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Women set to outdo men on pay

Falling birth rates, the ‘mancession’ and cultural shifts are all propelling female workers up the American earnings league

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Women in over a third of dual-income US households earn more than their husbands (Frederic Cirou) The pay gap between men and women is set to vanish within 14 years among the professional classes, according to an analysis of the American workplace.

Women will on average earn more than men in careers such as law, medicine and academia by 2024, says Maddy Dychtwald, a Californian expert on demographics.

In a new book, *Influence*, based on US government statistics, she says women in more than a third of professional dual-income households in America are making more than their husbands, up from just over a quarter five years ago.

If this trend continues, women in middle-income jobs such as teaching, healthcare and the arts will start overtaking men shortly after 2024.

The predictions mark a startling break with official estimates at the start of the century, which suggested the pay gap would persist for another 40 years.

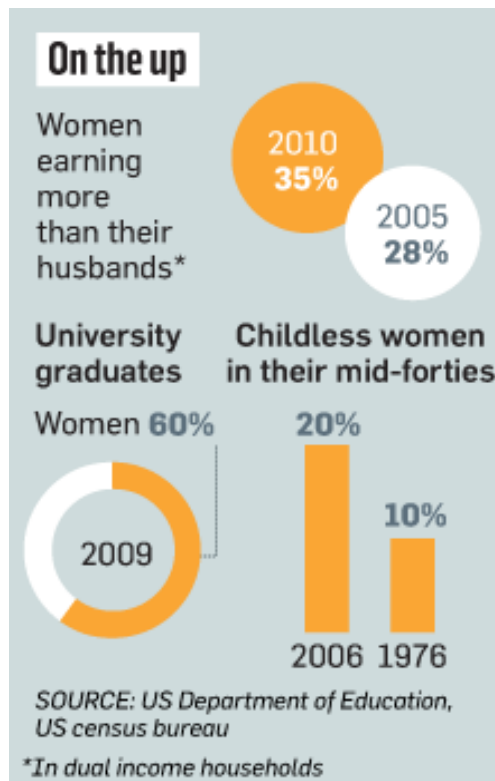
Declining birth rates, a growing number of female-friendly posts and the “mancession” — more men than women lost their jobs in the US recession — have since helped to shatter elements of the glass ceiling.

“There are economic changes, but also shifts in cultural attitudes showing up in many polls,” said Dychtwald. “Women are more ambitious, going for the top jobs, and younger women would find pay disparity with their male peers a joke.

“While older men find this threatening, the majority of men under 40 have little problem with their wives earning more than they do. It takes a burden off their shoulders and they can move into jobs previously unthinkable, such as teaching.”

Her projections are backed by Robert Reich, professor of public policy at the University of California, Berkeley, who predicts that the gap could close at the professional level as early as 2020.

“Significantly more woman are graduating from college than men and, as college remains the single clearest indicator of future wealth, these woman will reshape the pay structure at the top end of the workforce within the next few years,” said Reich, who was labour secretary under President Bill Clinton.



According to Andrew Beveridge, professor of sociology at Queens College, New York, this has already happened in cities such as Dallas, where the average woman in her twenties earns 20% more than the average man in the same age group, New York (17% more), Chicago and Boston.

Beveridge said women graduates had flocked to these cities in search of “gender-blind” jobs over the past decade. In New York 53% of female workers in their twenties are graduates, compared with 38% of males.

The recession has resulted in what Dychtwald suspects is a permanent change: according to a University of Illinois study, companies that downsized in hard times are hiring more women as the US economy improves.

Others analysts warn that Dychtwald may be over-optimistic: a 2005 Cornell University study found that many employers would still prefer men to women with children because they felt they were more “committed”.

The “motherhood penalty” remains the biggest obstacle to female advancement, say experts, especially among poorer, less well-educated woman who tend to have more children.

This may change as the birth rate falls and educational opportunities trickle down.

The decline in America’s birth rate is sharpest in cities, where more women go to college. But it is a national trend: 20% of women aged between 40 and 44 were childless in 2006, twice as many as in 1976, the US Census Bureau reported.

Companies are catering to affluent women, from Hewlett-Packard’s “digital clutch” laptops to banks setting up women-only divisions.

These cater for professional women who want to take time off to raise children and then return to work — and not for pin money.