

Women and Work: 50 Years of Change since the American Women Report

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This paper was prepared with funding from the U.S. Department of Labor. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Federal Government or the Department of Labor.

Introduction

When the President's Commission on the Status of Women published its report *American Women* in 1963, there was much to be celebrated with regards to women's status in the United States. Women were living longer than ever and more of them were a part of the labor force than at most times in recent history. The civil rights movement had placed equal opportunity as the ideal in the workplace, at home, and in all facets of life. Yet in the workforce, women had a long way to go. Many jobs were essentially off-limits to women, including doctor, lawyer, and many types of businesses. While a few remarkable women pursued these fields, the majority of women worked as teachers, nurses, maids or secretaries.

Fifty years later, women's gains are considerable. More women are a part of our labor force than in 1963, and women are more likely to be the primary breadwinner for their families than they were then. Women are matriculating from higher education in larger numbers than their male peers. Many goals outlined in *American Women* have been achieved. But the more things change the more they also stay the same. This paper will examine women's participation in the labor force, then and now, and illuminate lingering gender disparities that persist from day one for female workers. Specifically, a persistent concern is that women begin their careers nearly on par with their male counterparts in wages, but fall behind their male colleagues in mid- to late- career. This fact has not changed substantially since 1963, even though postsecondary educational gains have helped women narrow the wage gap. There is much left to be done to ensure the promise of the 1963 report of the President's Commission on the Status of Women.

This paper begins with a brief study of the changing landscape of education and training and its impact on women's work. Next, the paper explores women in the workplace and persistent challenges they face. In addition, the paper examines women and their support for their families as wage earners. The paper concludes with an assessment of policy priorities to help achieve many of the goals set forth in the original *American Women* report.

Section 1. The changing landscape of education and training

Over the past fifty years, the number of women pursuing college education has risen quickly. Since the 1963 report women have shifted to being the majority of students on college campuses and the majority of degree earners. In 1963 around 1.8 million women were enrolled in postsecondary education. They comprised about 38 percent of total enrollment. Only 15 years later, women would reach a tipping point on campus and become half of students enrolled in postsecondary education. Today, almost 12 million women are enrolled and make up 57 percent of total enrollment (Department of Education, 2012, Table 221). In 1980, women also began to earn more Bachelor's degrees each year than men. It took until the mid-1980's for a similar thing to happen among Master's students and until 2004 for doctoral degrees to be also conferred mostly to women (Department of Education, 2012, Table 310).

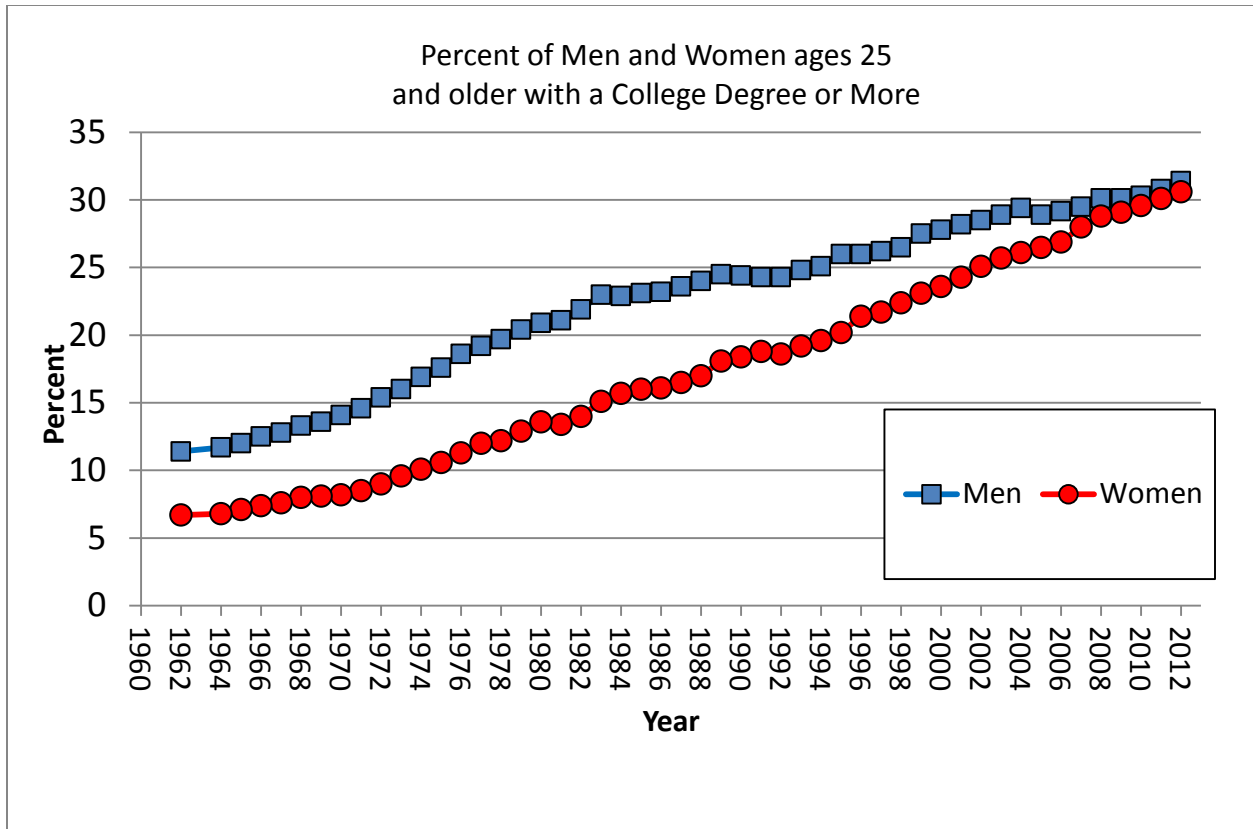


Figure 1: EDUCATION CHART

Source: 1962-2002 March Current Population Survey, 2003 to 2012 Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the Current Population Survey (noninstitutionalized population, excluding members of the Armed Forces living in barracks)

Community colleges, previously more often also known as junior colleges, have always served an important role for women. Today there are over 1,000 community colleges in the United States, and they enroll almost one-third of all students pursuing postsecondary education. Today, more than 4 million women attend community college, and more than 1 million of those students are also mothers (AAUW Women in Community Colleges).

For traditionally female careers, such as teaching and nursing, at least a two-year degree has become minimal, with four-year degrees a much more prevalent standard for entry level employment (Department of Labor, 2012). Additional education is a key contributor to

women's economic security. More education is an effective tool for increasing earnings – at every additional level of academic achievement, women's median pay increases (Simple Truth, 2013, p13). In addition, women have also found that education and training continues to pay off by providing better employment opportunities overall. In 2012, women with less than a high school degree had an unemployment rate of around 14 percent. This stands in stark contrast to women with an associate's degree, whose unemployment rate was around 6 percent, and women with a Bachelor's degree or higher, whose unemployment rate was around 4 percent (DOL Employment, 2013). In addition, households with wage earners who have at least a college degree have seen their incomes grow on a per household basis between 1991 and 2012. Household income increased 9 percent for those whose highest education level was a Bachelor's degree, whereas household incomes have declined for households who do not have at least a Bachelor's degree (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Women are also entering traditionally male careers in larger numbers. These include occupations that require four-year degrees, but also jobs where some postsecondary education, such as a certificate or credential or a 2-year degree are necessary. In the 1970's and 1980's women moved into occupations such as mail carrier, elevating their presence from only 6.8 percent in the 1970's to almost 35 percent in 2009 (IWPR 2010). Among careers that require more education, becoming a dentist or a lawyer has become far more common for women than it was in 1970 (IWPR 2010). While some occupations have seen increases in the participation of women, efforts to move young women into some nontraditional careers, such as carpentry, plumbing, and other construction-related fields, have not been as successful. In

addition, there are some growing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields that remain segregated by gender despite women's additional educational attainment.

While education opens doors in the workforce for women, not all college degrees are the same. Women tend to major in "female" fields such as psychology, health fields (nursing), and social science, while men are more likely to pursue computer science or engineering. Overall, women tend to be underrepresented in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), especially at the higher levels. A highly educated and technologically sophisticated workforce is critical to our nation's ability to compete and innovate. Encouraging girls' interest in STEM fields, as well as encouraging more women to pursue and stay in STEM careers is widely viewed as a desirable goal. By 2018, 1.4 million computer specialist job openings are expected to exist in the U.S. labor market, but U.S. universities will only produce enough graduates with computer science Bachelor's degrees to fill 29 percent of these jobs (National Center for Women and Information Technology, 2009).

Education can be the key for women to enter-high paying and high-demand careers, but for young women today, education also equals student debt. Most research indicates that a college degree pays for itself over time, but many students are graduating with high levels of student loan debt burden, which impacts their future economic security. Women in particular grapple with this issue as a result of the gender pay gap. The pay gap impairs women's ability to repay their loans at the same rate as their male counterparts. Among 2007-08 college graduates, women and men borrowed similar amounts of money to finance their educations – about \$20,000. But, more women than men were likely to borrow money to attend school. Moreover, women tend to earn less than men when they graduate. Thus student loan debt

burden is a particularly widespread problem among women (Graduating to a Pay Gap, 2012, 24). Among recent graduates working full-time in 2007-08, women were more likely than men to be paying more of their income than a typical woman or man could afford (Graduating to a Pay Gap, 2012, 26).

Over time the success of women in our higher education system is something to be cheered; women with additional education are more economically secure and have better job opportunities when they leave school than those without the same education and training. But, continued gender segregation in education programs remains a problem for women graduates, something that was the case in 1963 as well. In addition, the staggering impact of student debt on women in particular handicaps graduates straight out of the starting gates of their careers.

Section 2. Pay Gap Persists

Fifty years after the Equal Pay Act was passed and the *American Women* report was issued, women continue to earn less than men do in nearly every occupation. Because pay is a fundamental part of everyday life, enabling individuals to support themselves and their families, the pay gap evokes passionate debate. The *American Women* report focused on this gap, highlighting that women at the time were earning only 59 percent of what men were, on average. In the following years women made great strides towards closing the gap – by 1983 women were being paid 64 percent of what men were, on average, and by 1993 were being paid 72 percent of what men were. The trend over the 25 to 30 years following the 1963 report would have instilled hope in those working to close the gap completely. Unfortunately the trend over the past 10 years is far less encouraging. The pay gap has stagnated. Again in 2012,

as has been the case for practically 10 years, women working full time were paid only 77 percent of what men were paid (DOL CPS 2012).

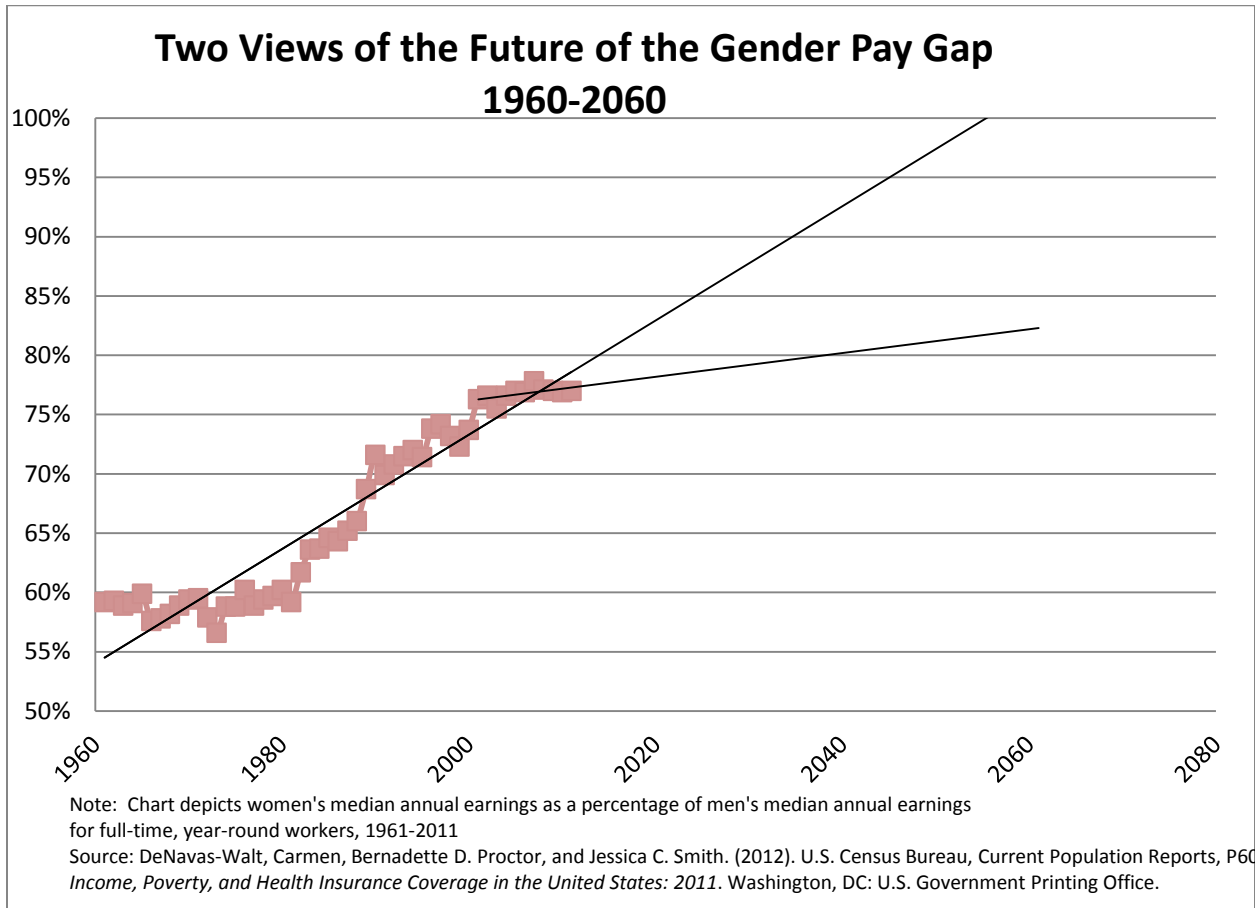


Figure 2: CHART OF PAY GAP OVER TIME

The gender pay gap has far-reaching consequences for women and their families. According to one estimate, college-educated women working full time earn more than half a million dollars less than their male peers do over the course of a lifetime (AAUW *Graduating to a Pay Gap* 2012). The 1963 report identified key factors behind the pay gap: occupational segregation, education, family and caregiving responsibilities, and impediments to hiring and promotion (Report on Private Employment 1963, 34). Unfortunately, many of the same factors are still at work today in 2013, although some progress has been made.

Behind the Pay Gap

The gender pay gap for college-educated women begins within the first year following graduation. AAUW's report *Graduating to a Pay Gap* found that women were paid just 82 percent of what their male counterparts were paid only one year after college (*Graduating to a Pay Gap*, 2012). After accounting for factors known to contribute to the gender pay gap, such as major, occupation, sector, and hours worked, the gap narrowed but still persisted – 7 percent of the difference in earnings between men and women one year after graduation was still unexplained (*Graduating to a Pay Gap*, 2012). The pay gap continues to grow throughout women's careers (*Behind the Pay Gap*). This tells us that while women's educational gains have helped to improve their economic security through increased earnings and helped to close some of the gender pay gap over time, inequities in earnings persist and cannot be explained by choices alone. In addition, factors such as education, occupational segregation, family and caregiving responsibilities, and impediments to hiring and promotion, also influence the gender pay gap, as explained in the following section.

Education and the Pay Gap

As a rule, earnings increase as years of education increase for both men and women. This has, in part, contributed to the decreasing pay gap over time between men and women. Unfortunately, while more education is an effective tool for increasing earnings, it is not an effective tool against the gender pay gap today. Indeed, the pay gap remains between men and women at every level of educational attainment. And the pay gap is largest between men and

women without a high school diploma, as well as between men and women with a Doctoral degree, with women with a Doctoral degree earning 80 percent of what men with a Doctoral degree earn (Simple Truth, 2013, p13).

Occupational Segregation and the Pay Gap

Women have made great inroads into higher levels of education, but they have done so largely without desegregating the various fields of study (Graduating to a Pay Gap, 2012, 13). Even when comparing men and women in the same field of study, the wage gap exists. Women and men still find themselves working in different kinds of jobs, and occupational segregation between men and women is present from the beginning of their careers.

In 1963, the *American Women* report noted that women represented more than three-fourths of the workers in the nursing, bookkeeping, teaching, and secretarial fields, among others (Report of the Committee on Private Employment, 1963, p44). Today, as was the case in 1963, women are still more likely than men to work as secretaries, teachers, social services professionals, and nurses and other health care providers (DOL Occupations for Women, 2010). It is worth noting that some jobs that were not female-dominated in 1963 have since become so. In *American Women*, bank tellers are listed as an example where women earned less than men for the same job. Today, women make up 85 percent of those workers employed as bank tellers (DOL Databook). Men today are more likely than women to work in business and management occupations; math, computer, and physical science occupations; engineering; and “other,” mainly blue-collar, occupations (Graduating to a Pay Gap, 2012, 15). While many

predominately male occupations pay better and have a smaller pay gap than some traditionally female occupations, the pay gap still persists even in those jobs (Graduating to a Pay Gap, 2012, 17). The pay gap among professionals varies substantially, with women financial managers making 70 percent as much as their male peers and female counselors actually out earning their male counterparts.

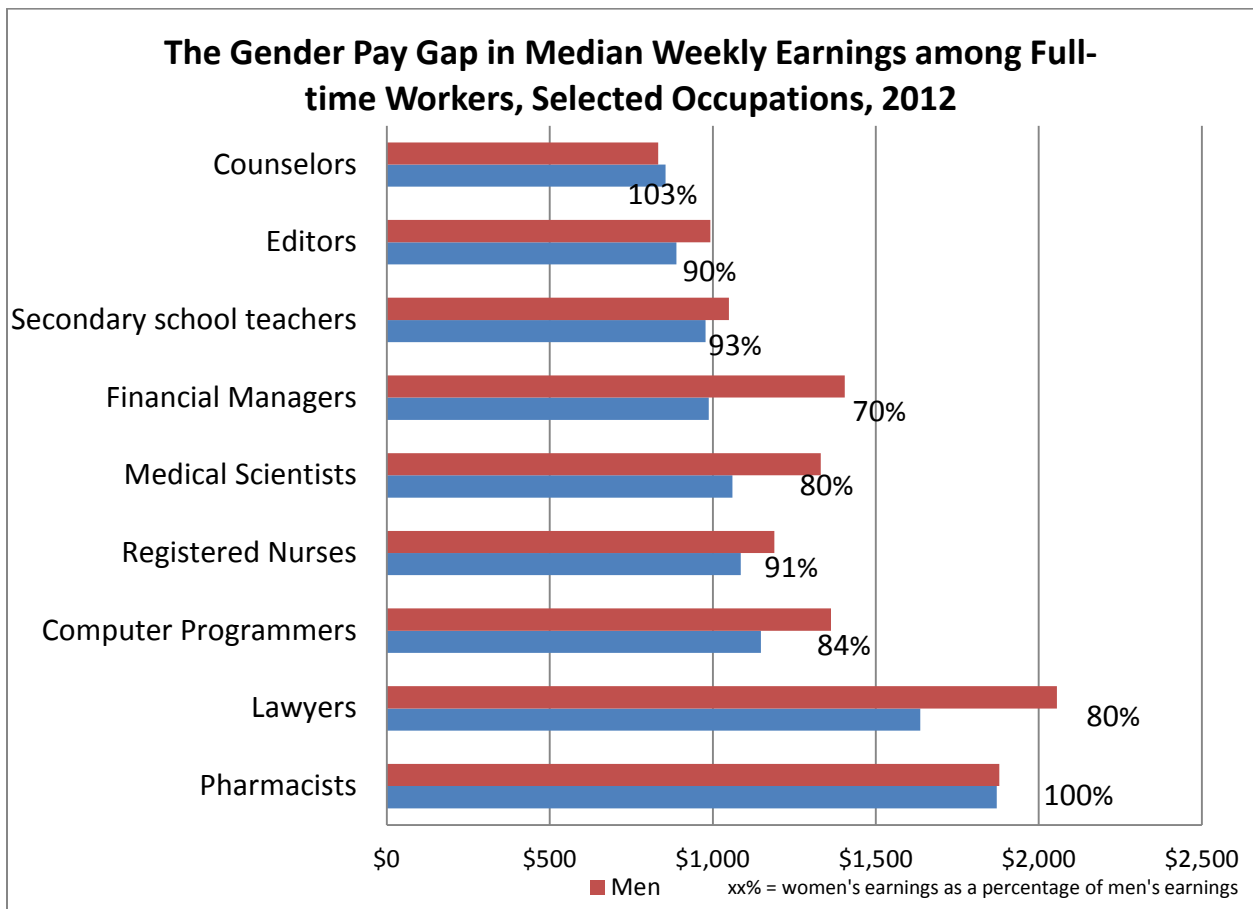


Figure 3: Gender pay gap among full-time workers in selected occupations.

While occupational segregation certainly contributes to the overall gender pay gap, it also limits our country’s economic growth and success. If women and members of other traditionally underrepresented groups joined the STEM workforce in proportion to their representation in the overall labor force, the domestic shortage of these professionals would disappear

(Congressional Commission on Women in STEM, 2000). Women made up 57 percent of professionals in the 2008 U.S. workforce, but only 24 percent of professional IT-related occupations were held by women (National Center for Women and Information Technology, 2009).

Family and Caregiving Responsibilities and the Pay Gap

Women are still more likely to be caregivers and to take time off from the workforce than men are. This theme was raised in the 1963 report, where career interruption is noted as a double-edged sword for many women. While it was a reality for many, it also created a generalized bias that women working would eventually have to be homemakers and would be less reliable than male employees due to their family obligations. Unfortunately, this type of stereotypical view of women workers continues to persist in pay and promotion disparities that continue to impact most women throughout their lives. Experimental research has documented that employers are less likely to hire mothers compared with childless women, and when employers do make an offer to a mother, they offer her a lower salary than they do other women. Fathers, in contrast, do not suffer a penalty compared with other men (Simple Truth, 2013, p9). Parenthood affects men and women very differently in terms of labor force participation and how they are viewed by employers, and that difference may be reflected in a worker's salary.

Impediments to Hiring and Promotion and the Pay Gap

Gender discrimination, overt and subtle, persists in American workplaces. It occurs when employers and co-workers treat women in a particular way because they are women rather than on the basis of individual merit. In 2011 alone, the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) received more than 28,000 complaints of sex discrimination, an increase of about 18 percent compared with a decade earlier. Although the EEOC will not find all of these cases to have merit, each year millions of dollars are awarded to individuals who file sex discrimination claims (AAUW Graduating to a Pay Gap, 2012). In addition to EEOC cases, some additional sex discrimination claims are resolved through the courts. But, it is likely that many more women who face circumstances similar to those found in the cases that are litigated do not bring charges or file lawsuits against their employers. The resolutions and awards associated with these cases each year demonstrate that gender discrimination in the workplace continues to be a significant problem (AAUW Graduating to a Pay Gap, 2012). A wide body of research demonstrates that a considerable number of men and women continue to hold biases – often unconscious – against women in the workplace. Persistent biases and discrimination can influence both the explained and unexplained portions of the gender pay gap. Since discrimination is difficult to measure directly – and other factors may be at play – we do not know how much of the unexplained pay gap is due to discrimination. But, where discrimination contributes to something we can and do measure, such as occupational segregation where employers hire men into certain jobs and women into others, this portion of the pay gap may be capturing some discrimination at play (AAUW Graduating to a Pay Gap, 2012).

Ultimately, the gender pay gap is an aspect of women's experience in the workforce identified by the 1963 President's Commission report that has not disappeared in the 50 years since the report was issued.

Section 3. Women are breadwinners, but don't make enough bread.

Women have long been economic engines for our country. In 1963, eight out of ten women were in paid employment outside the home at some time during their lives (*American Women*, 1963, p6). At the time of the President's Commission report, one worker in three was a woman, which meant there were almost 23 million women at work outside of the home.

Around three out of five women workers were married, and nearly one in three married women were working. Women's participation in the labor force has always been high among women of color, immigrants, and low-income women (Center for American Progress, 2012). Nearly one in two married women of color was working in 1963 (*American Women*, 1963, 27).

Just following the end of the most recent recession, in July 2009, the National Bureau of Economic Research found that women made up half of all workers on U.S. payrolls (Center for American Progress, 2012). Though that number has fluctuated minimally as jobs continue to be added and the economy recovers, in February 2012 women still comprised about half, around 49.3 percent, of U.S. payrolls (Center for American Progress, 2012). Married women made up only about half of women workers in 2011, and about 57 percent of married women were working (DOL Women Databook Table 4).

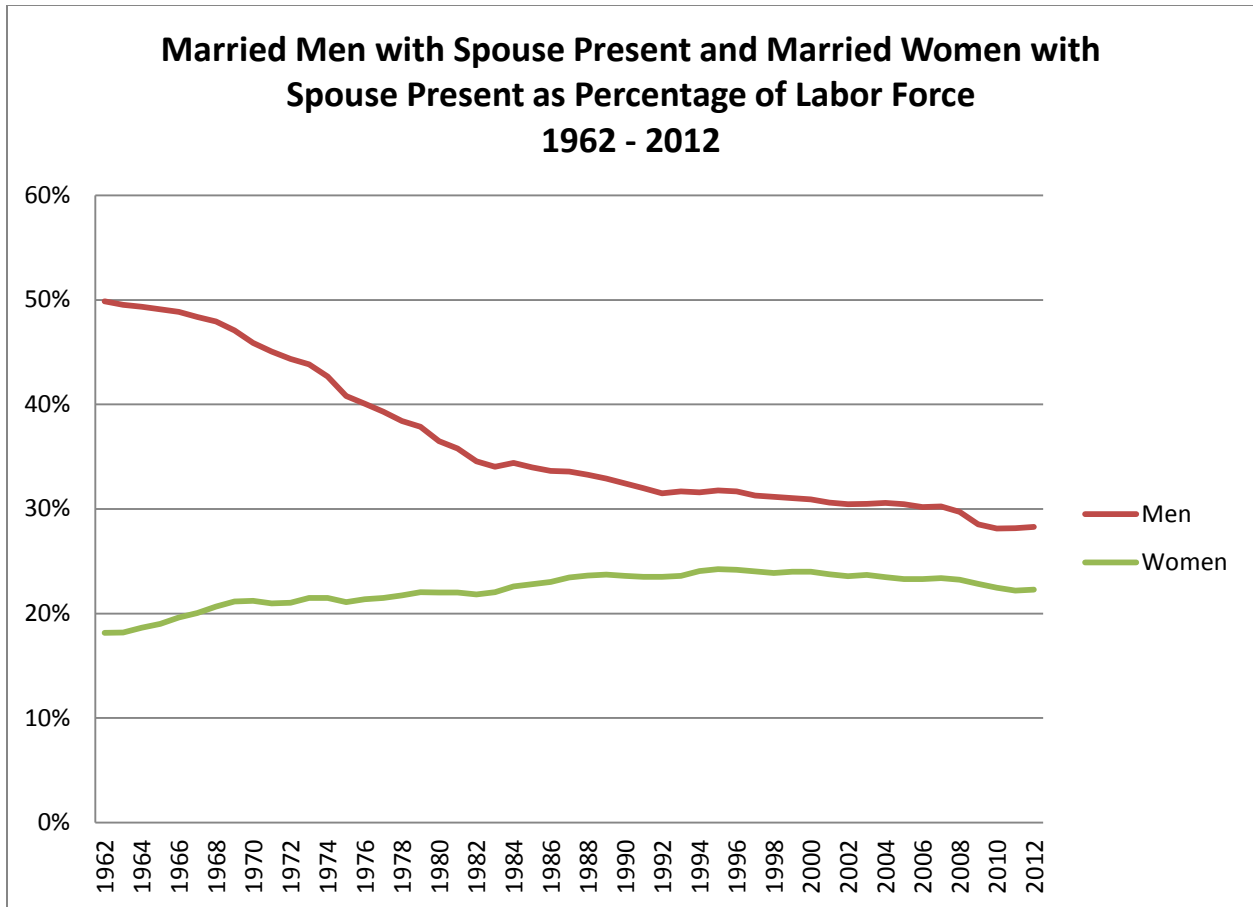


Figure 4: Married Women and Men

The economic security of America’s families is inextricably linked to women’s economic security. This was a trend that was already developing in 1963, when married women made up around 20 percent of the labor force. As the *American Women* report noted, almost three million mothers of children under 6 worked outside the home, although there was a husband present (*American Women*, 1963). At that time it was a departure that more mothers were working, but today it has very much become the norm. By 2011 that number had more than doubled – over 6 million mothers of children under 6, with a husband present, worked outside

the home (DOL Women Databook Table 6). Over 23 million mothers with children under the age of 18 are employed today (Department of Labor, 2011).

Families increasingly rely on women's wages to make ends meet, and more women are breadwinners in today's American families than were in 1963. In typical married households, women's incomes accounted for 37.6 percent of total family income in 2010, up from 26 percent in 1970 (DOL Women Databook Table 24). Thirty four percent of working mothers are their families' sole breadwinner (Joint Economic Committee, 2010). In addition, among married couple families, 54 percent had earnings from both wife and the husband in 2010, compared with 44 percent in 1967 (DOL Women Databook Table 23). In 1987, almost 18 percent of working wives whose husbands also worked earned more than their spouses. In 2010, over 29 percent of working wives were paid more than their working husbands.

Women are increasingly co-breadwinners, with their families relying on their incomes. In the past 20 years, married couples with a working wife enjoyed average annual income growth of 1.12 percent per year. In contrast, married couples with a stay-at-home wife saw their average annual incomes decrease by 0.22 percent per year (Joint Economic Committee, 2010). In addition to the changing dynamics within married couple households, since 1963 societal changes have led to more single parent households – a majority of which are headed by women (CPS, 2012). That women contribute to the economic security of their families across family demographics is a clear trend.

Ultimately, then, negative impacts on the wages women are paid have implications for their families. As primary and co-breadwinners, when women don't bring home enough "bread" their families suffer. This happens for a myriad of reasons, but we do know that

women are more likely than men to be in poverty (Center for American Progress, 2008). In many cases, women in poverty are the sole head of household for their families. The gender pay gap contributes to their diminished wages, and this starts immediately after they enter the workforce (AAUW Graduating to a Pay Gap, 2012). In addition, caregiving responsibilities may cut into their wage-earning capacity, and inflexible workplaces may make it particularly difficult for women to balance both (Center for American Progress, 2008).

Section 4. Workplace Policies Impacting Women

As the 1963 report was issued, Congress had just passed, and President Kennedy had signed, a bill to ensure that male and female workers performing substantially equal work in the same establishment receive equal pay. The Equal Pay Act acknowledged many of the same things the report sought to spotlight: that women continued to work in different occupations than men, and that in some cases they were barred from employment in certain jobs and in others were paid less for the same work. Recommendations to pass legislation to end discrimination by gender in employment were included in many sections of the *American Women* report. At the time, fewer than half of all states had already taken steps to end practices that discriminated against women and limited their job opportunities. In addition, research gathered by the President's Commission on Women indicated that 1 out of 3 companies had dual pay scales for men and women (*American Women*, 1963, p28). As the report explained, some discriminatory practices were contained in common law, some in statute, some in court decisions, and others in practice only.

Pay Equity

Since enactment of the Equal Pay Act, we have seen shifts in women's participation in the labor force, as well as improvements in the working conditions they face. Congress and the President have sought in several ways to help limit discrimination in the workplace. Following passage of the Equal Pay Act, which has provided options to women who are discriminated against when performing substantially equal work as their male colleagues, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, enforced by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and Executive Order 11246 have also helped to open doors for women in the workplace. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act has been helpful in providing options beyond equal pay for substantially equal work. In 1981, in *County of Washington v. Gunther*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Bennett Amendment (Sec. 703(h)) of Title VII does not restrict Title VII's prohibition of sex-based wage discrimination to claims of equal pay for equal work. According to a 1985 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission decision, claims of sex-based wage discrimination may be proved by evidence of (1) the discriminatory application of a wage policy or system or the discriminatory use of wage-setting techniques such as job evaluations or market surveys, (2) barriers to equal access to jobs, or (3) the preponderance of direct or circumstantial evidence that wages are intentionally depressed because of the occupants of the job (EEOC Decision No. 85-8, June 17, 1985, as reissued July 12, 1985). Title VII was updated in 2009 with the passage of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which was the first bill President Barack Obama signed into law. The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act restored the interpretation of the law that pay discrimination occurs not only when pay decisions are made, but also every time employees are subjected to that pay discrimination. This was an important decision which helps to keep courtroom doors open for

women who are filing suit.

Executive Order 11246 speaks specifically to a recommendation in the 1963 report – that work done under federal contracts should ensure nondiscrimination (*American Women*, 1963, p60). The Executive Order prohibits federal contractors and federally-assisted construction contractors and subcontractors who do over \$10,000 in Government business in one year from discriminating in employment decisions on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) enforces the Executive Order. OFCCP's jurisdiction covers approximately 26 million or nearly 22 percent of the total civilian workforce (DOL Facts on Executive Order 11246 – Affirmative Action).

But, the Equal Pay Act, Title VII, and other federal provisions, have not been enough to fully curtail stereotypes and the practices that accompany them, which often restrict women as they move through their careers. In addition, the pay gap limits women's choices, from where they live to their educational choices, and the futures of their families (*AAUW Graduating to a Pay Gap*). Understanding the persistent pay gap shows us that discrimination likely still exists. Advocacy groups such as AAUW argue that the proposed Paycheck Fairness Act is needed to improve upon the Equal Pay Act and other laws. The Paycheck Fairness Act would require employers to prove that pay disparity is based on a legitimate business reason not related to gender, or due to seniority, merit, or productivity. It would also strengthen deterrents to pay discrimination and prohibit retaliation against workers who discuss their pay with one another or ask about pay practices.

Minimum Wage

Also contributing to the overall lower earnings of women was, and still is, their predominance in minimum wage occupations. In 1963, 6 million women were employed in work not covered by minimum wage legislation. Several million women at the time earned less than \$1 an hour – they were working primarily in service occupations and domestic trades (*American Women*, 1963, 63). Since 1963, major advances have been made in the coverage and rate of the federal minimum wage (Department of Labor Min Wage Doc). But today, women still represent nearly two-thirds of U.S. workers earning the minimum wage or less. In 2013, a woman working full-time, year-round at the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, earned just \$14,500 annually — more than \$3,000 below the poverty line for a family of three.

Continuing from 1963 to today, there are still many occupations dominated by women which are not covered or have different consideration under the federal minimum wage. For example, today women also represent two-thirds of workers in tipped occupations such as restaurant workers, where the minimum cash wage has been frozen at \$2.13 per hour for more than 20 years. Continuing to improve our federal minimum wage law to keep pace with inflation and include all occupations would have a meaningful impact on the economic security of women and their families. This was true in 1963 and remains true today.

Child care and Family Leave Central to Agenda for the Future

Finally, as the 1963 report explains, for women to truly be full participants in the workforce paid parental leave or comparable insurance should be provided for all workers (*American Women*, 1963, 43). This finding from the *American Women* report remains a key

policy priority to advance women's economic security. While paid parental leave is important due, in part, to the fact that over 23 million mothers with children under 18 work outside the home (DOL Databook Table 6), leave to cover all family caregiving responsibilities has become even more of a necessity as the current workforce, particularly women workers, becomes responsible for providing care to their aging parents. In 2009, about 61.6 million Americans provided care to an adult at some time during the year (AARP 2011). A key policy advance was made in 1993, 30 years after the report, when the Family and Medical Leave Act was signed into law, providing most workers job-protected, family and medical leave to care for a loved one or themselves. Unfortunately, FMLA leave is unpaid. Many workers find that they cannot use FMLA leave because they cannot afford to go without a paycheck. Also, about 40 percent of the workforce is not eligible for leave under the FMLA. Finally, FMLA does not cover leave (sick leave) for short-term non-serious illnesses, such as the flu or a cold, which last for only a day or two. Workplace policies must catch up to the reality that all employees need the capacity to balance work and life demands.

Conclusions

Important changes in women's role in the workplace have occurred since 1963. Women are obtaining additional education and training, participating in the labor force in higher numbers, entering higher-paying occupations – even those that used to be dominated by men—and families are increasingly relying on women's earnings to be economically secure. But, similar to 1963, barriers remain that perpetuate deeply entrenched occupational segregation, a gender pay gap, discrimination in the workplace, and inflexible policies that make it harder for workers to balance work and family responsibilities. Without meaningful changes to our workplace

policies to catch up to the changing makeup of our workplaces and needs of our workers,
women will continue to struggle with barriers to their success.

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