

By Elena Silva



# Women **at** Work

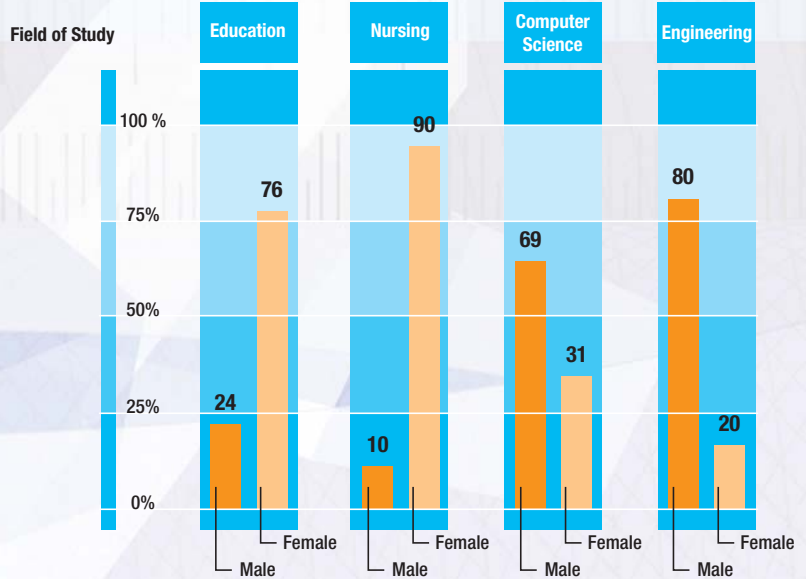
## changes and challenges

***“We’ve come so far,” said a health aide and full-time nursing student at a focus group the AAUW Educational Foundation conducted for its new report on women at work. Then she added tentatively, “Haven’t we?”***

***Today girls can dream of becoming nurses and doctors. A woman can be an auto mechanic or a secretary. And more and more women climb to the top of their fields.***

***As they achieve educational levels similar to those of men, women see their employment options and opportunities expand. Women at Work (2003), a new research report published by the AAUW Educational Foundation, documents this progress—and flags the challenges. Because despite strides forward, women still face obstacles to equity at work.***

## Education is key to women's workforce participation.



Master's Degree 1998-99

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Illustration by J. Clint La Follette

### The Good News

Walk into any place of business today and you'll see women and men working side by side. Women succeed in an array of fields and at all levels. And the service industry, which dominates today's economy, draws more women than men. As *Women at Work* documents, women make up nearly 50 percent of the paid workforce for the first time in history. Even Mom no longer stays at home: Two-thirds of mothers with young children work.

Bei-Ling Sha is one such mom. With sons ages 2-1/2 years and 5 months, Sha balances her home life with a full-time faculty position at the University of Maryland, a part-time curriculum development job at the university, and a part-time job consulting with the U.S. Census Bureau.

"I don't work 9 to 5," she says. "I work 9 to midnight plus weekends."

But she finds the effort worthwhile: "I do it for two reasons. One is financial and the other is so I can decide which path I want

to take. Professionally, I benefit because each of my jobs enhances the others. And my family benefits because I'm happy."

Along with her education, Sha credits her success to her supportive employers and husband and her attitude.

"A lot of women feel guilty," she explains. "When they're at work they feel guilty that they're not with their family, and when they're with their family, they feel guilty that they're not accomplishing work. I try to live in the moment. When I'm at work, I'm 100 percent at work. When I'm at home, I'm 100 percent at home."

In the 21st century, women can and do pursue every field of study. They enter careers with good wages and opportunities for mobility and growth. The expanded options in education and employment convey the illusion that the struggle for gender equity at work is over.

**It's not.**

## Occupational Segregation

Walk back into today's typical place of business. You'll see women working alongside and even managing men. But surprisingly, despite decades of progress and increasingly higher levels of education, female workers remain segregated in what have been called "pink-collar" fields. *Women at Work* documents that nearly 30 percent of paid female workers work in just 10 occupations. The majority of these are low-status service jobs such as receptionist, waitress, nursing aide, and cook.

A large proportion of women with higher levels of education have advanced into managerial and professional positions. Yet these positions, clustered in the critical fields of education and health, are also traditionally female positions and remain undervalued and underpaid.

Seeing a female accountant, stockbroker, or lawyer is becoming more commonplace (and will become more so as increasing numbers of women pursue education in these fields). But seeing female schoolteachers and nurses is expected. One-third of college-educated female managers and professionals work in education. Nursing reflects a similar concentration.

"Oh, there were five or six guys in my class out of 100," says Sean McCarthy, who graduated from nursing school in 1996. Nursing attracts predominately women, he says, because "it's a traditionally female career." A former paramedic, he says he pursued a degree in nursing "to continue helping people, but not at 70 miles per hour." While he's still in the minority, the gender balance in his hospital has improved. He says men now account for 20 to 30 percent of the nurses.

Women in education and health are among the best positioned to get jobs, as these fields continue to grow. But until these workers—including health attendants, dental assistants, and teacher aides—receive better pay and benefits, women's occupational concentration will remain a concern.

## High-Paying, High-Powered Jobs

On the other end of the spectrum stand women in traditionally male jobs—women such as National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, Hewlett-Packard CEO

Carly Fiorina, and National Science Foundation Director Rita Colwell. Their achievements in high-level positions mark women's progress at work. Their visibility, however, stands in sharp contrast to the facts. For example, women hold just 16 percent of Fortune 500 corporate officer positions, according to a survey by Catalyst, a research and advisory organization. And although women make up 42 percent of staff and senior attorneys, they make up only 16 percent of law partners, according to the National Association for Law Placement.

*Women at Work* illustrates the link between education and job success. Not surprisingly, women with college degrees are more likely to achieve higher-level jobs. Today, women account for more than half of all undergraduates. But educational progress still varies by race, ethnicity, and income level. Latinas, for example, average less than a high school education, putting them at a severe disadvantage in the labor market. For these and other less educated women, quality jobs with decent wages and benefits are hard to come by. And the high-paying tech jobs of the future are out of reach.

## High-Tech Jobs

The gender gap widens significantly in the high-tech industry—the hottest field in today's and tomorrow's markets. Jobs in information technology are among the fastest-growing occupations, according to *Women at Work*. Yet women are less likely than men to pursue education that prepares them for high-tech jobs—especially those at higher levels. In computer science the proportion of bachelor's degrees awarded to women actually dropped from 30 percent in 1990 to 27 percent in 1998. Women account for only 25 percent of professional IT workers.

Repercussions resound for women and for employers, who depend on technological and computer expertise in all employment levels. With so many educational advancements for girls and women and such pressing needs, the question persists: Why aren't girls and women moving into computer and information sciences?

The Foundation's *Tech-Savvy: Educating Girls in the New Computer Age* (2000) found

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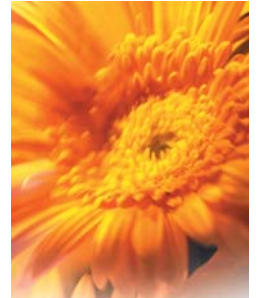
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that the problem lies not in girls' ability or intelligence. Rather, dull programming classes and negative "computer geeks" stereotypes turn girls off. They aren't drawn to the violent and competitive computer games that boys like—and computer and software industries supply. The finding was not that girls aren't smart enough but rather, "We can but don't want to."

Based on that premise, Marie Reyes triggers the "I want to" mechanism in underserved girls in her community.

"I want to dispel the idea that computers are for geeks and are uncool," says Reyes, assistant research scientist at the Southwest Institute for Research on Women at the University of Arizona. She launched her project with the assistance of an AAUW Educational Foundation Community Action Grant.

"I want to spark the interest of elementary school girls with socially relevant computer projects," she says, "and retain their interest ... so that when they enter the workforce, they can shape the future of technology and education."

### Mixed Blessings

Women have more personal reasons to pursue high-paying, high-powered, and high-tech careers: Those jobs are more likely to offer flexible, family-friendly benefits.

These are the benefits women prize above all. A national survey commissioned by AAUW for *Women at Work* found that an overwhelming majority of women, given the choice, would pick a job with lower pay and better benefits over a job with higher pay and fewer benefits. Men's contributions to family care and household work remain relatively low. Despite decades of dinnertime negotiations and gains toward that 50-50 partnership, women continue to be the primary caregivers for children and elderly parents.

Yet the Foundation's new report shows that family-friendly benefits such as flexible hours, telecommuting, and on-site child care remain out of reach to the large number of female workers in low-level service positions. For single mothers in particular, balancing family and work can be a great burden. When Christina Brown worked as a sales office manager at a hotel, her day

began at 4:30 each morning and included few spare moments.

"It [was] hard to find 'me' time—you know, time to unwind, pay bills, and get my homework done," says Brown, who is pursuing a degree in marketing. "I [would] take my daughter to day care, go to work, pick her up, get home for play time, and then it's unpacking and packing for the next day. It was not good. ... In hospitality, at least at some hotels, the hours are long, it's not family-oriented, and the tuition assistance is low." In the end, she left the service industry.

That's a function of the "maternal wall," according to Joan Williams, the 2002 AAUW Educational Foundation Scholar-in-Residence and Executive Director of the Program on Gender, Work, and Family, a research and advocacy center based at the American University law school.

Despite some flexibility, she says, "most good jobs still reflect the ideal of a worker who starts to work in early adulthood and works, full time and full force, for 40 years straight, taking no time off for childbearing, child rearing, or anything else. But think about it: Who needs time off for childbearing? Women. And who needs time off for child rearing? Again, it's women, who still do 70 to 80 percent of the child rearing. ... The Family and Medical Leave Act's three-month leave is vitally important. But raising a child takes 20 years."

Or, as a full-time administrator, mother of two, and *Women at Work* focus group participant summed up, "How am I supposed to do it all? Tell me how."

### Catching Up ... and Left Behind

So, how far have we come? Women—more educated, employed at higher levels, and working more than ever before—have experienced remarkable progress. But they remain the primary caregivers, remain concentrated in mostly low-paying professions, and lag behind in the high-tech industry.

We still have far to go to ensure good jobs, fair pay, and decent benefits for all workers. Equity remains a work in progress. ■

**Elena Silva is research director for the AAUW Educational Foundation.**



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