

# Getting to Equal

## Progress, Pitfalls, and Policy Solutions on the Road to Gender Parity in the Workplace

BY PAMELA STONE

**K**ate Hadley aspired to do it all—pursue a successful career and raise a family. With a BA and MBA from Ivy League schools, Kate was a poster girl for the feminist movement, having easily cracked the boys' club of the corporate suite. She was committed to her job, experienced (with more than 10 years as an international marketing executive), and—when I interviewed her—at home full time with her kids. Part of the so-called “opt-out revolution” popularized by the media, Kate epitomizes high-achieving women who are said to be throwing over careers for family, their decision to be home a choice and part of a larger social movement, not simply a retro echo. Stay-at-home moms like Kate might not be the first group of women you'd think to study if you wanted to learn more about inequality in the workplace, but in fact their experiences are central to understanding recent trends. These women offer a unique lens for viewing the processes underlying women's progress—and lack thereof—in achieving gender parity in employment.

### Trends in the Gender Revolution

Since the 1970s, women have made great and, by historical standards, rapid gains in the workplace. They have closed the college education gap, and their graduation rate now eclipses men's. While their labor force participation rate is still lower than men's (60 percent versus 75 percent in 2008 for those aged 16 and over), it has risen rapidly over a period that saw men's begin to dip. Importantly, over this same period, women (particularly white and middle-class women) began eschewing the pattern of dropping out of the labor force after becoming mothers, instead working continuously throughout the years of peak family formation (as less-privileged women have always done). Fully two-

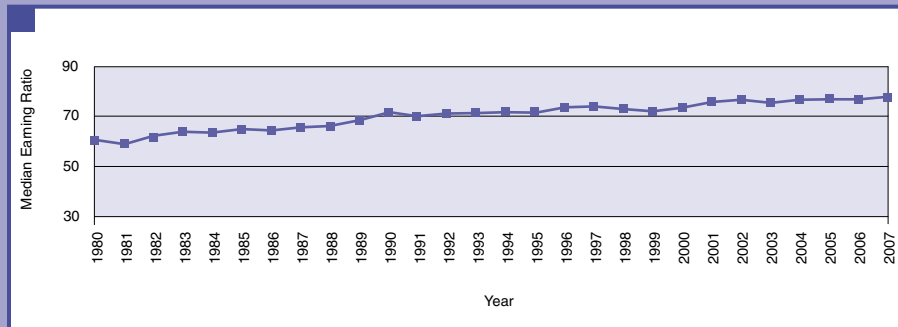
thirds of mothers of preschoolers are in the labor force today. And fulfilling the basis for those old “You've come a long way, baby” ads, many women have entered formerly male-dominated, high-prestige, lucrative, and powerful professions once all but closed to them.

With respect to advancing in the workplace, women have been doing everything right for close to four decades now: getting educated, working more and more continuously, and moving out of dead-end, low-paying “pink-collar” jobs. That's the good news. The bad news is that despite women's best and sustained efforts, progress toward gender equality is uneven and appears to be stalling.

Let's start by looking at one of the bright spots: the mobility of women out of low-paying historically “female” jobs such as child care providers and secretaries. One such measure of this movement is the index of dissimilarity, which expresses the extent of sex segregation in terms of the proportion of workers who would have to change jobs in order to create a fully integrated workplace. A fully integrated workplace is defined as one in which women's representation in any occupation would be equal to their representation in the labor force as a whole. In 1970, this index stood at 0.57; today, it is around 0.47. Progress, yes, but there's a long way to go when you consider that about half of all workers would still have to switch jobs for the workplace to be completely integrated.

Another sobering observation is that most of the gains in this index resulted from dramatic declines in segregation in the distant 1970s. Recent decades have shown virtually no change. Nor has women's progress in integrating jobs occurred across the board. Rather, integration has been experienced almost entirely by middle-class, college-educated, predominately white women who were able to respond quickly to opportunities afforded by

FIGURE 1. Trends in Women's Earnings (Relative to Men): 1980–2007



Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research, *Fact Sheet on the Gender Wage Gap: 2007*, August 2008, based on compilation of data from Current Population Survey.

the late 20th-century shift to a postindustrial economy and the attendant growth of professional and managerial jobs. Less well-educated women did not enjoy similar opportunities and remain mired in low-wage jobs. Finally, even in professional fields where women are well- and long-represented, they are often concentrated in less prestigious and less lucrative niches, and do not appear to be making it to the very top. Law, one of the first fields to open up to women, is a notable case in point. Women received about half of all law degrees conferred in 2001, when they made up 30 percent of the profession. At the same time, however, they accounted for only 15 percent of federal judges, 15 percent of law firm partners (only 5 percent of managing partners), 10 percent of law school deans, and 10 percent of general counsels.

The most widely used bottom-line indicator of gender inequality is the wage gap, computed as the ratio of women's to men's median earnings. Since the 1970s, when women earned roughly 59 cents to every dollar earned by a man, the gap has narrowed considerably, and now stands at 78 cents to every dollar. This progress is largely a function of women's entry into higher-paying fields, but also of declines in men's earnings. Trends in the gender wage gap show rapid and sizeable improvement, starting in the 1980s (see Figure 1). This improvement, however, was followed by a subsequent slowdown.

For today's twentysomethings, the wage gap narrows to near parity, as would be expected for these beneficiaries of the gender revolution. By the time they reach their thirties, however, women have become parents. And despite the fact that these women have become more experienced workers, the wage gap widens, approaching overall levels. The wage gap is also wider for women of color (African American women earn 63 cents and Latinas 53 cents to every dollar earned by a white man). Even in the professional and managerial ranks, where formal credentials are critical (and meritocratic principles govern recruitment, promotion, and pay), sizeable gender gaps remain. In 2000, these

gaps were 65 cents to the dollar for financial managers, 72 cents for physicians, 73 cents for lawyers, and 81 cents for editors and reporters, to name but a few fields in which women have made considerable inroads.

What explains the overall gender wage gap? Between 1983 and 2000, according to a 2003 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, just over half of the gap is due to "legitimate" or "valid" sources, including differences in human capital (such as education and training), hours worked, industrial and occupational positions, and unionization levels. The remaining 45 percent is unexplained, which most analysts attribute to differences in tastes or preferences and/or

outright discrimination, although some suggest that it is attributable to very fine-grained occupational segregation.

Not only are major sources of the gap unknown, so too are prospects for future progress. Leading experts on gender inequality, such as sociologist Reeve Vanneman and his colleagues, have raised the worrying question: "Are we seeing the end of the gender revolution?" Others, such as psychologist Virginia Valian, ask impatiently "Why so slow?" The decade-long slowdown in integrating jobs and closing the wage gap—at a virtual standstill in the new millennium—is a red flag to scholars, activists, and policymakers alike that something is seriously amiss on the road to gender equality.

### Opting Out? Or Pushed Out?

This is where women like Kate Hadley come in. I talked with Kate as part of a larger study I conducted of women who had transitioned from lives that combined professional careers with family—a contemporary, feminist model—to lives in which careers were left behind and taking care of children and family became their major focus—typically understood as a neo-traditional, counter-feminist lifestyle. Kate and women like her in their 30s and 40s were responsible for much of the improvement registered in the aggregate indicators described above. If these women are retreating from professional success, or "opting out" as media pundits claim, this might explain some of the slowdown in women's progress, or even portend a greater stall. I wanted to learn two things: (1) What was happening to this cohort of fast-track women? Were they turning away from combining careers with motherhood and, if so, how widespread was this phenomenon? (2) Among women who have "opted out," what led them to do so? In particular, what role did those hard-to-measure, unexplained "choices," tastes, and preferences (said to be evolving to reflect traditional gender roles) play? Likewise, what role did discrimination play?

In answer to the first questions, Figure 2 shows trends in

full-time family caregiving and employment among the demographic said to be heading home (white, married, college-educated mothers). The overall trend in caregiving is downward, but not straightforward: In 1981, 25.2 percent of women stayed home, which declined to an all-time low in 1993 of 16.5 percent, rising again in 2005 to 21.3 percent. The uptick in staying home in the mid-1990s was attributable primarily to unemployment levels, rising husbands' earnings, and deferred childbearing. Furthermore, among mothers, college-educated women exhibit the highest rates of labor force participation, and more recent cohorts of professional women are combining careers with motherhood in greater proportions than ever before: 77 percent in 2004. Overall, these trends show little sign of women reverting to 1950s stereotypes. Whether looking at staying at home or employment, however, we see a plateau or slowdown after an initial burst of rapid change. And, as with trends in job desegregation and the wage gap, this leveling off is not fully understood, though the parallels strongly suggest that the trends are inter-related.

To understand more about the decision-making underlying these trends, I interviewed dozens of at-home moms across the country who had worked in a variety of high-status professional and managerial jobs (more than half of whom had advanced degrees). What I found is that working moms are not "opting out" of the workplace because of family. They're being shut out. Their decisions did not reflect a change in favor of domesticity nor even a newfound appreciation of mothering (that came after they quit). Women spoke much more about work than about family in discussing why and how they'd come to quit. Nor did outright old-fashioned sex discrimination play a role (these women were surprisingly resilient, recounting overtly sexist experiences with tough matter-of-factness, almost gusto).

Instead, the combination of rising hours, travel, and 24/7 accountability demanded in today's workplaces, coupled with insufficient and inadequate part-time and flexible options, put these working moms in a classic time bind. As I talked with them, I heard the same thing over and over: that their jobs were "all-or-nothing," forcing these high-achieving women into decisions to reluctantly interrupt, and sometimes terminate, their once-flourishing careers. Married to men with comparable credentials and work histories—until they became parents—women found themselves "home alone" and primarily responsible for child care, their husbands' inability to help out a function of their own high-demand jobs.

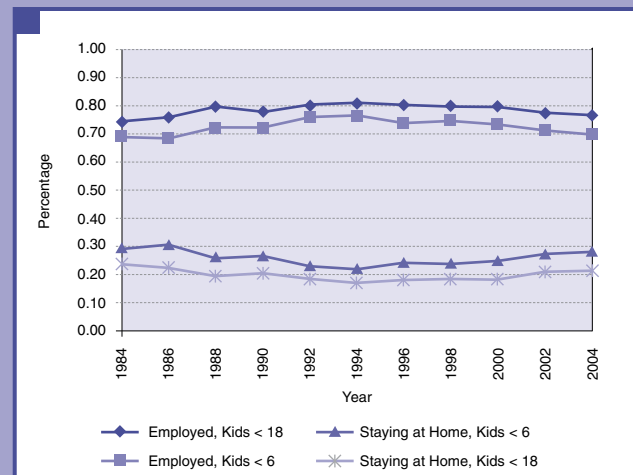
One of the paradoxes of my findings is that these at-home moms, seemingly the most traditional of women, were actually highly work-committed. Despite being married to equally successful men who could support them at home, most women, after becoming mothers, stuck it out, trying to make work work. Some were denied flexibility outright, but more quit because their efforts to fashion flexible careers—efforts that should have been applauded—were instead penalized. Indicative of the mommy-tracking and stigma these innovators experienced,

one woman invoked *Scarlet Letter*-like imagery as she explained to me "When you job share, you have 'MOMMY' stamped in huge letters on your head." Once women shifted away from a full-time-plus schedule, their formerly high-flying careers nosedived, undermining their attachment to their careers in a classic scenario of negative reinforcement.

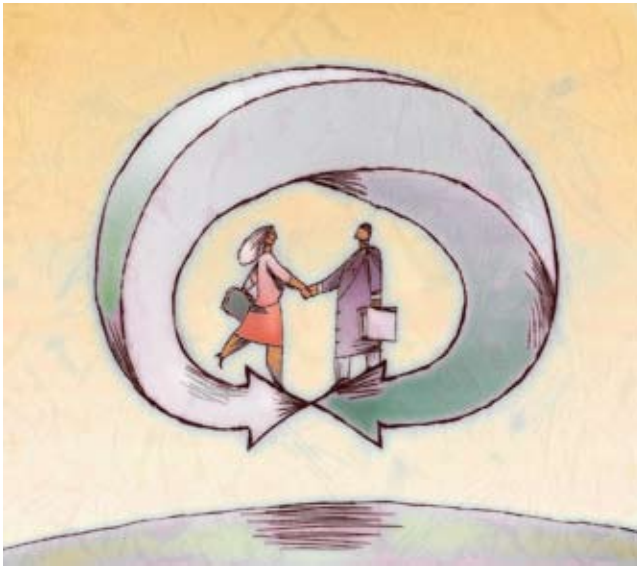
My results highlight the way in which time demands and professional occupations' inflexibility create a de facto "motherhood bar." This bar operates in tandem with the secondary influence of intensive parenting to cause women to quit their careers. Ostensibly meritocratic and unbiased time demands, coupled with ideal worker standards of commitment, appear to be replacing essentialist stereotypes in preventing women's full integration in professional fields. More women than ever are professionals and managers (over a third of all employed women), and the hours of these jobs have ratcheted up, such that the United States now enjoys the dubious distinction of having the world's longest workweek. That's not to say that essentialist stereotypes have disappeared. Indeed, they are at the heart of the double bind of work-family conflict. But stereotypes now operate in less overt ways, under the cover of time norms and related job imperatives. And because women facing untenable work conditions voluntarily "quit," unequal outcomes become their "choice" rather than a reflection of employers' (often discriminatory) practices.

Most women, of course, cannot quit, and instead persevere in the face of inflexible schedules, mommy tracking, and low pay. Less-educated and less-advantaged women accommodate their caregiving needs by cycling in and out of the labor force through a series of low-wage jobs, often fired when they take time off or show up late because they have to attend to family

FIGURE 2. Trends in Staying at Home and Employment among White, Non-Hispanic College-Educated Mothers



Source: Tabulation of March Current Population Survey microdata, 1984–2004, by Cordelia Reimers, Department of Economics, Hunter College and Graduate Center, CUNY



needs. These different strategies to accommodate family responsibilities share the same result: considerable costs not just to women in the form of lost earnings, but also to firms and the economy in the form of underused skills and talent. The motherhood penalty has now been well-documented. Incidentally, men—perceived as primary breadwinners—enjoy a “fatherhood premium” that further exacerbates the gender gap. The deep-seated and entrenched nature of motherhood bias means that it is more difficult to discern, more taken for granted as the norm, than is outright old-style sexism. Witness the easy acceptance of the notion that women like the ones I studied, who’ve spent a lifetime devoted to the pursuit of professional success, happily throw it all over in a (baby’s) heartbeat.

### Remembering the Ladies: Policies for Gender Equality

The motherhood penalty reminds us that workplace inequality is deeply rooted in the division of labor at home. The gendered nature of care, coupled with the absence of public supports in the United States for caregiving, redound to women’s detriment and remain a lingering basis of labor market inequality. Women must trade time in paid employment for time devoted to unpaid caregiving, a trade-off that looms ever larger as we face a widely acknowledged care crisis occasioned by an aging society, changes in family and household structure, and gaps in the social safety net. An effective policy response requires that we confront both sides of the work-family equation to neutralize the penalty to caregiving and break the link between gender and care. To accomplish this, we must provide supports for more gender-equitable caring *and* earning. In devising policy initiatives, we do not need to start from scratch, but can instead look to Europe’s experience to draw both positive and negative lessons. While work-family policies and supports are more widespread and well-established there, somewhat surprisingly these

countries exhibit less gender equality than the United States. This outcome alerts us to steer clear of policies that unintentionally cement women’s secondary labor market position as part-time workers in highly segregated female ghettos. Such policies include the long unpaid leave in Germany that reinforces a traditional division of labor and women’s lesser labor force attachment. A better approach would be to err in favor of more egalitarian approaches like those in Sweden and Norway, which provide generous wage-replacement policies and family leave provisions to promote men’s caregiving.

Current economic circumstances, coupled with a new administration led by President Barack Obama, create a moment of crisis and opportunity. Congress and the Obama administration are off to a good start, putting more teeth into existing equal pay laws with the swift passage and signing into law of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. As the Ledbetter case demonstrated, garden variety sexism is alive and well. Ledbetter, an experienced plant manager for the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, filed suit when she learned that she was earning less than her male counterparts, a case that made its way to the Supreme Court. The court did not deny that Ledbetter had suffered pay discrimination, but ruled that she had failed to file her claim in time. The Ledbetter bill closes that loophole, effectively extending the deadline under which plaintiffs can bring suit under existing equal pay laws. Several pending fair pay bills go even further, requiring proactive oversight and enforcement of anti-discrimination laws. The new stimulus package also contains provisions to strengthen and re-energize the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Together, these laws send a powerful signal that puts employers on notice and empowers women workers who are experiencing sex discrimination. Under the Bush administration, the EEOC was already paying increased attention to family caregiving discrimination (FCD). Currently the fastest-growing area of employment discrimination litigation, FCD attacks the motherhood penalty directly, and these cases must be vigorously pursued.

The recently passed stimulus package, insofar as it contains numerous tax and spending policies related to employment and earnings, can also be used to advance gender equity and parity—a true win-win—and must be evaluated and implemented with this goal in mind. A guiding principle should be to maintain and hasten the progress women have made, largely at the top, while increasing opportunities for those at the bottom who have not enjoyed the same gains and suffer the triple penalty of gender, race, and class. Thus, we need a two-pronged approach to move closer to gender equality, one that raises the ceiling and lifts the floor.

Women’s jobs appear to be a little more recession-proof than men’s in the current downturn, but women’s groups have called on the new administration to “remember the ladies” to create more public-sector jobs in fields such as education, health care, and social services. While the stimulus package does so, it

appears to be weighted somewhat more heavily toward creating male-dominated infrastructure jobs. The enormous scale of new job creation offers a rare chance to challenge existing stereotypes about what constitutes “women’s” and “men’s” work. By coupling job creation with new training and recruitment efforts, the employment-stimulus package can bring more women into high-paying “male” jobs, while at the same time encouraging men to enter lower-paying, but seemingly reliable “female” jobs, thereby reducing unemployment *and* shrinking the wage gap.

The kind of job creation entailed in the stimulus package would especially benefit women at the true middle and bottom of the income spectrum. The problem for women at the very bottom is that work doesn’t pay enough to offset its associated costs, especially child care. In addition to creating more employment opportunities, we need to make work worth it for these women, and the enhanced earned income tax credits in the stimulus package are a good beginning. Nearly one-third of women in the labor force work in low-wage jobs compared with one-fifth of male workers. To really move women out of poverty and to economic self-sufficiency and parity with men, we need more aggressive policies that address low pay directly, such as raising the minimum wage or implementing more comprehensive policies like living wage and pay equity reforms. All of these, but especially pay equity, which expands the reach of equal pay laws to level earnings for comparable jobs with similar requirements and responsibilities, will go far to increase women’s earnings and narrow the gender gap by addressing the sizeable pay disparities associated with job segregation.

Policies that facilitate mothers’ labor force attachment by nullifying the trade-off between unpaid care work and employment are also needed. In this regard, extension of the Family and Medical Leave Act to provide *paid* family leave with fewer restrictions in coverage is the obvious answer, and already a reality in a number of states, notably California and New Jersey. Providing child care, either directly or in the form of subsidies, as well as universal early childhood education, will make it possible for women to hold on to jobs and accrue valuable experience while simultaneously affording their children well-documented educational benefits. Finally, universal health insurance, insofar as it promotes health and wellness, reduces the need for women to take costly absences and interruptions from work to care for sick children and other family members.

Last, we need to find ways to undermine the long-hour work culture that effectively bars women’s progress in elite jobs and robs all parents, fathers and mothers, of time with their families. One way to reduce hours is to extend overtime provisions to the professional and managerial jobs that are now exempt from them, requiring employers to pay workers for those 40-hour-plus workweeks. A good place to start would be to overturn Bush-era policies that broadened exempt coverage. Absent this, we need to look to the private sector to come up with meaningful, non-stigmatized, and gender-neutral ways of working flex-

ibly, including better-paying and more equitable part-time jobs with prorated benefits (health care reform will advance this goal by making part-time positions less costly to employers). Many American companies already have innovative and successful work-life and work-family policies and practices in place that can serve as a model. While some argue that curtailed hours and family-friendly flexibility are no longer feasible in an era of economic insecurity, news reports make clear that both are being used in innovative ways to avoid layoffs in the current deep recession. Similar strategies of shortening the workweek and encouraging flexibility have a long track record in dealing with unemployment in Europe. As an added attraction, research demonstrates that flexibility and family-friendly innovations enhance employee morale, productivity, and retention.

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Current policies and work arrangements shortchange women’s employment and earnings, but they also shortchange men’s participation in parenting and family life. We’ll know we have achieved true gender parity when men and women participate equally and fully in market-based work and the unpaid work of the family, when women are not only just as likely as men to be CEOs, but men are just as likely as women to stay at home.

*Pamela Stone is Professor of Sociology at Hunter College and The Graduate Center at City University of New York. Her new book, *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*, was recently published by the University of California Press.*