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## ***Unsuitable Job for a Woman? Women at Work, Status and Issues***

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# Unsuitable Job for a Woman? Women at Work, Status and Issues

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## Abstract

This article attempts to present the issues of gender equity in the workforce from several points of view and to provide clues to identify causes for the continued inequities. In addition, the author presents some of the problems for industry and society as a whole if the inequities continue. The article particularly points out that although gender is the issue, neither gender is entirely responsible for the delays in workplace equity, and that prejudices, misconceptions, and misunderstanding on the part of both genders seems to be the root of the problem.

## Introduction

What determines an "unsuitable job for a woman"? Poet Laureate Robert Southey wrote to Charlotte Bronte early in the 19th century: "... literature cannot be the business of a woman's life . . . the daydreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a diseased state of mind." (Wiles, 1997, p 48) Although this admonition was given (and ignored) almost 200 years ago, a report in February, 1997, indicates that society's ideas of what is "proper" work for females may be the most influential factor in determining a female's choice of career or employment (Holdstock and Radford, 1997).

Historically and currently there are numerous pros and cons concerning the recruitment of women into non-traditional fields of science and

technology. Often the urgency to meet imposed minority personnel quotas has caused employers to choose women by a different set of standards than those used to screen male applicants. This discrepancy can create burdens on other employees or misunderstanding and subsequent resentment against current or future women employees. These prejudices and misconceptions can discourage many talented and competent females from pursuing careers in some fields. When women (or men) make career choices or are forced into choices based on bias or fear or ignorance or even apathy, both the individual and society as a whole lose potential benefits.

## Historical Overview

To understand the present, it is often beneficial to observe the past. Figure 1 summarizes demographic data for wage earning women during this century in the United States. This graph shows the percent of all women

in the US who earn a wage and the percent of all workers who are women. Data is from the Department of Labor statistics.

Prior to World War I only about 1% of women in the United States were wage earners although wives in this country were known for working alongside their husbands on farms, mines, and businesses since colonial times. They frequently inherited their husband's property upon his death and often continued to work as before unless pressured to sell the business or to remarry. By 1939 almost 25% of all women in the United States were earning wages but not much had changed regarding public attitude toward professional women. Author Norman Cousins wrote in 1939, "There are approximately 10,000,000 people out of work in the United States today, there are also 10,000,000 or more women, married and single, who are jobholders. Simply fire the women, who shouldn't be working anyway, and

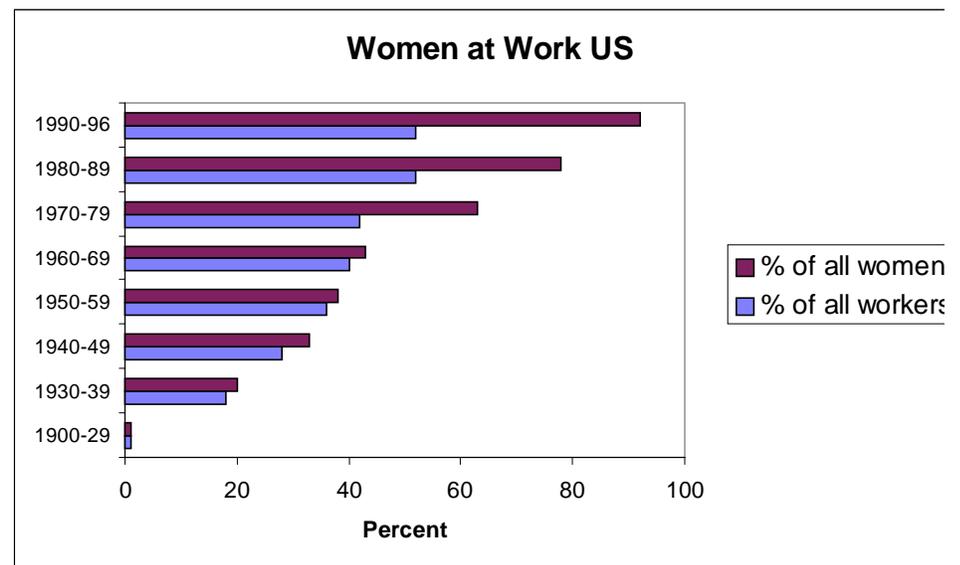


Figure 1. Women at Work US

hire the men. Presto! No unemployment. No relief rolls. No depression."(Cousins, 1939, p14)

With the onset of World War II, a drastic if short-lived change of attitude emerged. The war brought a critical shortage of male labor force and the only solution was for women to fill the men's jobs. The surprise for all was that these women were competent and fully able to fulfill the requirements of these positions. The next question was whether to pay the women the same salary their male counterparts had received. Decisions to grant equal pay for equal work were made primarily to retain salaries for men who would resume the jobs when they returned from the war. Nevertheless, for the first time in the history of women wage earners, promotions and salaries were granted by job and regardless of gender, for those women in the traditionally male jobs.

Following the war, old policies were gradually readopted and women again were paid on a separate scale from men. In 1952, Maurice Tobin, then Secretary of Labor, demonstrated to an Equal Pay Conference how little progress had been made: "Dear Mr. Blank,"(from a company manager to an employment agency), "We have an opening here for a combination program director and salesman. This position can be filled by either a man or a woman. We will pay a woman \$20 a week for doing the office work and give her \$10 a week drawing account, thus guaranteeing her \$30 a week. We will pay her 20 percent commission on all sales. We will start a man at \$30 a week for doing the office work, and \$30 a week drawing account, and also pay him 20 percent on all sales . . . the person who fills this position must have at least a year or two of business and office experience. . . The gal especially should be attractive." (Tobin, 1952, p 7) By this time more than 33% of all women in the United States were working and they constituted 29% of the work force.

By 1965 women constituted 35% of the total work force in the US and by 1975 this figure had increased to 40%, which included 48% of all women in the US over the age of 18. In

1985 70% of all women in the US earned a wage and represented 54% of the total work force in the US. Although the majority of wage earners in the United States today are women, women's earnings are only 78 cents for each dollar earned by men. (Department of Labor [DOL], 1996)

### Wage Development

Figure 2 is a summary of wage development for women since World War II. (DOL)

It is interesting to note that wage comparisons for women to men have remained about the same since 1939, varying from 55% to 63% of men's wages until 1990; while during the same decades the percentage of women making up the work force has increased consistently (figure 1).

Reasons for this inconsistency in the two comparisons have been attributed to several factors. A prevailing justification for the continuing salary gap has been that women simply did not want or need higher salaries since they are primarily supplementing their family income and their primary interest is in their homes rather than in their careers. However more than one third of working women are single and this theory loses credibility as both single and married women are surveyed concerning their feelings on the issue. A stronger rationale is that women are employed in the jobs which pay less traditionally. They lack the

skills which afford them higher pay. It would stand to reason then that women would seek skills and employment which afford higher pay just as their male counterparts do. Actually many women have learned the necessary skills and are working in non-traditional jobs. Unfortunately recent studies have revealed an alarming trend toward reductions in salaries as female-domination occurs in those jobs which have been traditionally male-dominated. So that instead of women earning more for their work, employers are paying both the men and the women less (Lewis, 1991).

A ten year initiative, "Women Into Science and Engineering," launched jointly by the Engineering Council and the Equal Opportunities Commission in 1984, targeted girls of about 12 years of age. The objective was to encourage the girls to discover and cultivate their abilities and interests in science and engineering and to pursue careers in those areas. Although the girls were successful academically and in all areas relative to the scientific fields and although they were made aware of good employment and high salary prospects, less than 20% actually pursued these careers in college. Traditional "roles" of women dictated the choices of careers and not ability or opportunity. (Holdstock, 1997) This study alone should dispel antiquated fears that women will "take over" or displace the men. The question of equality in the

Women's Earnings in Cents per Man's Dollar

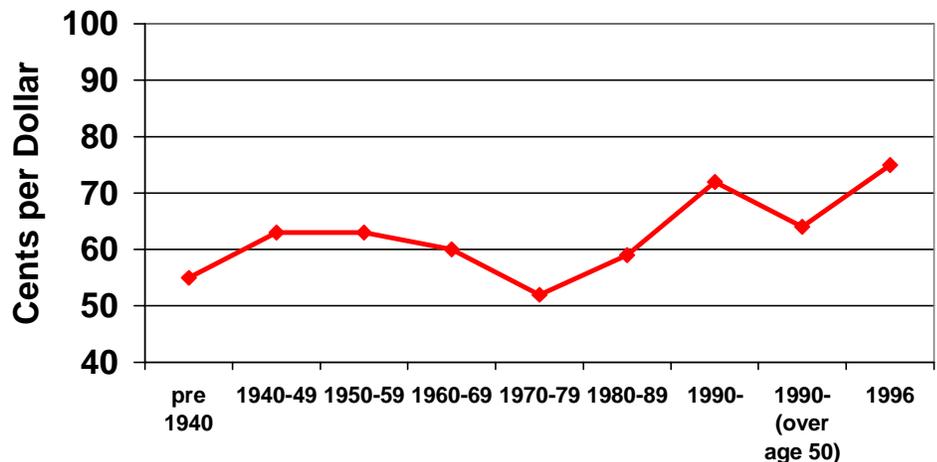


Figure 2. Women's Earnings in Cents per Man's Dollar

workplace is not and never has been one of displacement. The issue is equality in opportunity and equality in compensation for the work done.

**Issues**

There are many reasons to continue efforts to rectify the inequities. Three are basic. First, it is fair and morally correct to give equal pay for equal performance. Rose Monroe (Rosy the Riveter) became a symbol of the integrity of women at work in industrial and technical jobs during World War II. Ms. Monroe and thousands others proved that women could do what men do and many of them wanted to continue the jobs after the war. Second, it is an important waste of talent when women are diverted from jobs because of their gender. Steven Isaac of Louisiana State University gave three important reasons women were needed in engineering in his 1991 article "Women Engineers Needed". 1. "Women bring new perspectives on issues facing mechanical engineering. As it is, we're only hearing from one side of society." 2. "In terms of creativity, . . . women bring a more non-competitive approach than their male counterparts. They view things with an idea of partnership" . . . this could . . . "help the United States compete against the team-oriented designs of the Japanese and Western Europeans." 3. "Engineering tends to be set in its ways...and we need an influx of new ideas."(Isaac, 1992, p7) The third reason we cannot ignore even if we disagree with the first two, is that it is the law that we must comply with non-discrimination on the basis of gender.

To summarize the federal legislation concerning gender discrimination: The nineteenth amendment of 1920, the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972, the Education Amendments of 1972, Title VII and Title VIII, the Equal Credit Opportunity of 1974, Revenue Sharing, and Public Law 98-524 (the Carl Perkins Act of 1984), gave women the right to vote, to own property, to establish credit, to study any field or prepare for any career they choose, and to receive equal pay with their male

counterparts. Furthermore Public Law 94-482 prohibits sex bias, sex stereotyping and sex discrimination. This law further defines the terms: Sex bias is behavior resulting from the assumption that one gender is superior to the other. Sex stereotyping is attributing behaviors, abilities, interests, values, and roles to a person or group of persons on the basis of their gender. Sex discrimination is any action which limits or denies a person or group of persons opportunities, privileges, roles, or rewards on the basis of their gender. Proving violation is close to impossible as we have seen in public hearings in recent years. (Alexander/Harrison, 1996) Laws can be circumvented unless the persons involved respect the intent of the laws.

**Compliance**

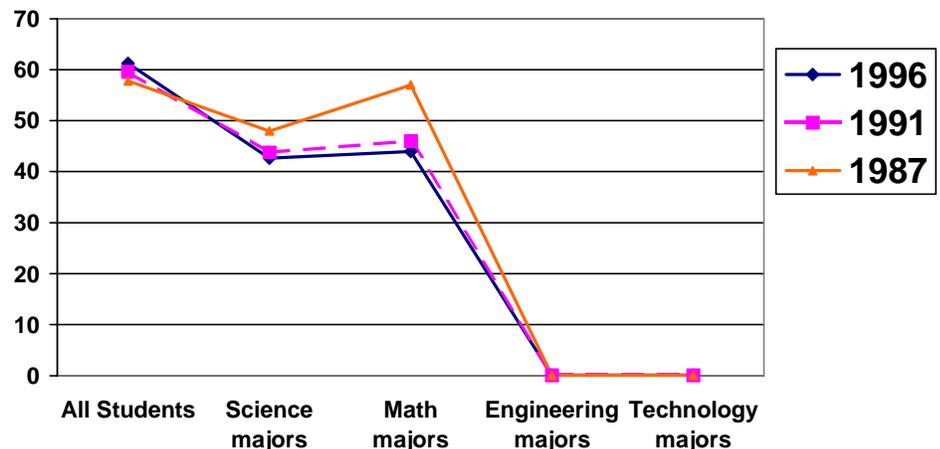
If industry wishes to comply they may do so by approaching the problem in basically two ways: through "token" hiring or through active recruiting of competent women with acceptance standards equal to those for male employees.

If a company or school chooses to hire "token" females, regardless of their skills or aptitude in order to meet quotas, increased workload for male employees and increased misunderstanding and resentment can develop. Perhaps more often the work load for the women in these situations is

unrealistic because of "inclusion": being appointed to committees, boards, and projects because "a woman is needed". As Markert, 1996, expresses it in her article "Gender Related to Success in Science and Technology", ". . . tokenism is exhausting". All persons involved can be hurt from this attitude. Not only can the business suffer in these circumstances, but an unfair stigma can develop toward future female employees. If, on the other hand, a company chooses to recruit competent women with skills and qualifications equal to the male applicants', and they are subsequently treated equally on the job, inroads to equality can be made and prejudicial barriers can be broken down.

The next important question is where and how do companies find and recruit these "competent" women? The answer is, of course, complex and different for each set of circumstances. One important fact, however, is that universities must assume a major share of the responsibility for both recruiting and retention of women in the non-traditional fields. These schools and departments must recognize the reasons for hesitancy on the part of women to pursue non-traditional careers and be willing to rectify the situations instead of perpetuating them. They should not only know the laws regarding the issues but should understand the reasons for and the intent of them.

**Percent of Females Enrolled at Southeastern Louisiana University**



*Figure 3. Percent of Females Enrolled at Southeastern Louisiana University*

## **Issues remain and trends continue**

The issues concerning women in nontraditional fields have remained fairly constant over the past four decades. The four major concerns publicly identified by most sources have been and continue to be: salary equity, entry-level equity, promotion and tenure equity, and sexual harassment. Statistics show that salary and admission equity have made some progress, promotion and tenure has improved, and the fact that harassment has so frequently become a public issue in this decade would lead one to predict improvement in this concern by the new millennium. It cannot be denied, however, that equity for women is not a fact, especially in the fields of science and technology. There is evidence that a backward trend is in progress in some non-traditional fields. Figure 3 shows changes in enrollment at one university (Southeastern Louisiana University), comparing total enrollment increases with decreases for women in science and technology.

Summarizing this study, female enrollment was observed over a 10-year period. From 1987 to 1996, the percentage of female enrollment remained almost constant with 57.8% females in 1987 and 59.6% females in 1996 showing an overall increase of 1.8% females in the total enrollment. At the same time a decrease in percent females in science and technology is shown with 38.2% in 1987 and 36.85% in 1991, making a total decrease in percent females of 1.3% for the ten year period. The difference in percentage is 3.1% less for the ten-year period. The projected increase nationally for this period was approximately 2% according to the Illinois Office of Education report, "Building Sex Equity in Vocational Education", 1980. Immediately evident is the decline in percentage of females in math and science. A slight increase in technology majors is not as great as the overall increase in female enrollment (1.8%) for the university. All other areas of science and technology are below the overall percentage increase of female enrollment at Southeastern Louisiana University. This study should be

expanded for validity, but the example shows the possible existence of a downward trend in this decade, supporting findings of others such as the Equal Opportunities Commission, 1984. (Holdstock, 1997)

### **Why?**

Again, the obvious question is why, if women workers want to earn more money, do women not assert their rights to earn higher pay by entering non-traditional, higher paying careers? As pointed out above, one reason is the reduction in pay for jobs when large numbers of women enter a field. However, more complex and more subtle circumstances are revealed as the issue is investigated beyond public statistics and data, to case studies of women involved in the pursuit of non-traditional careers.

At the level of training, most classes and programs are taught by men and there are even fewer females in positions of administration in these programs. In Liz McMillen's 1991 article, "Women in Academe Say They Bear Brunt of Staffing Cutbacks," she points out that "women and minority-group members tend to be clustered among the non-tenured ranks, and cutbacks there could have a 'disparate impact' on them" (McMillan, 1991, p A38): "... after administrators"(at one university) "said ... cuts had had little effect on the proportion of women on the faculty ... the proportion of women at the university dropped from 27 to 24.5 percent because of the cuts, which eliminated the positions of 28 female and 27 male professors." (p A1) This tenure inequity is common to most university campuses. Rank for female professors as well as administrative appointment is also in question. If numbers of women students in university departments of science and technology are to increase, these situations must be rectified.

Harassment of female students occurs more often in these male dominated environments because of the vulnerable status of students. Isaac relates the education experiences of one female engineer, "There were times when I understood why women don't want to do this," she said ...

'Although they weren't directed right at me, there were lots of remarks' . . . . During both her senior project and two internships, she felt her gender influenced the tasks given her. 'Some supervisors didn't want to deal with me, so mine would send a male just to keep things going smoothly' " (Isaac, 1992, p 7). Women receive inferior training in the same program when schools, departments, or instructors assume these attitudes.

The effects of sexual harassment on recruitment and retention of females in the work place is expressed in part by Billie Wright Dziech in the article "Colleges Must Help to Unravel the Bewildering Complexities of Sexual Harassment": "In the work place, victims avoid private and public contacts with harassers and have frequent absences from work. This impairs their job performance, limits advancement, and often results in lower wages. College students cut classes, change majors, relinquish careers, and drop out of school to avoid harassers" (Dziech, 1991, p B1).

In addition to universities' responsibility, companies must advertise with appeal and persuasion. Women are interested in companies who are interested in them, who are willing to provide fringe benefits especially for them such as child care or single adult orientation to the community. Hiring and retention should go hand in hand. Companies must build reputations for fairness. The serious recruiter must use his own creativity to devise ways to attract competent female employees and to keep them once they are hired. Surveys may be helpful if used to identify problem attitudes or to instigate change in attitudes through open and rational discussion. Both employees and executives should be surveyed to know if problems exist. Bringing problem attitudes into the open helps to deal with them rationally. Checking one's own attitude by common scales can help one to identify one's own biases.

### **Recommendations for further study**

The situation has changed in this century and continues to change.

Decades of unemployment, underemployment, and unequal salary for women in non-traditional fields is being gradually and continuously requited through the efforts of women and men who have fought the inequities and through women who have lived by separate standards in the work place, patiently, effectively and in some cases indispensably doing their jobs. This evolution in the job market is having and should continue to have positive economic effects as competitiveness becomes increasingly dependent on quality and effectiveness, rather than a matter of traditional gender roles. More in-depth studies are needed of women who have continued careers in non-traditional fields and of the companies who have employed them. Uniform systems of measure such as common surveys or structured interviews with the female employees are needed. Changes in attitude by both men and women relative to what jobs are "suitable" or "unsuitable" for either gender seem to have fundamental significance, (Holdstock, 1997) as well as finding measurable economic impact of non-gender-based employment.

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