed Forces and, as their number in the civilian work force plummeted, women moved in and took their places. This pattern was reversed in the following two years. As the GI's returned home, the number of men in the civilian labor force rebounded, while millions of women withdrew from the work force. However, fewer women left at the end of World War II than had entered during the war years, and many of those who exited in the 1944-46 period returned a few years later.

Age. Women in the 45 to 54 age group led the influx into the labor force in the postwar period. Participation rates for

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this older cohort soared from just over 30 percent in 1946 to 50 percent in 1960. (See chart 2.) In contrast, rates rose more moderately for the 35- to 44-year-olds and hardly increased at all for 25- to 34-year-olds. These were the postwar baby-boom years, and most married women remained outside the labor force because of their child and family responsibilities. The different timing of labor force increases by age mirrored public attitudes about women working outside the home. Attitudes shifted first for older women, who generally did not have young children at home.

In the early 1960's, however, women of childbearing age began to enter the labor market in large numbers. The rate of increase picked up in the mid-1960's and accelerated even more during the 1970's. (See chart 2.) A very sharp decline in the birth rate in the 1960's was a major contributing factor. At the same time, total employment was rising strongly, with much of the growth occurring in services and the public sector (especially education), where large numbers of women are employed. Increasing levels of education and rapidly changing views about the home and work roles of women were also factors in the tremendous jump in women's labor market activity during the 1960's and 1970's.³

The flood of 25- to 34-year-olds into the labor market during the last 20 years changed the long-standing pattern of female participation rates by age. The historical "M" shape was replaced by an inverted "U," as the dip in female participation that had been evident between the 20 to 24 and 25 to 34 age groups almost disappeared. Also, after the mid-1970's, women 45 to 54 no longer had the highest rates among the three groups within the prime working-age bracket. In 1987, the rate for the 45 to 54 age group averaged 67 percent, compared to 74 percent for 35- to 44-year-olds, and 72 percent for 25- to 34-year-olds.

The unprecedented changes discussed above can be seen clearly in the participation rates of women in the same birth cohort as they move from their early to late twenties. As the following tabulation shows, almost half of the women who were 20 to 24 in 1960 were in the labor force, but the proportion dropped substantially when these women entered the peak childbearing ages of 25 to 29:

| | Age 20-24— | Age 25-29— |
|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| Year born: | <i>in 1960</i> | <i>in 1965</i> |
| 1936-40 | 46.1 | 38.9 |
| | <i>in 1970</i> | <i>in 1975</i> |
| 1946-50 | 57.7 | 57.3 |
| | <i>in 1980</i> | <i>in 1985</i> |
| 1956-60 | 68.9 | 71.4 |

The first of the baby-boom generation, born only 10 years later, displayed markedly different patterns. Their participation rates were much higher than those of women born 10 years earlier, and participation rates did not drop between their early and late twenties. Women born in the latter part of the 1950's showed further remarkable changes. Not only were their participation rates higher again, but the rates actually rose as these women moved from their early to late twenties—a reversal of the pattern just 20 years earlier.

Race/ethnic group. Throughout most of the postwar period, black women had much higher activity rates than did white women.⁴ However, the gap has narrowed greatly, especially since the mid-1960's, when the rates for white

Chart 1. Civilian labor force participation rates by sex and age, selected years

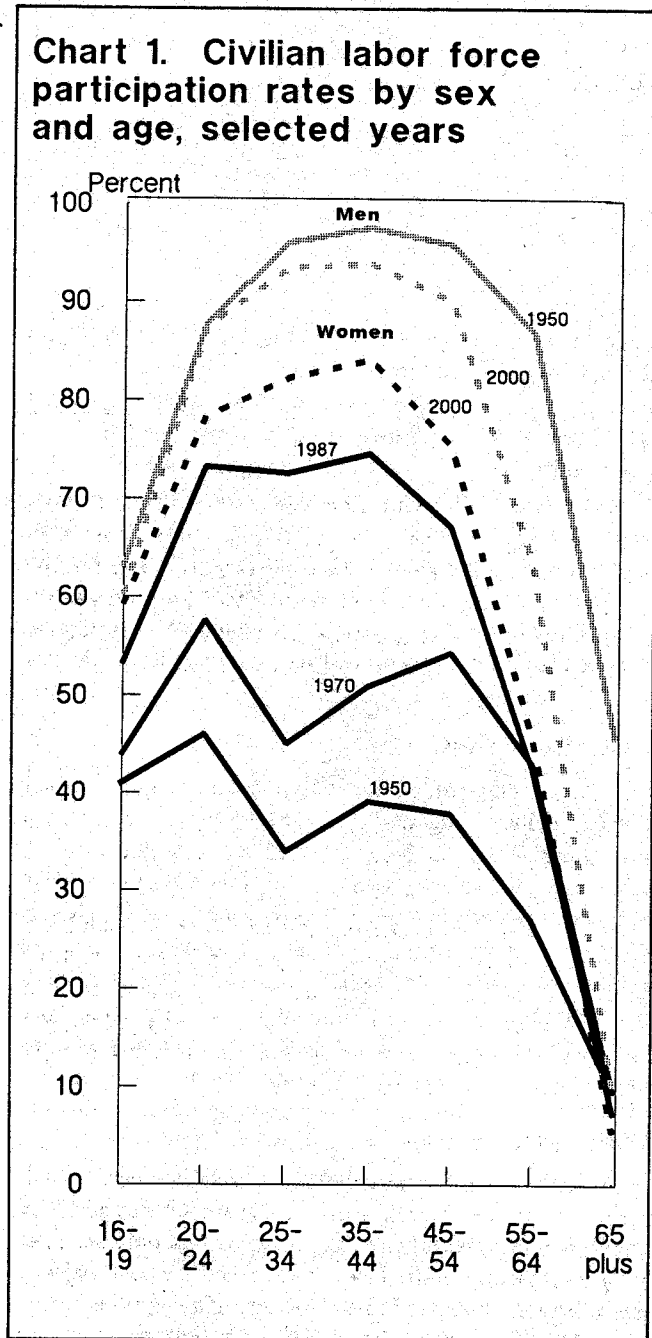
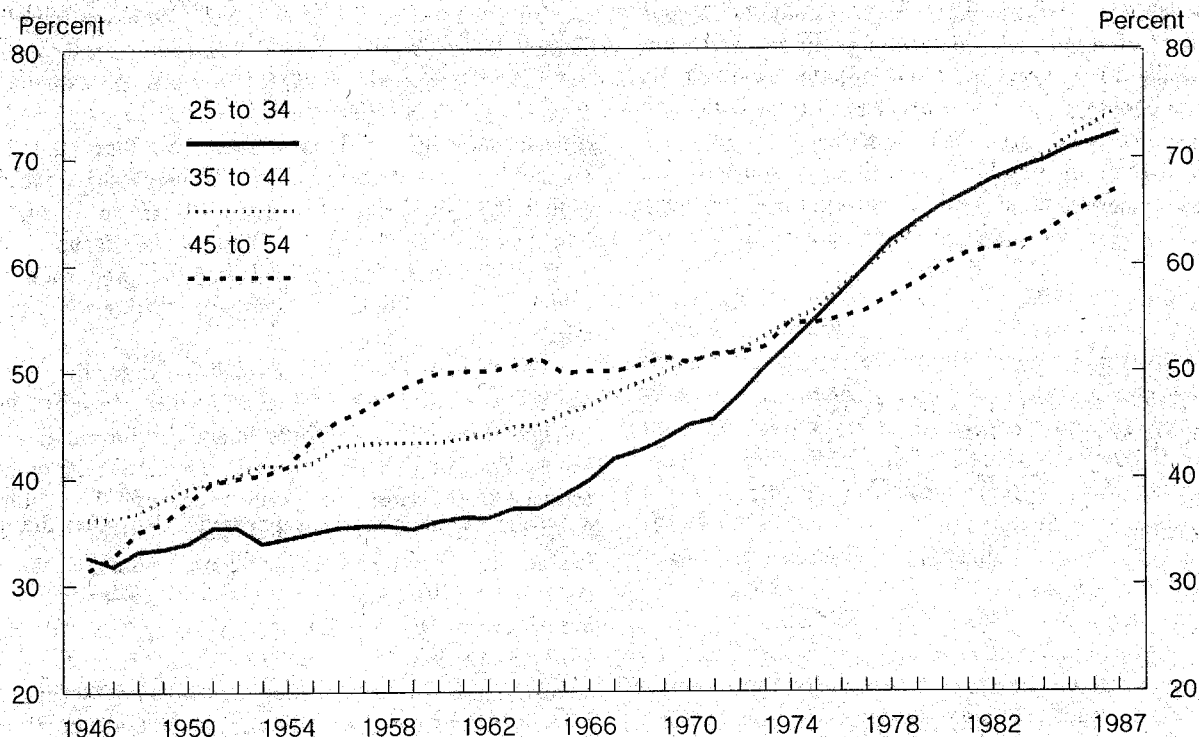


Chart 2. Civilian labor force participation rates for women, by age, 1946-87



women skyrocketed. As shown in the following tabulation, by 1987, participation rates for both white and black women in the 25 to 54 age group were similar:⁵

| | White | Nonwhite | Black |
|------|-------|----------|-------|
| 1954 | 37.0 | 53.4 | — |
| 1967 | 45.7 | 59.3 | — |
| 1977 | 57.7 | 63.7 | 64.4 |
| 1987 | 71.8 | 72.1 | 73.6 |

Hispanic women, however, were much less likely than either white or black women to be in the labor force. Their lower participation rate (61 percent in 1987) is related to a number of factors, including a high birth rate, generally low educational attainment, and cultural factors that emphasize women's home and family roles.⁶

Marital status. Most married women did not work outside the home in the postwar years. In 1957, for example, only about 33 percent of married women 25 to 54 were in the labor force, compared with approximately 80 percent of single women and 65 percent of widowed, divorced, and separated women combined. These differences shrank dramatically in the following three decades. Between 1957 and 1987, married women entered the labor market in record numbers and their participation rate more than doubled—to 68 percent, while the rate for single women remained around 80 percent, and that for widowed, divorced, or separated women rose to 79 percent.

At the same time that differences in labor force activity rates narrowed across marital status groups, the number of single and divorced women rose substantially. The following tabulation shows that the proportion of divorced women in the prime working-age population increased fourfold, and the proportion of single women also jumped:

| | 1957 | 1987 |
|-------------------------|------|------|
| Never married | 7.5 | 12.9 |
| Married, spouse present | 80.5 | 68.2 |
| Married, spouse absent | 4.3 | 4.9 |
| Widowed | 4.6 | 2.2 |
| Divorced | 3.0 | 11.8 |

In 1987, divorced and never-married women together accounted for 1 of 4 prime working-age women—up from about 1 of 10 in 1957. The marked expansion in these groups, which have high labor force activity rates, was matched by contraction in the married and widowed groups, where rates are somewhat lower.

Work attachment

The phenomenal rise in female labor force activity has been accompanied by major changes in the nature and extent of women's connection to market work. Not only are most women currently in the labor market, but the vast majority are full-time, career-oriented workers. This applies across virtually all age, race, and marital status groups. It applies

whether or not women have children at home and even for those with very young children.

Only in the last few years have women decided to remain in the labor force for a large part of their adult years and to work even when they have young children at home. As recently as 20 years ago, it was more typical for women to work for a few years after they finished school and then leave the labor force when their first child was born. In many cases, these women did not return to market work at all or did so only after an absence of several years.

Marital status and children. Labor market activity is now the norm for women, and high participation rates are evident in nearly all demographic groups. For example, in March 1987, rates ranged from 85 percent among divorced women to 66 percent for widows. (See table 1.) Women 35 to 44 generally had the highest activity rates of the three 10-year groups of the prime working ages. However, this was not the case among the single women group, where 25- to 34-year-olds registered the highest participation rate. Moreover, the rate was nearly 90 percent for women in this younger age group who did not have children.

The presence of children, especially very young children, tends to moderate the labor force participation of women, but this effect is much less marked today than it was 20 years ago. In 1987, 79 percent of women with no children under age 18 were in the labor force, compared to 67 percent for women with children. Activity rates for mothers fell steadily in line with the age of their youngest child—from about 75 percent for mothers of high school age children (none younger) to 55 percent for mothers with children under the age of 3. The fact that more than half of all mothers with toddlers were in the labor market in 1987 indicates the magnitude of social and economic change in recent years. As recently as 1967, less than one-fourth of mothers with children under age 3 were in the labor force.

Hours per week. The number of hours worked per week or per year is a measure of the intensity of a person's connection to the labor market. Despite a common impression to the contrary, most employed women work full time, that is, 35 hours or more per week. In 1986, for example, 78 percent of all employed women ages 25 to 54 worked full time; an additional 5 percent worked fewer than 35 hours but wanted full-time jobs; and only 17 percent worked part time voluntarily. The proportion of women who work full time has been essentially stable for the past two decades. However, among those working part time, the proportion doing so voluntarily has declined, while the fraction wanting full-time jobs has increased.

Even though most women work full time, they tend to work fewer hours per week than do men. In 1986, prime working-age women employed in nonagricultural industries averaged about 37 hours per week, compared with 44 hours for men in the same age group. (See table 2.) Employed women are heavily concentrated in the retail trade and service industries in which part-time work is common. Approximately 6 of 10 prime working-age women were in these two industries in 1987, in contrast to only 3 of 10 prime working-age men.

As might be expected, differences in hours by gender are greatest at the extremes—the less than 30 hours or the more than 48 hours per week categories. (See table 2.) However, over the past two decades there has been some convergence in the work schedules of men and women, largely because the proportion of women working 49 hours or more rose substantially, and the proportion of men working fewer than 30 hours increased. As a result, the differences in the average workweek by gender shrank from 9 hours in 1968 to about 7 hours in 1987.

Weeks per year. In addition to hours per week, labor force attachment can also be viewed in terms of weeks worked per year. During 1986, 68 percent of women 25 to 54 who worked did so for a full year, and an additional 10 percent worked 40 to 49 weeks.⁷ At the other extreme, only about 15 percent of these women worked for less than half the year. (See table 3.) Women's year-round employment rose substantially between 1966 and 1986, especially in the 25 to 34 age group. Over these two decades, the fraction of these younger women who worked full year jumped from 45 to 65 percent, while the proportion who worked only 1 to 13 weeks dropped from 18 to 7½ percent.

Combining weeks worked per year with usual hours per week offers additional insights into the degree of workers' job attachment. Persons who work full time 50 to 52 weeks per year clearly have a strong work commitment. In 1986, 57 percent of all employed women 25 to 54 were in this year-round, full-time category; the comparable proportion for men was 78 percent. As was true of hours per week, work patterns over the calendar year have been converging for men and women of prime working age. Two decades

Table 1. Civilian labor force participation rates of women, by age, marital status, and presence and age of children, March 1987

| Characteristic | Age 25-54 | Age 25-34 | Age 35-44 | Age 45-54 |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Marital status | | | | |
| Never married | 81.5 | 82.9 | 81.8 | 68.5 |
| Married, husband present | 68.1 | 67.5 | 71.7 | 64.0 |
| Married, husband absent | 70.9 | 68.2 | 76.0 | 67.6 |
| Widowed | 65.7 | 52.7 | 68.7 | 66.5 |
| Divorced | 84.7 | 83.3 | 87.3 | 82.7 |
| Presence and age of own children | | | | |
| No own children under age 18 | 79.0 | 89.0 | 82.1 | 68.1 |
| Own children under age 18 | 66.7 | 63.1 | 71.7 | 63.8 |
| Age of youngest child: | | | | |
| 14 to 17 | 74.8 | 82.4 | 78.7 | 67.8 |
| 6 to 13 | 72.0 | 72.9 | 73.8 | 58.7 |
| 3 to 5 | 62.4 | 63.1 | 61.1 | 52.7 |
| Under age 3 | 55.2 | 55.2 | 55.9 | (1) |

¹ Participation rate not shown where population is less than 75,000.

earlier, 46 percent of the employed women and about 84 percent of employed men were year-round, full-time workers.

Younger women have followed the lead of their older counterparts in moving toward year-round, full-time employment, as they did in entering the labor force. By 1986, fully 55 percent of employed women 25 to 34 were year-round, full-time workers, up from 39 percent in 1966. The proportion of women in this age group working full year but part time also rose considerably. This latter pattern—full-year work on a part-time basis—was the second most common schedule (after year round, full time) for women in the prime working-age group in 1986.

Future outlook

Will women continue to enter the labor force in greater numbers? How high will their participation rates go? How large will the proportion of women who work year round, full time become? While there are no definite answers to these and some other questions about women's labor market behavior in the future, BLS recently introduced projections to the year 2000 which describe some probable scenarios.⁸ The projections presume a continued increase in female labor force participation, but at a much slower rate than during the preceding two decades.

Slower increases. Between 1986 and 2000, the labor force participation rate for women in the prime working-age group is projected to increase 10 percentage points, from about 71 percent to 81 percent (assuming the "middle growth" scenario). While very large by most standards, this would be only half the size of the increase that took place in the previous 14 years, when the rate jumped from 51 percent to 71 percent.

The primary reason for the projected slower rate of increase is that the huge gains of the past have brought female participation rates to relatively high levels. There is simply much less room to grow from a 70-percent participation rate than there was from a 40- or 50-percent rate. A second reason is that the projections assume that participation rates for prime working-age women will not exceed those for

Table 3. Women with work experience in 1966 and 1986 by age, full-time or part-time job, and weeks worked
[Percent distribution]

| Work experience | Age 25-34 | | Age 35-44 | | Age 45-54 | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------|------|-----------|------|-----------|------|------|
| | 1966 | 1986 | 1966 | 1986 | 1966 | 1986 | |
| Worked at full-time job: | | | | | | | |
| 50-52 weeks | 57.1 | 45.5 | 55.1 | 38.6 | 57.8 | 45.2 | 59.8 |
| 40-49 weeks | 6.5 | 8.3 | 7.2 | 8.8 | 6.0 | 8.2 | 6.0 |
| 27-39 weeks | 4.2 | 6.5 | 4.6 | 7.6 | 4.2 | 6.2 | 3.3 |
| 14-26 weeks | 4.2 | 6.5 | 5.1 | 9.2 | 3.8 | 6.3 | 3.4 |
| 1-13 weeks | 2.8 | 6.1 | 3.3 | 9.6 | 2.5 | 5.4 | 2.2 |
| Worked at part-time job: | | | | | | | |
| 50-52 weeks | 11.4 | 9.8 | 10.3 | 6.8 | 12.0 | 10.9 | 12.7 |
| 40-49 weeks | 3.3 | 2.9 | 3.3 | 2.5 | 3.1 | 3.0 | 3.3 |
| 27-39 weeks | 2.8 | 3.1 | 2.7 | 2.7 | 2.9 | 3.4 | 2.6 |
| 14-26 weeks | 4.0 | 4.5 | 4.2 | 5.7 | 4.1 | 4.1 | 3.5 |
| 1-13 weeks | 3.8 | 6.9 | 4.2 | 8.4 | 3.7 | 7.3 | 3.1 |

men. This constraining assumption is built into the projection methodology. A third reason for the projected slowing is that most of the population growth will take place in the oldest 10-year group in this study (45- to 54-year-olds), where participation is lower. During the 1990's, this group will account for virtually all of the population growth in the prime working-age group—as the first of the baby-boom generation moves into their mid-forties and early fifties.

While some slowing in the pace of women's labor force increases is almost inevitable in future years, the precise timing and extent of such slowing are matters of judgment. In this connection, it should be noted that BLS projections of women's labor force participation have come closer to the mark in recent years. Between 1959 and 1976, BLS produced six projections of the future size of the labor force, and all six underestimated actual growth in the female labor force.⁹ The phenomenal increases in participation rates for prime working-age women that started in the mid-1960's surprised almost all analysts. However, BLS projections introduced in 1978 and the early 1980's assumed that such growth will continue, although not necessarily at the same rapid pace.¹⁰

Gender differences shrink. While participation rates for women are expected to continue rising through the end of the century, those for men are projected to edge further down. As a result, the longstanding gap between male and female rates will shrink even more. The following tabulation shows that the difference in the prime working-age group, which was about 60 percentage points in 1950 (and 23 points in 1986), will narrow to 12 points by the year 2000. For 25- to 34-year-olds, the gender difference is expected to shrink to only 10 points.

| | Actual, 1950 | | Projected, 2000 | |
|----------------------|--------------|------|-----------------|------|
| | Women | Men | Women | Men |
| 25 to 34 years | 36.8 | 96.5 | 80.8 | 92.6 |
| 24-34 years | 34.0 | 96.0 | 82.3 | 93.6 |
| 35-44 years | 39.1 | 97.8 | 84.2 | 93.9 |
| 45-54 years | 37.9 | 95.8 | 75.4 | 90.1 |

Table 2. Hours at work for 25- to 54-year-old women and men in nonagricultural industries, annual averages, 1968 and 1986
[Percent distribution]

| Hours of work | Women | | Men | |
|-------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 1966 | 1986 | 1966 | 1986 |
| Average hours | 36.8 | 35.7 | 43.9 | 44.7 |
| Total hours | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Under 30 hours | 19.5 | 21.5 | 5.7 | 4.4 |
| 30-34 hours | 9.4 | 9.6 | 4.8 | 4.7 |
| 35-39 hours | 9.7 | 11.0 | 4.0 | 3.9 |
| 40 hours | 42.1 | 42.0 | 44.4 | 43.4 |
| 41-48 hours | 8.9 | 9.3 | 13.2 | 17.3 |
| 49 hours and over | 10.4 | 6.5 | 27.7 | 26.3 |

Moreover, as the gap between male and female rates continues to narrow, the outline traced by these rates over the life cycle is expected to become increasingly unisex. In the year 2000, activity rates of women are projected to rise steadily from the teen years to a peak in the 35 to 44 age group, then to decline in the 45 to 54 age group before dropping off sharply for those 55 and over. Chart 1 notes the similarity between this pattern and that for men in the year 2000.

The shift in the outline of women's participation rates from the "M" shape to an inverted "U," which started in the 1970's, will be even more prominent by 2000. In fact, women's participation rates (in terms of both level and pattern by age) are projected to be more similar to those for men than to women's rates in 1960 or 1970. Moreover, as male rates decline over time—especially in the older age

groups—the right side of their inverted "U" shifts to the left and thus becomes more like that for women.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LABOR MARKET BEHAVIOR of men and women shrank dramatically in the four decades following World War II. This was due largely to a tremendous increase in labor market activity by women. Over the past 40 years, the proportion of 25- to 54-year-old women in the labor force jumped from one-third to more than 70 percent. Furthermore, among employed women, 3 of 4 worked full time in 1986, and well over half of them worked year round and full time. BLS projections to the year 2000 call for continued increases in market activity of women, and as a result, further convergence in male and female labor force patterns over the life cycle. □

—FOOTNOTES—

¹ See Deborah Pisetzner Klein, "Women in the labor force: the middle years," *Monthly Labor Review*, November 1975, pp. 10–16.

² These are Current Population Survey (CPS) data for persons 14 years and over. When the lower age boundary for labor force statistics was raised to 16 years, historical data were revised, but only back to 1948. The CPS is a monthly household survey, conducted for the BLS by the Census Bureau.

³ For an excellent interpretation of changing work-leisure patterns for women, men, and teenagers in the 1950-75 period, see Robert W. Bednarzik and Deborah P. Klein, "Labor force trends: a synthesis and analysis," *Monthly Labor Review*, October 1977, pp. 3–15. When reprinted as Special Labor Force Report 208, this article included an annotated bibliography of selected literature on trends in labor force participation.

Also, see Lois B. Shaw, "Determinants of the Increasing Work Attachment of Married Women," *Work and Occupations*, May 1983.

⁴ Historically, the higher rates for nonwhite women reflected many factors, such as greater economic need, lower marriage and higher fertility rates, and a larger proportion of extended families, which meant additional relatives to assist with child care.

⁵ Labor force data for blacks only are not available prior to 1972; rates for nonwhites (persons of black and other races) are shown for earlier years.

The 1977 and 1987 data show that there is little difference between the participation rates of black women and nonwhite women age 25 to 54.

⁶ Rosemary Santana Cooney and Vilma Ortiz, "Nativity, National Origin, and Hispanic Female Participation in the Labor Force," *Social Science Quarterly*, September 1983, pp. 510–23.

⁷ These data are from the March 1987 work experience supplement to the Current Population Survey. This supplement (conducted in March of each year) obtains labor force information for each week of the previous calendar year.

⁸ Howard N Fullerton, Jr., "Labor force projections: 1986 to 2000," *Monthly Labor Review*, September 1987, pp. 19–29.

⁹ Paul M. Ryscavage, "BLS labor force projections: a review of methods and results," *Monthly Labor Review*, April 1979, pp. 15–22.

¹⁰ See Paul O. Flaim and Howard N Fullerton, Jr., "Labor force projections to 1990: three possible paths," *Monthly Labor Review*, December 1978, pp. 25–35; Howard N Fullerton, Jr., "The 1995 labor force: a first look," *Monthly Labor Review*, December 1980, pp. 11–21; and Howard N Fullerton, Jr. and John Tschetter, "The 1995 labor force: a second look," *Monthly Labor Review*, November 1983, pp. 1–8.