

## TREND OF FEMALE LABOR PARTICIPATION IN THE US SINCE 1970s

Balasundram Maniam, Tabitha Parker

*Sam Houston State University*  
*Sam Houston State University*

### Abstract

*Gender roles seem to direct society by telling men and women what they should be doing with their lives, making them feel like outcasts if they do not fill these roles. However, over the last 50 years, women have started to fight against these societal norms and have shown a desire to join the labor force. Women in the workplace saw an upward trend from 1970 to around 2000, where it since appears to have leveled out. As they have become more a part of the work force, there have been areas affected by their choice to not be as prominent in the home. This study will look at the journey women have taken thus far and how it has affected various aspects in their lives. Changes have been made to the gender-wage gap, lessening the gap significantly. Family units have changed, allowing women to have more of a role outside the home. While women in the work place overall have changed, differences have varied across separate ethnicities. Women have fought a hard battle, one that seems will not end any time soon.*

**Keywords:** labor force, gender-wage gap, wage inequity

### INTRODUCTION

Since 1970, women have become a much more prominent presence in the typical work environment. That is, a job with certain hours and one that presents a paycheck for the work done. In 1970, and for years after, women were homemakers, and this was the “job” they held without “pay”. Women have been constantly battling to have a place not only at home, but also in the labor force.

There have been several different ways how they fought their way out of the home and into the office. They have not only created a spot for themselves in the workplace, but they have begun to hold the same managerial positions that their male counterparts have held for decades. Desegregating the jobs that were traditionally male has played a role in female participation from 1970 and later, including holding top tier positions (Cotter, 2001). A document that has helped women have a fair chance in the workplace is the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 in the US, which prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, sex, national origin, or religion.

Working women have played major role in the progress of future women’s participation in the labor force and how they are viewed by men. The increase in married women participating in the workplace grew from 1950-1990, growing around 12.9% per decade, remaining at a constant since around 1990 (Fernandez, 2013). As more of these wives, and potentially mothers, continue to have a presence outside the home, their sons are growing to recognize this as a societal norm, not just a special circumstance. As men continue to know this as a normal occurrence, they have been more accepting and supportive of the changing role women are taking on (Fernandez, 2013).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Although the rate of women in the workplace rose at such a rapid rate through 1990, it has since become stagnant, even declining slightly in more recent years. Aaronson (2014) tells us that the overall participation of women in the workplace has declined from 66% in 2007 to 63% in 2014. As the economy has changed over the last fifty years, there has been an increase in the wages for genders. However, as Kassenhoehmer (2014) argues, the wage increase for women has been greater, supporting the idea that the gender-wage gap is decreasing. Attanasio (2008) raises the idea that there is a link between the gender-wage gap decrease and childcare, claiming that as the wages increased overall, including those for women, there was not much of a raise for child care workers. Thus, there is the assumption that child care costs

remained the same as wages have increased, making it possible for women to go into the labor force, while still being able to bring in an income to help support the family.

Cohen (2004) says that there were clear declines in gender segregation in the work place in the 1970s-80s. Although Cunningham (2008) argues that there have been continued changes in gender roles, there have been questions as to how much these roles have really changed. Bianchi (2000) questions if roles have reversed, or if men have been forced to contribute more to the household because of the continued growth women are having in the workplace.

Even though there has been more gender equality present in the workplace, Langdon (2013) argues that women want to see more equality at home. As their presence continues to grow in the corporate world, their male counterparts need to contribute more to the household. The female presence that once held the home together has continued to grow outside the home, and if males do not step into that role to help more, the family unit will weaken. Furthermore, as the female labor supply continues to increase, fertility of women has seen decreases. Devaney (1983) claims the factors that increase work force participation are the same that depress fertility, and vice versa, which could be the reason the home has continued to change as women in the workforce grow.

As the gender-wage gap has decreased, there have still been issues regarding the role men and women hold inside the job field. Mintz (2010) argues that men continue to hold more authoritative roles than women, though this ratio has been decreasing. While there is no question as to the roles that men and women hold, Mintz further questions if there are differences regarding ethnicities in the workplace. Juhn (2006) also raises curiosity in questions of ethnic differences, wondering if the differences that have arisen in female participation in the world place are the same across all ethnicities.

This study will attempt to show not only the journey women have gone through thus far, but also how their choices have affected various aspects. These aspects include the changes women have made in the workplace in relation to the difference in the gender-wage gap and how their role in the home has changed. There also appear to be differences across ethnicities, which will be explored further in this study.

## **HOW WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE HAS CHANGED**

As discussed previously, the role of women in the work place has changed drastically. There has been a tremendous rise in the rate of women who have become a part of the work force, even if these rates of tapered off in recent years. There are several areas that have been affected by the increase of women in the workplace and a decrease of their presence in the home.

By becoming a greater presence in the work force, women have fought to decrease the gender-wage gap that was once such a prominent issue. Thus, the rate of income inequality has lessened over the last fifty years. Continued entrance by women into a place of work outside the home has also impacted how families' function. There has been a role change from males being the sole breadwinners to women now contributing to the household income. The changes have not necessarily been the same across all ethnicities, so it is important to see that some races may have to fight harder to break out of the "normal" role that society holds for women in general.

## **WORKPLACE INEQUALITY**

When discussing the idea of income inequality concerning genders, much of the talk revolves around the gender-wage pay gap. Although this is the biggest issues women face, there may be another factor that influences the pay rate of women. Cotter (2001) raises the issue of "female jobs" or those jobs that are jobs that women tend to hold, such as clerical work or, previously, the role of school teacher. Not only do women face the gender-wage gap issue in jobs they share with men, this now raises the issue that the jobs women tend to have are those that pay less in general.

There are different ways that the difference in wage gap had been measured over the years. Kassenboehmer (2014) also displays the wage gap in terms of dollars, showing a wage ratio comparison from 1993-1995 versus 2004-2008. From 1993-1995, men made, on average, \$15.81 and from 2004-2008 \$16.53, an increase of 4.6%, compared to the \$11.61 women made in 1993-1995 and the \$13.07 they made in 2004-2008, an increase of 12.6%. This data shows that the incomes of women are on the incline at a

steeper rate than that of men, however, there is still a gap in the amount of money the two genders make. In 1993-1995, the wage ratio was .735 and from 2004-2008 it was .791. So, while this shows that the ratio is increasing, women still only make, on average, 79 cents for every \$1 men are making, as seen in Figure 1 below. Further, Kassenboehmer (2004) claims there may be different factors responsible for changes in the gap at the top and bottom of the distribution, citing level of education has a factor at the top and work history as a factor at the bottom.

**Table 1: Wages of Male and Female Workers**

|                 | Male      |           |                | Female    |           |                | Wage ratio |           |
|-----------------|-----------|-----------|----------------|-----------|-----------|----------------|------------|-----------|
| Measurement     | 1993-1995 | 2004-2008 | Percent change | 1993-1995 | 2004-2008 | Percent change | 1993-1995  | 2004-2008 |
| <b>Mean</b>     | 15.81     | 16.58     | 4.6            | 11.61     | 13.07     | 12.6           | 0.735      | 0.791     |
| <b>Quartile</b> |           |           |                |           |           |                |            |           |
| Q10             | 6.38      | 6.13      | -3.9           | 4.29      | 4.77      | 11.2           | 0.673      | 0.779     |
| Q30             | 10.52     | 10.53     | 0.0            | 7.36      | 8.33      | 13.2           | 0.699      | 0.791     |
| Q50             | 14.10     | 14.39     | 2.0            | 10.20     | 11.37     | 11.4           | 0.724      | 0.790     |
| Q70             | 18.76     | 19.56     | 4.3            | 13.94     | 15.47     | 10.9           | 0.743      | 0.791     |
| Q90             | 28.01     | 30.39     | 8.5            | 20.54     | 23.44     | 14.1           | 0.733      | 0.771     |
| <b>N</b>        | 6.867     | 6.455     |                | 5.562     | 5.938     |                |            |           |

Source: Kassenboehmer (2014)

Graft (2008) showed that the gender-wage gap is lessening, showing that the gap is narrower in 2017 than it was in 1980. The gap has narrowed the most for young workers, ages 25-34. The gap in 1980 was 36 cents and went down to 18 cents in 2017, which the gap for young workers narrowed from 33 cents to 11 cents. This research also shows that 42% of women claim to have experienced discrimination in the workplace, while only 22% of men have claimed the same. The graphs below show how the wage gap has

*Median hourly earnings of U.S. women as percentage of men's median among ...*



change from 1980-2017, for workers in general and for young workers.

There has been discussion of the role childcare has played in how women have progressed in the work-place. Attanasio (2008) shows that while the wages have increased in all aspects of the job field, including those for both men and women, there has been one sector that has not seen the same generous increase – childcare. From 1982-1997, wages increased by 79%, while those of childcare employees increased by only 11%. There can be an assumption that since wages of these workers increased by less than others, then the cost of childcare itself has not increased drastically either. Thus, since women are making more than they were 15 years previously, they can now afford to not only put their children in childcare but also find a way to contribute to the household income, meaning men are no longer the breadwinners of the home.

How women continue to be paid less does not seem right, which is a thought supported by male politicians. In 2005, Senator Tom Harkins proposed the Fair Pay Act, which prevents employers from unfair wage practices, that is paying a woman less than a man for doing the same job. Senator Harkins claims that similar working conditions should equal similar pay (Langdon, 2013). There is also support from former President Obama, who signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which further supports the idea that women should be paid the same as men and any discrimination is a wrongful act under the previously mentioned Equal Employment Opportunity Act, which had been put into place forty-six years prior to the signing by President Obama.

The fight for gender equality is one that seems will be a constant and continuous struggle, but there has been much progress made over the years. As women become more prominent in the workplace and the gender-wage gap narrows, women will continue to take steps outside the home. However, as women make themselves more well known in the labor force and continue to fight for gender equality in the workplace, there may be consequences in the typical home dynamic.

### **HOW CHANGES IN WOMEN LABOR HAS AFFECTED FAMILIES**

Much of why women choose whether to leave the home and join the work force is due to the approval or disapproval of outside sources. Fernandez (2013) shows that as the approval for married women to work increases, so does the percentage of women in the work force. In 1970, approval was 65% and women in the work force was 40%, with the numbers rising in 1980 to 75% and 60% respectively, rising again in 1990 to 80% and 70% respectively, rising again in 2000 to 80% and 75% respectively, and since then has leveled out.

Juhn (2013) shows an increase in women, age 20-60, participating in the labor force, especially those who had been married at some point. From 1969-1999, the increase of those joining the labor force depended on their marital status, with those who were married increasing from 43.7% to 72.2%, those having never been married increasing a total of 4.4%, and those who were widowed or divorced rising 10.7% (2006). Juhn also questioned if there is a link in the stagnation of low skilled men and the rise of women. As the pay rate for those that are low skilled as not increased at such a rate as those that are highly skilled, it is a wonder if women have stepped up and gotten into the work force to help offset the financial changes their family may be experiencing. In fact, Langdon tells us that 1/3 of families are now the solely supported by the woman of the house.

Cunningham (2008) believes that the attitude towards roles in the home have changed as women's employment outside the home changes. In fact, this could be contributing to a move away from the normal gender roles of women being the homemakers and men being the breadwinners. Bianchi et al. (2000) supports this idea by showing how the responsibility of household chores have changed from 1970 to 2000. In 1970, women were spending 23.7 hours a week on household chores, while men spent only 7.2 hours a week, but this changed in 2000, with women spending 17.5 hours and men spending 10 hours, as seen in figure below. During this time, women cut their housework time due to an increase in labor force participation, leaving men to be responsible for nearly 1/3 of the household work. Men have taken over the role of cooking more often, while women continue to do more of the upkeep of the home, such as the cleaning and laundry. Bianchi emphasized a surprising fact in that, over time, unemployed women spent less time doing house work than those that are employed. This may lead to an assumption that there is a difference in the attitude and work ethic of those that choose to hold a job outside the home and those who do not.

One of the effects that women joining the labor force has had on the family unit has been the fact that fertility has gone down. Devaney (1983) said that the decline in fertility in 1970 was caused by the rising female employment ratios. However, this could be argued by Langdon (2013), who claims that women tend to choose jobs that still allow them to be a present figure in the household. In addition to be a more present parental figure even though they are working outside the home, Cohen claims that women still tend to do most of the labor at the house, but that as household services, products, and technologies continue to change, women have had more of a chance to enter the labor force (2004). These technologies include items that have made the job of the homemaker easier, including items such as a washer and a dryer.

Overall, there has been an increase in the percentage of mothers with children under 18 who have joined the labor force, growing from 47% in 1975 to 71% in 2011 (Langdon, 2013). Previously, there was the thought that women working would have a negative impact on marriages, causing divorce rates to rise, but it may be the opposite (Özcan, 2012). There is now evidence that as women feel their marriage becoming unstable, they become more involved in the work force for fear their marriage will not last and they will be left helpless.

While there has been evidence that women's roles are changing in the family, it is interesting to see if the changes are the same across all ethnicities. Cultures have women take on different roles and have different views as to what roles women should play in the workplace and home. Although women in general have seen changes in both home and work life, do women across all ethnicities have the same experiences?

## **CHANGES ACROSS ETHNICITIES**

Much of what has been discussed thus far pertains to women, however, it is not likely that the changes have been the same across all races or ethnicities. Macunovich (2012) supports this claim, showing that from 1970-2000, married women across all ethnicities show a rise in labor force participation. However, it appears that this growth pattern stops around 1990 for whites and other non-whites but continues to increase until around 2000 for African Americans.

Juhn (2006) supports the idea that races have about the same growth pattern when it comes to women entering the work force. In 1979, whites had a labor force participation of 61.4%, African American had 64.2%, and other races had 61.9%. They see a rise in these numbers in for whites in 1989 to 71.1%, a rise in 1999 to 75%, and a slight decline in 2004 to 73.6%. They also see a similar rise in 1989 to 70.5%, a rise in 1999 to 76.2%, with a slight decline in 2004 to 74.8%. Other races also show the same pattern with a rise in 1989 to 68.3%, a rise in 1999 to 69.4%, and, again, a slight decline in 2004 to 68.2%. While each of these ethnicities have the same pattern, it can be seen there is a larger percentage of African American women that are a part of the work force.

While it was discussed previously that men are more likely to hold managerial, thus authoritative, roles than women, do women across different races have the same chance? Mintz (2010) does not think so, showing us that while the numbers are rising for each race, white women still have a better chance at holding an authoritative role than other races. From 1970-2000, the percentage of female managers for different ethnicities varies as follows: for Whites, 16% in 1970 increase to 39% in 2000, for African Americans, 2.5% in 1970 increase to 6.9% in 2000, and for Hispanics, 0.7% in 1970 increase to 6% in 2000. Looking at these statistics, it can be concluded that Hispanics are more likely to hold a managerial role than African Americans, who may face discrimination in the hiring process. There is also a difference in the hiring rate for single women, with white women who are not been married being more likely to be hired than African American women who are not married.

Looking specifically at Mexican Hispanics, in 1985, men were more likely to be hired than women, but undocumented women were more likely to be hired than those who were documented (Chavez, 1985). This may be since undocumented workers were more willing to take the type of work that documented worker did not want, and the fact that they would take less money to do the same job. Moving forward, Mexican immigrants are still seen as better workers than natives because they have a stronger work ethic. Women have grown in the work place, as they are good workers until domestic issues arise, but men are still seen as the providers for the family (Karjanen, 2008).

Cubans bring a whole new ideal to what has been seen in other ethnicities. Perez (1986) claims that, in 1986, Cuban women have a higher labor participation rate than American women, therefore playing a larger role in the income for the family. Davis (2004) brings a new light to the situation by discussing the enclave Cubans seem to have built in Miami, claiming women have more success outside of the enclave because of the role they played in the development of the Cuban enclave. The women did much unpaid work, making sure the men had the chance to build themselves, and thus their families, in a new country. Like the Caucasian women, though, Cuban women still earn less than their male counterparts, even outside the enclave.

Immigrants prove to be a whole different entity to delve into. Immigrant mothers often rely on their family members, especially grandparents, for assistance so they can work and help support their family (Hu, 2018). Oddly, immigrant women tend to bring with them the ideals from their native lands. Women from countries where the labor supply is high, tend to work more than those with a low labor supply, eventually eliminating the gap with the natives of the United States. It is also important to note that women tend to lean toward the tendencies of their own source country, not that of their husband's. (Blau, 2011)

### **WHAT DOES THE FUTURE LOOK LIKE FOR WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE?**

As the participation of women in the workplace declines, Juhn (2006) wonders if this is a foreshadowing of women permanently withdrawing from the workforce or if it is just a slowdown in women continuing to join. Will women go back to be the homemakers they were 50 years ago, or will they continue to make a place for themselves in the labor force? It is important to also look at how the labor force participation is changing overall, for both men and women. As of right now, the decline appears to be a mirror of how the rest of the economy is doing, but the decline for women may have more of an implication in the future.

Kassenboehmer (2014) claim concerning the distributions of wage gaps may support the idea that there are “glass ceiling” and “sticky floor” phenomena. These phenomena claim that it there is difficulty for women to get away from the bottom pay and fight for more initial pay, but that once they do this there may be an issue with how much women will get paid in the long run. It appears there is still a struggle for women to keep up with men in terms of pay rate. Since women are more likely to live in poverty while raising their children, Cunningham (2008) also brings the idea how fair wages would increase the wellbeing of children by reducing poverty and allowing women to provide better lives for their children. This shows how better wages are not only unfair but how children may be suffering from the gender-wage gap.

Although the role of women is changing, there is a wonder if there will ever be true role reversal. It is not unheard of for a man to now be the homemaker, but it is a rarity, seeing as how only 1/3 of homes have women as the breadwinner. Will men continue to step up and allow women to continue their growth outside of the home, even if it means they must make some sacrifices themselves? However, Cohen (2004) claims that with the advancement in technology, eventually the home may not be seen as a place of work, nor will a “housewife” be seen as an occupation. Looking at continued gender roles after retirement is interesting, as well. It appears that women may retake the “normal” gender roles after retirement, going back to be the primary homemaker (Langdon, 2013). Looking at the research done back in 1983 by Devaney, we would expect that as the wages have continue to rise for women that the average family size has decreased, as she claimed fertility is negatively affected by the increase in female labor participation.

It will be interesting to see how all ethnicities will change over the coming years. Some have had to fight harder just to get entry level jobs, while some women hold the top roles in their companies. Thus, there are women not just fighting gender roles but also continuing to fight how races are viewed in society. It appears that some races have progressed further than others, but will these races grow to be equal? Although women participation overall has become stagnant, will there be continued growth when broken down by race?

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Fifty years ago, the idea of women in the workplace seemed like a foreign concept, but now it is a regularity that is seen every day, with some women even holding executive roles. It is important to realize how much women have gone through to get to the point they are at today, which is not just as homemakers but as successful business women. It has been a tough journey, and they still face many challenges to this day, but they are becoming more respected in the workplace as years continue to pass.

While the gap is lessening, there is still an issue with the amount of money that men make versus the amount women make for performing the same duties. However, it is beneficial for women that there are male politicians who hear their displeasure and are making constant efforts to do away with the unfairness concerning pay. It means their voices are being heard, and there are people that care enough

about them to do something about it. This gives women that are fighting right now the hope for a better future.

Roles have changed over the last several years, but, again, there is still work to be done if there will ever be equality between those homes that have men as the main source of income and those that have women as the main source. Women are still seen as mothers and wives more than they are seen as workers, even though they continue to work harder than men, with the majority of their work being in the home, thus being unpaid. Much of the future of women in the workplace will depend on the support of the men in the home.

As shown, hiring rates vary by ethnicity, meaning some women will have to work harder than others to get hired, and then even harder to hold authoritative roles. African American women especially appear to have the hardest time getting out of gender and racial stereotypes. As much work as women have done thus far to build their niche in the labor force, it is seen from the numbers that there is even more work that needs to be done for equality, especially among races, to be a tangible thing.

## REFERENCES

1. Aaronson, S., Cajner, T., Fallick, B., Galbis-Reig, F., Smith, C., & Wascher, W. (2014). Labor Force Participation: Recent Developments & Prospects. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 197-255.
2. Attanasio, O., Low, H., & Sánchez-Marcos, V. (2008). Explaining Changes in Female Labor Supply in a Life-Cycle Model. *The American Economic Review*, 98(4), 1517-1552.
3. Bianchi, S. M., Milkie, M. A., Sayer, L. C., & Robinson, J. P. (2000). Is Anyone Doing the Housework? Trends in the Gender Division of Household Labor. *Social Forces*, 79(1), 191-228.
4. Blau, F. D., Kahn, L. M., & Papps, K. L. (2011). Gender, Source Country Characteristics and Labor Market Assimilation Among Immigrants: 1980-2000. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 93(1), 43-58.
5. Chavez, L. R. (1985). Households, Migration and Labor Market Participation: The Adaptation of Mexicans To Life in The United States. *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, 14(4), 201-346.
6. Cohen, P. N. (2004). The Gender Division of Labor. *Gender & Society*, 18(2), 239-252.
7. Cotter, D. A., Hermsen, J. M., & Vanneman, R. (2001). Womens Work and Working Women. *Gender & Society*, 15(3), 429-452.
8. Cunningham, M. (2008). Changing Attitudes toward the Male Breadwinner, Female Homemaker Family Model: Influences of Womens' Employment and Education over the Lifecourse. *Social Forces*, 87(1), 299-323.
9. Davis, C. P. (2004). Beyond Miami: The Ethnic Enclave and Personal Income in Various Cuban Communities in the United States. *International Migration Review*, 38(2), 450-469.
10. Devaney, B. (1983). An Analysis of Variations in U. S. Fertility and Female Labor Force Participation Trends. *Demography*, 20(2), 147-161.
11. Fernandez, R. (2013). Culture as Learning: The Evolution of Female Labor Force Participation over a Century. *The American Economic Review*, 103(1), 472-500.

12. Graf, N., Brown, A., & Patten, E. (2018, April 9). The narrowing, but persistent, gender gap in pay. Retrieved July 22, 2018, from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/09/gender-pay-gap-facts/>
13. Hu, X. (2018). Filling the Niche: The Role of the Parents of Immigrants in the United States. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*,4(1), 96-114.
14. Juhn, C., & Potter, S. (2006). Changes in Labor Force Participation in the United States. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*,20(3), 27-46.
15. Karjane, D. (2008). Gender, Race, and Nationality in the Making of Mexican Migrant Labor in the United States. *Latin American Perspectives*,35(1), 51-63.
16. Kassenhoehmer, S. C., & Sinning, M. G. (2014). Distributional Changes in the Gender Wage Gap. *ILR Review*,67(2), 335-361.
17. Langdon, D. L., & Klomegah, R. (2013). Gender Wage Gap and Its Associated Factors: An Examination of Traditional Gender Ideology, Education, and Occupation. *International Review of Modern Sociology*,39(2), 173-203.
18. Macunovich, D. J. (2012). Relative Cohort Size, Relative Income, and Married Womens Labor Force Participation: United States, 1968-2010. *Population and Development Review*,38(4), 631-648.
19. Mintz, B., & Krymkowski, D. H. (2010). The Ethnic, Race, and Gender Gaps in Workplace Authority: Changes Over Time in the United States. *The Sociological Quarterly*,51(1), 20-45.
20. Özcan, B., & Breen, R. (2012). Marital Instability and Female Labor Supply. *Annual Review of Sociology*,38, 463-481.
21. Perez, L. (1986). Cubans in the United States. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*,487, 126-137.