

Women's share of jobs slipping

Once poised to become a majority of the workforce, women haven't found as many jobs as men during the recovery. But some signs point to an eventual rebound.

By Christianna McCausland, Correspondent / February 11, 2011

The great recession was so hard on male workers that some called it a "he-cession." Male unemployment peaked at 11.4 percent. So many men were pushed off employment rolls that by October 2009 women held a record 49.96 percent of the jobs, within a hairbreadth of a historic first for the United States.

Some outlets couldn't wait to trumpet the news: "Women are about to become the majority of the nation's paid workers," Ms. Magazine reported that month.

In fact, the great gender switch never happened. October turned out to be the high point for women and their job share has been slipping ever since, as male-dominated industries like manufacturing recovered and female-dominated ones like education were cut as cash-strapped states slashed budgets. Even if women do gain the upper hand in a few years, that may not eliminate chronic inequities, such as lower pay and underrepresentation in management.

Women may need something more, like a new generation of workers.

"While it's true the paygrade isn't high in the industries women generally go into, the average woman graduating college in major cities like New York, London, Munich is actually outearning the average man, which is new in recent years," says Maddy Dychtwald, cofounder of Age Wave, a research and consulting firm in Emeryville, Calif., and coauthor of a new book "Influence: How Women's Soaring Economic Power Will Transform Our World for the Better." "I think we're seeing the beginning of an important flip-flop."

A key factor in that switch, she adds, is the trend away from a manufacturing-centric economy to one where "brains outranks brawn." Ms. Dychtwald believes women's education levels have reached a tipping point where women will forge ahead of men, citing statistics such as 73 percent of recent high school valedictorians were women.

This optimistic forecast runs counter to some long-established trends. Although women make up half the attendance of law schools and graduate from college at higher rates than men do, they account for only 18 percent of partners in private law practice and 3 percent of Fortune 500 executives. Despite higher levels of education, women graduates routinely enter the

workforce at a lower paygrade than male peers. Last year, women's median full-time earnings were \$36,278, compared with \$47,127 for men.

Regardless, women are poised to become the majority of the workforce at some point, if past patterns hold true.

During most of the postwar recessions, women made job gains. Their employment numbers rose an average 0.4 percent during each of the eight economic downturns prior to 1990, the US Department of Labor says. After the shallow recession of the early 2000s, where women's unemployment rate mirrored that of their male counterparts, women were thought to have "opted out" of work.

"What really was going on was that women lost more jobs than they had in the previous recessions, and job growth in the 2000s was weak by historical terms," says Heather Boushey, senior economist at the Center for American Progress, a progressive think tank in Washington.

Not everyone thinks women are poised to become a majority in the workforce. The Labor Department projects that they will account for 46.9 percent of the labor force by 2018.

"I do believe men will go back to [being] the majority of the workforce," says Heidi Hartmann, president of the Washington-based Institute for Women's Policy Research. "They do that because they take less time to manage families."

Even if women become the majority of the US workforce, other challenges remain.

"I don't think we should focus on labor force participation as a magic number," says Olga Shurchkov, a professor of economics at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Mass. "It really matters more what kind of jobs women have access to and how they can progress in those jobs over time."

The so-called Millennials (under age 29) could be a linchpin of change. Young women's desire to advance and have high-powered careers is now equal to that of men, regardless of the woman's parenting status, according to a 2008 study by the Families and Work Institute, a New York research organization. As women seek higher-powered careers, they're more apt to become better negotiators of higher salaries.

In addition, young men, particularly those raised by working mothers, have a new attitude. The study shows that young men are more likely to believe women can work and be good mothers at the same time. Male Millennials now spend more time engaged in home- and child-care tasks than their fathers did.

Perhaps most telling, they also suffer higher levels of angst over work-life balance.

"As women become more involved as breadwinners, men become more involved as breadmakers," says Dychtwald. "We see the early signs of that all around us."

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