

Factsheet: Women and Gender Inequality in the U.S. Labor Force

Since the 1970s the role of women in the U.S. workforce has changed tremendously - more women have entered the workforce, they are increasingly holding positions in management, and the pay gap between men and women has diminished. Although these are significant accomplishments that signal a positive change for U.S. female workers, many disparities remain. For example, females still earn less than men for equal work, they are overrepresented in sectors with lower wages, and there are mixed results for the number of women in leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. This factsheet provides an overview of women and gender inequality in the U.S. labor force.

Female Participation in the U.S. Labor Force

Since the 1970s female participation in the U.S. labor force, across all races, has steadily increased, and now represents close to half of the U.S. labor force (BLS 2013).

Figure 1: Female Participation in the U.S. Labor Force in 1970 and 2010

	Population of U.S. labor force	Number of women in U.S. labor force	Percentage of women in U.S. labor force		Population of adult women in the United States	Number of women in U.S. labor force	Percentage of women in U.S. labor force
1970	83 million	32 million	39%		73 million	32 million	44%
2010	154 million	72 million	47%		123 million	72 million	58%

Source: <http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/QS-womenwork2010.htm>

In 1970, 83 million people were in the U.S. labor force, and 32 million (39 percent) were women. In 2010, 154 million people were in the U.S. labor force, and 72 million (47 percent) were women. In 1970, there were 73 million adult women in the United States, and 32 million (44 percent) participated in the U.S. labor force. In 2010, there were 123 million adult women in the United States, and 72 million (58 percent) participated in the U.S. labor force.

Who are Female Workers?

Female workers in the U.S. labor force tend to be overrepresented in certain sectors and underrepresented in others. They also tend to be in low-paying jobs. They are increasingly the sole or primary source of income for households with children (Pew, 2013).

- In 2010 the top three most prevalent occupations for employed women were secretaries and administrative assistants (2.9 million, or 4 percent of the female work force), registered nurses (2.6 million, or 4 percent of the female work force), and elementary and middle school teachers (2.3 million, or 3 percent of the female work force).

	Number of women employed	Percent of total female workforce
Total number of women employed	32 million	100%
Secretaries and administrative assistants	3.0 million	4%
Registered nurses	2.6 million	4%
Elementary and middle school teachers	2.3 million	3%

Source: <http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/QS-womenwork2010.htm>

- In 2011 the top three occupations with the highest percentage of females were registered nurses (92 percent female), elementary and middle school teachers (82 percent female), social workers (82 percent female).

Figure 3: Top three occupations with the highest percentage of females

	Total number of workers in occupation	Number of female workers in occupation	Percent female
Registered nurses	2.9 million	2.7 million	92 percent
Elementary and middle school teachers	2.8 million	2.3 million	82 percent
Social workers	734,000	602,000	82 percent

Source: <http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/QS-womenwork2010.htm> and <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>

- In 2010 the median weekly earnings of women who were full-time wage and salary workers was \$669 (BLS, Databook). In 2010 the top three occupations with the highest median weekly earnings among women working full-time were: physicians and surgeons (\$1,618), pharmacists (\$1,605), and chief executives (\$1,598).

Figure 4: Highest median weekly earnings among women working full-time

	Median weekly earnings of women working full-time	
All occupations	\$669	--
Physicians and Surgeons	1,618	2.5
Pharmacists	1,605	2.4
Chief Executives	1,598	2.4

Source: <http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/QS-womenwork2010.htm>

- In 2013, 40 percent of all households with children under the age of 18 include mothers who were either the sole or primary source of income for the family (Pew, 2013).
- In 2011, 27 percent of employed women (about 19 million people) usually worked part time (less than 35 hours per week) (BLS, 2013).
- In 2011, 2.4 million women who were paid at an hourly rate had earnings at or below the prevailing federal minimum wage – 6 percent of all women paid an hourly rate (BLS, 2013).

Gender-Based Wage Disparities

The U.S. government has passed numerous pieces of legislation in an effort to end gender-based wage disparities. In 1963 President Kennedy signed the [Equal Pay Act](#) into law, which makes it illegal to pay different wages to employees of the opposite sex for equal work. In 2009 President Obama signed the [Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act](#), which has extended the time period in which women who think they have earned less than their male counterparts for equal work can bring discrimination claims. Despite these efforts and significant progress, gender-based wage disparities persist in the United States.

- In 1963 in the United States women earned an average of 59 cents for each dollar their male counterparts earned. In 2013 women earn between 77 and 81 cents per dollar earned by men.
- The disparity is more prominent between Asian men and women and White men and women.

Figure 5: Gender-based wage disparities according to race/ethnicity

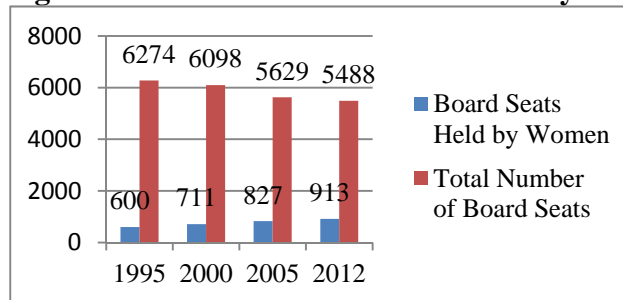
Race and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity	Women's weekly wages	Men's weekly wages	Women's earnings as percent of men's
All races			
White	\$703	\$856	82%
Black or African American	595	653	91%
Asian	751	970	77%
Hispanic or Latino	518	571	91%

Source: BLS 2011, <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpswom2011.pdf>: 6.

Women in Leadership Positions

U.S. female workers have made slow progress in obtaining leadership positions. Figure 6 shows that in 2012, women held 913 seats on boards in Fortune 500 companies, out of 5488 total seats (17 percent) (Catalyst, 2012). This is a marginal increase from 15 percent in 2005 (827/5629), 12 percent in 2000 (711/6098), and 10 percent in 1995 (600/6274).

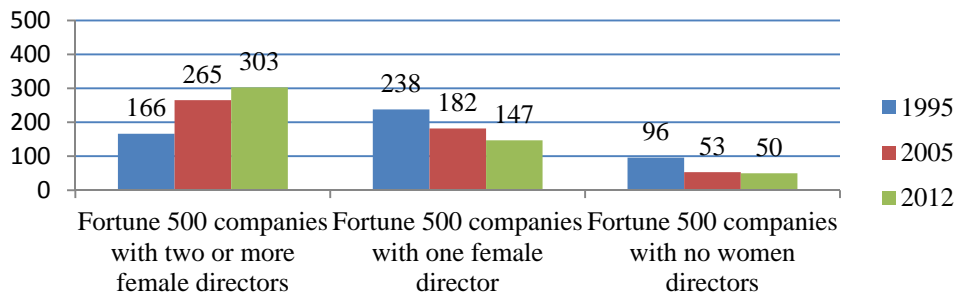
Figure 6: Number of Board Seats Held by Women in Fortune 500 Companies



Source: Catalyst Census, <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/browse-knowledge-center>

Figure 7 shows that the number of Fortune 500 companies with two more female directors has steadily increased from 166 in 1995 (33 percent) to 265 in 2005 (53 percent) and 303 in 2012 (61 percent). Further, the number of Fortune 500 companies with just one female director or no female directors has decreased in the same time period. This demonstrates that more companies are including women in leadership.

Figure 7: Number of Women Directors at Fortune 500 Companies



The Great Recession and Gender Equality in the Workplace

The Great Recession and the recovery process have affected men and women differently. The heavy public sector job losses are hampering the recovery process for women.

- During the recession, employment for women declined most significantly in manufacturing, financial activities, and retail trade. Together, these industries accounted for nearly 1.8 million jobs lost among female workers (DOL, Women's Employment During the Recovery).
- Between June 2009 and June 2011, women lost 343,000 public-sector jobs, 70 percent of all the public sector jobs lost. (National Women's Law Center)
- Adult women have had little change in their labor force participation during the recession. Labor force participation from 2007 to 2010 for women ages 25 to 54 was essentially unchanged (75.4 percent in 2007 to 75.2 percent in 2010), while the rate rose (33.2 percent in 2007 to 35.1 percent in 2010) for those ages 55 and over (DOL, Women's Employment During the Recovery).
- Although female unemployment rate has decreased from 7.6 percent in June 2009 to 6.5 percent in June 2013 (BLS News Release 2013), in manufacturing women lost 115,000 jobs during the recovery while men gained 94,000. In retail trade women lost 168,800 jobs while men gained 172,800. In financial activities women lost 150,000 jobs while men gained 9,000. In leisure and hospitality women gained only 6,000 jobs while men gained 120,000. In the public sector women lost 343,000 jobs, more than twice as many as the 150,000 jobs men lost (National Women's Law Center).

Young Female Workers

In the first quarter of 2013 there were 3.7 million females between the ages of 16 and 24 in the workforce. This is lower than the number of their male counterparts (4.7 million). Gender-based wage disparities also exist for youth workers, although the gap is smaller between young males and females. Young female workers on average earn 91 percent of what their male counterparts earn (BLS, 2009). The median weekly earning for these female workers was \$419, as compared to \$487 that their male counterparts earned (BLS, April 2013).

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