

Gender Inequality in the US Labor Force

Gender pay gaps persist around the world, including in the United States. According to public information collected by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the global gender pay gap ranges from 3 percent to 51 percent with a global average of 17 percent (ITUC 2009).

Highlights in the US

Equality in pay has improved in the US since 1979 when women earned about 62 percent as much as men. In 2010, American women on average earned 81 percent of what their male counterparts earned (BLS 2010; DOL 2011).

Women's participation in the U.S. labor force climbed during the 1970s and 1980s, reaching 60 percent in 2000. However, in 2010 this figure has declined to 46.7 percent and is not expected to increase by 2018 (DOL 2011).

The Great Recession of 2007-2010 affected men and women differently. Men lost more jobs than women in the recession but also experienced a steadier recovery. One in five women are working part time because they cannot find full time work while at the start of the recession less than one in ten women were doing so. Despite these developments, the overall unemployment rate for women is lower than men's and they are also less likely to be among the long-term unemployed.

Women are 50 percent more likely to work in the public sector. Women surpass men on education attainment among those employed aged 25 and over: 37.1 percent of women hold at least a bachelor's degree compared to 34.9 percent for men (DOL 2011).

Where are Women Employed?

In 2010, there were approximately 65 million women in the labor force and 53 percent of these women were concentrated in three industries a) education and health services, b) trade, transportation and utilities and c) local government (BLS 2011a).

Women were overrepresented in several industries and underrepresented in others. For example, in 2010, women represented 79 percent of the health and social services workforce and 68.6 percent of the education services workforce. However, women represented only 43.2 percent of the professional, scientific and technical services sector and 8.9 percent of the construction sector (DOL 2011).

Low Wage Households

The Government Accountability Office (GAO), in a recent report shows that in 2010 women constituted 59 percent of the low-wage workforce. Less-educated women were more likely than less-educated men to work part-time—on average, 29 percent of women and 15 percent of men worked part-time in 2010. Also, according to the GAO report, single woman households had the lowest total annual income of all households, averaging about \$27,000. Fifty-seven percent of the household income (or about \$15,000) came from their personal wage and salary earnings. The remaining \$12,000 came from other sources, such as government benefits and other household members' earnings. Without income from these other sources, the low-wage single mother households would be well below the poverty level of \$22,314 (or \$10.73 per hour, full-time) for a family of four (GAO 2011).

Women and Corporations

In terms of women in leadership positions, in 2009 only 24 percent of CEOs in the US were women and they earned 74.5 percent as much as male CEOs (BLS 2010 p.9).

The Harvard Business School, in conjunction with Catalyst, recently released a research report regarding the level of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of Fortune 500 companies with respect to the amount of women on the companies' Boards of Directors and serving as Corporate Officers. Of the Fortune 500 companies, in 2007, companies with three or more women on the Board of Directors averaged 28 times more money in philanthropic donations than those with no women, according to the report. Also, companies with 25% or more women in leadership positions as Corporate Officers averaged 13 times more philanthropic donations than those with none (Catalyst and HBS 2011).

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