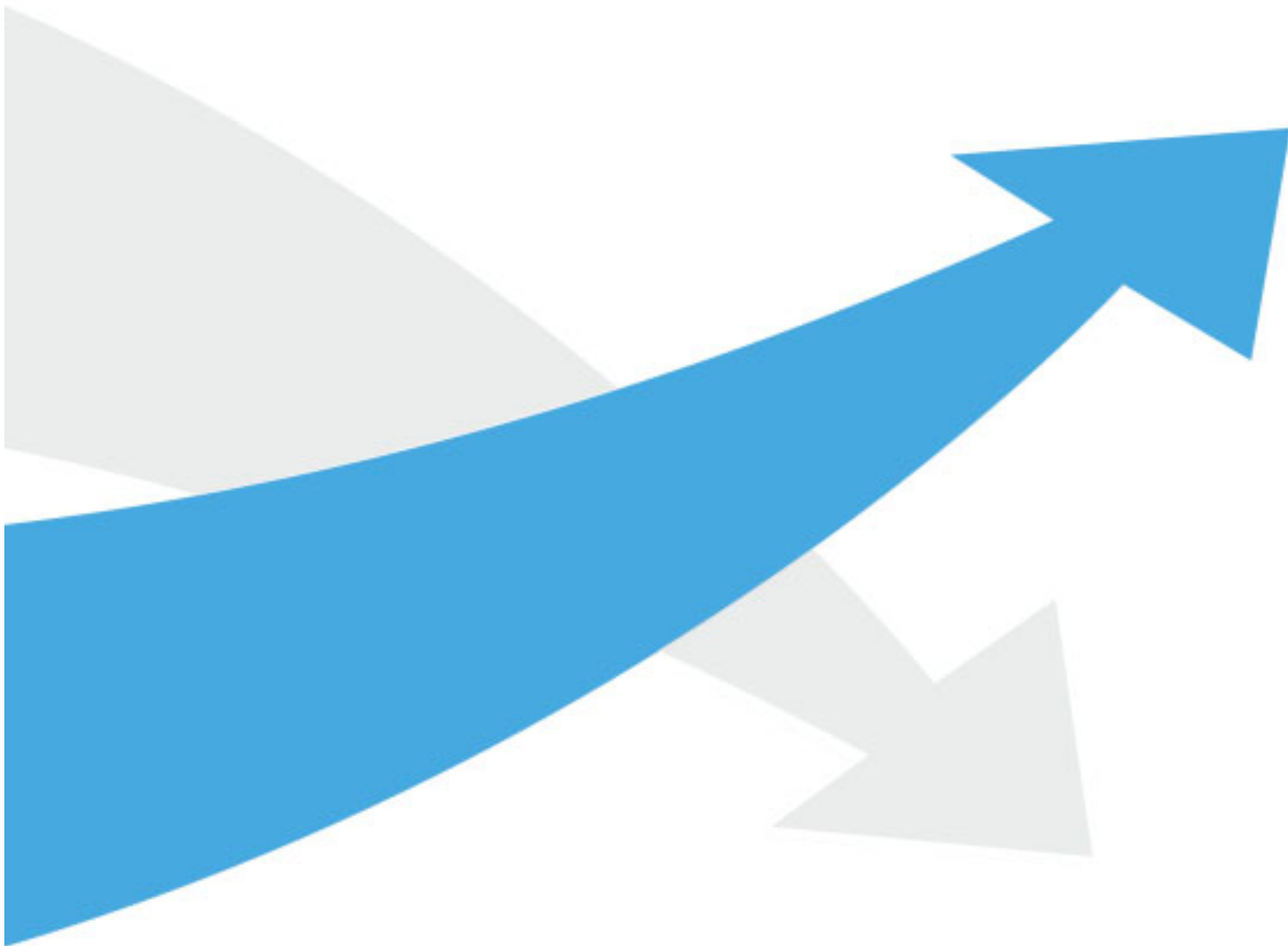


Executive Summary



During the second half of the 20th century, the U.S. economy experienced unprecedented levels of growth and expansion. Most notably, the United States shifted from an industrial, goods-producing economy to one dominated by service industries and, more recently, by the emerging knowledge-based field of information technology. The increase of these service industries, many of which are female-dominated, has resulted in a rising demand for women's labor and has helped draw many women into the paid labor force. At the same time, the recent growth of information- and technology-related occupations has raised concern about women's economic positions and occupational prospects, mostly because these better-paying, higher-status occupations tend to be male-dominated. To better understand the nature of women's participation and success as workers in the new economy, the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation explored two principal questions:

- ▶ How are women faring in today's economy?
- ▶ What are the future prospects for women in the labor market?

Women at Work examines these questions through national-level data comparing contemporary women with each other, contemporary men, and women of a generation ago. It looks at a combination of factors relevant to women's present status and future prospects in the labor market: women's levels of education and areas of study; women's marital and family status; women's participation and opportunities in the work force; and the conditions of today's work force, including levels of occupational segregation and prevalence of work-family programs and flexible work policies.

The report provides rich data on the two principal questions and paints a portrait of women's economic and educational well-being on the cusp of the 21st century. Paying close attention to women's status in the new economy, one driven by service and knowledge-based industries, the report will be useful to anyone interested in the social and eco-

nomics prospects of women for the next several decades. Moreover, given recent evidence from the Educational Foundation's *Tech-Savvy: Educating Girls in the New Computer Age* (2000) research that the growing electronic culture is leaving girls behind, *Women at Work* is equally significant to the educational and career preparation of young and adolescent girls.

Not surprisingly, the story here includes good news and bad news. The good news is that women's decades-long push for educational opportunities—a focus for AAUW since the 1880s—has paid off. As this report describes, education for today's women overall is similar to that of men today and more than that of women in 1980. Furthermore, women's participation in the work force is greater than ever. With growing numbers of service-related jobs, women now have a greater likelihood of employment than men do.

Yet while women overall have gained dramatically in educational achievement and work force participation, inequities persist. Educational progress continues to vary by income levels and race-ethnicity. For example, Latinos, a disproportionately low-income population, lag markedly behind as the only racial-ethnic group that averages less than a high school education (10.9 years for both females and males). This lack of education puts them at a critical disadvantage in the labor market and presents a growing national crisis as the percentage of Latinos in the United States continues to rise.

Educational differences among women intersect with marital and family status differences to create further inequalities in labor force participation and economic conditions for women. During the last two decades, both married and single mothers increased their participation in the labor force. This participation has done little, however, to improve the social and economic conditions for single mothers, who are generally younger, less-educated, and more likely to live in poverty and rely on federal assistance than are their married peers.

The multiple roles they fulfill within their households make the condition for working mothers, particularly single mothers, more tenuous. Women frequently cope with this challenge by selecting jobs that allow them to work at home or that provide flexible schedules or part-time or “shift” work. Still, the demand for flexible work schedules far exceeds the supply and does not appear to reach the women most in need.

About one-third of employed women have some option to vary the beginning and end of their workday. This option is less available to women than men and least available to African American and Latina women and women with less education. In personal service occupations—those most likely to be held by women in general and unskilled and undereducated women in particular—flexibility is often associated with unpredictable workweeks and pay and longer hours of work.

While women’s overall levels of education and participation in the paid labor force have increased, women remain overrepresented in clerical and service positions. Likewise, women find themselves on the margins of new and high-status fields and occupations, including systems analysts, software designers, computer scientists, engineers, and information technology professionals. Some related and especially troubling news is that college-age women today are actually *less likely* than their counterparts from 20 years ago to be majoring in high-growth fields. Compared to men, women today are less likely to study in a field that will prepare them for work in science, engineering, or information technology.

Furthermore, women—more than men—remain highly concentrated in specific occupations, and little has changed in these numbers or kinds of occupations in the past 20 years. The U.S. Census Bureau identifies 500 different occupations, but almost one-third of women today are concentrated in just 10 of these occupations. Although women have increased their representation in managerial and professional specialty fields, this broad occupational category includes the relatively low-paying

and traditionally female-dominated occupations of teaching, nursing, and bookkeeping.

What does all of this mean for women’s prospects in the new economy? Women’s job and economic prospects for the future are best described as mixed. Women are increasingly likely to enter the paid labor force, and all women, including those with less education, will be more able to secure positions in the burgeoning ranks of service employees. At the same time, however, women are less represented in and less prepared to assume technology- and information-related occupations than lower-status service occupations.

Quite simply, women do not appear well-positioned to access high-paying, high-quality jobs in emerging information- and technology-related segments of the labor market. Men, particularly white and Asian American men with a bachelor’s degree or four years of college, dominate these jobs, and this is not likely to change given the current trends in women’s educational preparation. For less-educated women and women in certain racial-ethnic groups, the prospects for economic security in today’s work force are discouraging.

The findings from this research point to four primary areas of focus for future policy and advocacy activities on behalf of women and girls:

- ▶ Increase educational access and opportunity for women and girls in underrepresented racial-ethnic communities.
- ▶ Promote the benefits of education in computer science, engineering, mathematics, and technology to women and girls, and create opportunities and incentives for women and girls to pursue these fields.
- ▶ Enhance women’s education and training in financial management and economic self-sufficiency, particularly for single working mothers.
- ▶ Promote equitable access to flexible work arrangements and additional research on work-family policies and programs.