


## Female workers make gains but still earn less than men

The number of women in the workplace is growing, but their pay is significantly lower.

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For a while last year — and for the first time in history — women outnumbered men in America's workforce.

Much of the shift could be attributed to the struggling economy. Manufacturing, trade and construction jobs, traditionally dominated by men, were the hardest hit by layoffs. In summer 2009, the left-leaning Center for American Progress noted that men accounted for three of every four jobs lost to the recession.

But economic conditions weren't the only explanation.

In July, *The Atlantic* magazine took a comprehensive look at the feminization of labor. The magazine noted that women held 51.4 percent of managerial and professional jobs, outpaced men in colleges and universities and are expected to exceed men in 13 of 15 projected growth industries.

“What if,” writer Hanna Rosin asked, “the modern, postindustrial economy is simply more congenial to women than it is to men?”

There's evidence to support that notion.

Since the early 1990s, women have outnumbered men in American universities. The American Council on Education shows that, on a national level, women currently account for 57 percent of college enrollments.

The most recent Oklahoma data shows similar enrollment figures: 56 percent women, 44 percent men.

Women earn more master's degrees and as many professional and doctoral degrees as men. They are increasing their numbers in traditionally male degree programs, such as engineering and business administration.

“Women now have virtually all careers available to them,” said Houston Davis, vice chancellor for academic affairs for the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education.

“If you look back 30 to 40 years ago, there were a number of degree programs in which you could not find women at all. As those barriers have broken, women are flooding into those opportunities and seeking careers that they were previously denied.”

Men still enroll in college, of course.

“Our numbers show there are more males enrolled now than there were 20 years ago,” Davis said, “but their overall share of the pie has shrunk.”

Men opt out of college for a variety of reasons. Many postpone higher education for immediate employment in the military or in jobs that involve physical labor, such as

construction or roofing.

“The problem with that is we know that for every year a person decides to lay out or not go into college, the more unlikely it is that they'll come back,” Davis said.

The numbers bear that out.

Men ages 25 and older comprise just 14 percent of all undergraduate students, according to the Council on Higher Education. Women in that age group outnumber men two to one.

## Transforming the workplace

Corporate strategies have changed in recent years, perhaps because women have gained more prominence. Militaristic bosses — characteristically men — are being replaced by managers who listen more and bark less.

“There's a premium on democratic leadership, coaching and teaching,” said Cindy Rosenthal, a University of Oklahoma professor who studies women and politics. “Women are better at leading that way rather than in an autocratic environment.”

That isn't to say that women aren't decisive bosses. Alice Eagly and Linda Carli argue in their 2007 book, “Through the Labyrinth,” that female leaders are equally as effective as men.

“They (the authors) review a lot of the literature and data on managerial skills,” Rosenthal said, “and to the extent that jobs have a strong emphasis on interpersonal skills and not just technical tasks, women tend to do better.”

In other words, women generally excel at skills valued in contemporary offices: collaboration, communication and compromise, among others.

Women are bringing those skills to the labor force at an unprecedented rate. In the past 25 years, the number of working women has increased by 44.2 percent, according to the “Women and the Economy 2010” report by the U.S. Joint Economic Committee. That's 20 million more female workers, with three out of four of them holding full-time jobs.

Seventy-five percent of American women ages 25 to 54 had jobs in 2010, according to the committee. Women's unemployment rate was 8.6 percent, compared to 10.6 percent for men.

## Problems persist

The American playing field still isn't level.

One in three families with children relied solely on the mother's earnings in 2010, according to the federal statistics, but women's earnings accounted for only about a third of married couples' income.

That's because women aren't paid the same as men.

Earlier this month, President Barack Obama noted that women still earn less — about 77 cents for each male dollar — and stand a greater chance of living in poverty.

“At a time when folks across this country are struggling to make ends meet ... it's a

reminder that achieving equal pay for equal work isn't just a women's issue," he said in a weekly radio address. "It's a family issue."

That's truer than most folks realize. For years, economists have said that women's expansion into the workplace has masked the larger problem of wage stagnation.

In 2008, researchers with the Schwartz Center for Economic Policy Analysis noted that for decades, men have been earning less than their fathers did at the same age, after adjustments for inflation. Pay increases haven't kept up, and more education and hard work — two cornerstones of the American dream — haven't equated to more money.

To compensate for that stagnation, families need two incomes. Women don't just choose to work; they *have* to work to keep their families afloat. When husbands lose their jobs, wives shoulder more of the financial burden while being paid at a lower rate.

That pay gap isn't limited to low-level jobs. Female managers are paid less than their male counterparts. They also stand a lower chance of becoming top executives and remain underrepresented in top legislative positions.

"If you look at it, only 17 percent of the membership of Congress is female," Rosenthal said.

Rosenthal herself proves the point. In 2008, the year after she was first elected mayor of Norman, only 15.7 percent of U.S. mayors were female, according to the Center for American Women and Politics. Oklahoma now has a female governor, but Mary Fallin has few analogues in other states.

In part, that's because women tend to get a later start at careers.

"Adapting family responsibilities to some of these very high-power, professional tracks is still much more difficult for women than men," Rosenthal said. "Women are less likely to see themselves as qualified to run for political office.

"They are less likely to be encouraged and recruited to run, and they start later in political careers because of family issues. The kids are in high school before women start. Whether it's a business or political career, you don't get to the top when you don't start until your early 40s."

That, too, is changing. According to the Joint Economic Committee, 52 percent of mothers with children under six worked outside the home in 1984. By 2009, that had increased to 64 percent. Whether that's progress — women entering the workplace earlier in life — or a backward step — children spending much of their early lives with baby sitters or in day care — is a matter of opinion.

What's clear is that American culture is shifting.

"Yes, the U.S. still has a wage gap. ... Yes, women still do most of the child care," Rosin wrote last year. "And yes, the upper reaches of society are still dominated by men. But given the power of the forces pushing at the economy, this setup feels like the last gasp of a dying age."

Welcome to the matriarchy.

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