

MEASURING THE EFFECTS

— by *Steven Lagerfeld*

For scholars, sorting out the causes and effects of the past two decades of America's social and sexual rearrangements is like eating a bowl of overcooked spaghetti with chopsticks. Every factor is somehow intertwined with others: Tug on the feminist strand, and along comes a tangle of others—sexual liberation, the growth of the economy's "service sector," affluence, the Pill, the expansion of college enrollment, recession, the rise of the "Me Generation," the reactions of men. There is, in short, no single "X factor" that researchers can point to and say, "That is the impact of Betty Friedan!"

As in research on minorities, the politicization of much scholarship concerning the sexes has had a "chilling" effect on certain lines of inquiry, obscuring matters still more. Rosalind Rosenberg, a Barnard College historian, discovered just how powerful academic taboos can be when she testified for the defense in a sex discrimination suit against Sears, Roebuck and Company last year. If Sears did not have many women in certain jobs, she said, it was probably because few women *wanted* those jobs. Historically, she said, "men and women have had different interests, goals, and aspirations regarding work."

Among others, a committee of her sister scholars at the Organization of American Historians swiftly rebuked her: "As feminist scholars, we have a responsibility not to allow our scholarship to be used against the interests of women struggling for equity in our society."

The most indisputable (and obvious) change in women's lot in recent years is the migration of women, particularly married women, from the home to the workplace. The female "labor force participation rate" has been on the rise since 1890, when only 18.2 percent of working-age women were employed or looking for a job. By 1950, the rate stood at 29 percent; by 1986, it had jumped to 55 percent.

Why?

Most of the much-publicized increase since 1950 is a product of decisions by married women with children.

Some of these new working mothers were doubtless drawn to factories, offices, and classrooms by feminist-inspired visions of personal fulfillment and equality with their husbands, but nobody can say how many. "We are busily unmaking one of the proudest social achievements in the 19th century," notes analyst Peter Drucker, "which was to take married women *out* of the work force so they could devote themselves to family and children."

There are several banal explanations. One is that, on average,



two-paycheck families earn more (\$35,740 annually) than those with a male breadwinner alone (\$25,640). Moreover, Washington, through its income tax policies, has given mothers a reason to work. Between 1960 and 1984, the average tax rate on childless married persons changed very little, while that on couples with two children jumped by 43 percent. The chief cause: Inflation slashed the real value of standard deductions for dependents.

Oddly, America's economic *growth* may have contributed more to the influx of women into the work force than did economic hardship. Two Rand Corporation economists, James P. Smith and Michael P. Ward, have attempted to measure the importance of rising real wages in drawing women away from home since World War II. Their conclusion: Nearly 60 percent of the influx is due to better pay.

Looking at the 1960-80 period, a second pair of economists, William R. Johnson and Jonathan Skinner, found another force pushing wives to work: the increased risk of divorce, causing many married women to take precautions to ensure their future economic security.* Such fears, they say, explain 12 percent of the increase in the female labor force participation rate between 1960 and 1980.

By and large, however, married women seem to put their families first when they do go to work. About one-third of working mothers in intact families hold part-time jobs, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Even those mothers who work full time make adjustments, shifting to less demanding jobs, and taking and quitting jobs with far more frequency than do their husbands. Only about one-quarter of all married mothers work full time, year round.

*As a result of today's high divorce rate, some 40 percent of all white children can now expect to live in a single-parent household at some point by the time they turn 16.

These choices, as well as discrimination, are reflected in employment patterns. In *Women's Work, Men's Work—Sex Segregation on the Job* (1986), a U.S. National Research Council panel reports that only a modest decline in workplace separation between the sexes occurred during the feminist 1970s. And most of the change that did occur was not revolutionary: Women entered in growing numbers those fields that were already “integrated”—e.g., payroll accounting, factory assembly. *In numerical terms*, women were not flooding male-dominated fields.

Despite the continuing, if softened, division of the sexes by job in the nation's factories, offices, and retail establishments, the male-female “pay gap” narrowed by four percentage points between 1979 and 1983: In 1983, full-time female workers earned 64 percent as much annually as their male counterparts did. (Since women are less likely to be employed year-round, *hourly* earnings might be a better gauge. Thus measured, the figure increases to 72 percent.)

How Much Discrimination?

Why is there a pay gap at all? No one denies that discrimination is part of the answer. But researchers do not agree on how strong an influence it is. Francine Blau, a University of Illinois economist, argues that more than half the gap is due to discrimination. “Human capital” theorists, such as June O’Neill of the Urban Institute, trace most of the differential to female patterns of schooling and employment. In general, O’Neill notes, working women (especially older women) have taken less career-oriented schooling than men. Once in the work force, they take time off to bear and raise children, change jobs more frequently than men do, and often seek jobs with “amenities such as short hours, long vacations . . . or a [convenient] location, [which] are paid for through lower wages.”

O’Neill argues that such factors account for most of the wage gap. Another human capital theorist, Solomon W. Polachek, says that they may explain virtually all of it. Economists of all schools seem to agree that the concentration of women in lower-paying fields—by choice and/or because of the traditional “socialization” of women and discrimination—is the key explanation for the wage gap.

In any event, O’Neill and Blau both expect male-female earnings to equalize perceptibly as younger women, better prepared for the work world, enter the job market.

How much wages will equalize is a matter of conjecture, for motherhood clearly is a major factor in determining how much women earn. Between the ages of 20 and 24, when most working women are still childless, women earn 89 percent as much as men,

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according to O'Neill. During the chief childbearing years (ages 25 to 34), the wage gap begins to grow. One group of women does enjoy wage parity with men of comparable age, education, and experience: those women who have never married or borne children.

Male-female differences persist on the "fast track"—law, medicine, business. "No matter what sphere of work women are hired for or select," sociologist Cynthia F. Epstein writes, "like sediment in a wine bottle they seem to settle to the bottom."

The reasons why are the subject of heated debate. Women have been entering business and professional schools in increasing numbers since 1960. Here is where the first crucial career decisions are made: One argument is that women tend to make different choices. In medicine, for example, many women elect to enter lower-paying specialties such as pediatrics, psychiatry, and gynecology/obstetrics. The pattern recurs in business. In a study of 18 women and 113 men who graduated from Stanford's Graduate School of Business in 1974, Francine E. Gordon and Myra Strober found that the peak salaries the women aimed for were only 70 percent as high as those the men expected. And the female MBAs tended to train for occupations that pay less: While only three percent of the men took jobs in government, nearly 20 percent of the women did.*

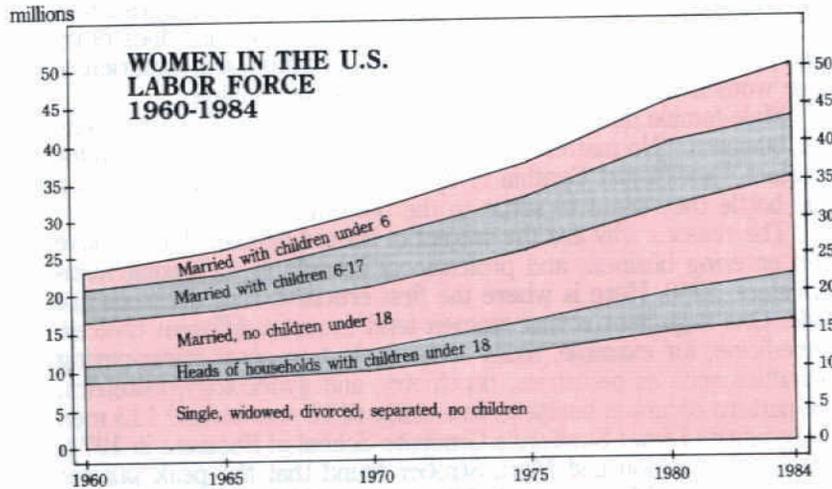
Strober's findings seem to be contradicted, in part, by Mary Anne Devanna's study of 90 men and women who earned MBAs from Columbia's Graduate School of Business between 1969 and 1972. The women started with virtually the same expectations, salaries, and professed commitment to their careers as the men did, yet within 10 years they were earning less. Devanna concluded that unspecified "societal and organizational phenomena" were to blame.

Dropping Out

Abundant anecdotal evidence suggests that men in the executive suite do treat women differently. *Fortune* reported in 1984 that many senior male managers are reluctant to brace their female juniors with sharp but constructive criticism. Some male executives also exclude women colleagues from their after-hours socializing, and assume that many of their female subordinates will eventually give it all up for their families.

In study after study, motherhood *does* emerge as the stumbling block for women on the fast track. Whatever their expectations when they set out on their careers, many women seem to change them when they bear children. A 1982 survey of 300 successful career women by Korn/Ferry International, an executive recruiting firm, found that 48 percent were unmarried and 61 percent (versus 14

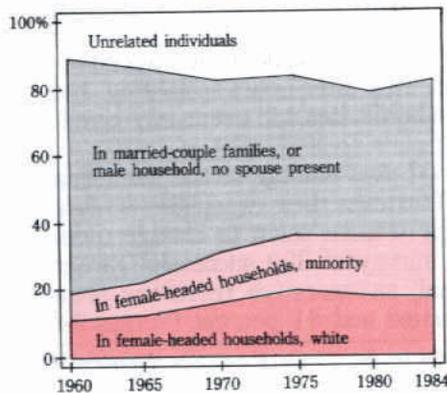
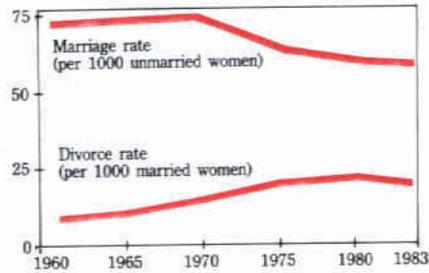
*Of course, women may find such jobs attractive because sex discrimination is more rigorously policed in government. Nobody knows.



Nearly half of the nation's 114 million workers in 1984 were women, up from one-third in 1960. Labor force participation rates increased most for women with children under six, 52 percent of whom now work.

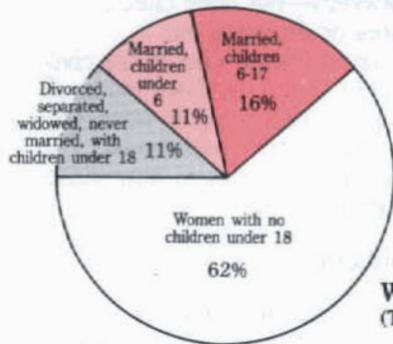
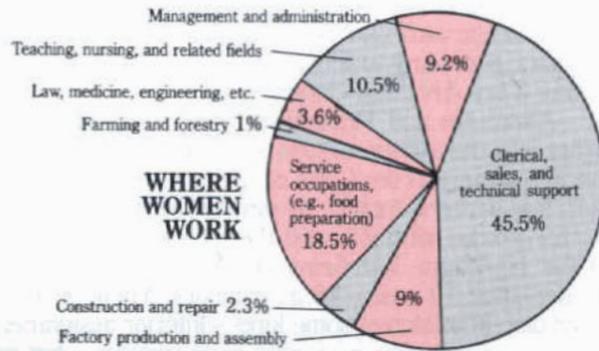
MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE RATES, 1960-1983

Women who work tend to marry later and get divorced more than those who do not. In recent years, the high U.S. divorce rate has leveled off even as women's employment has increased.

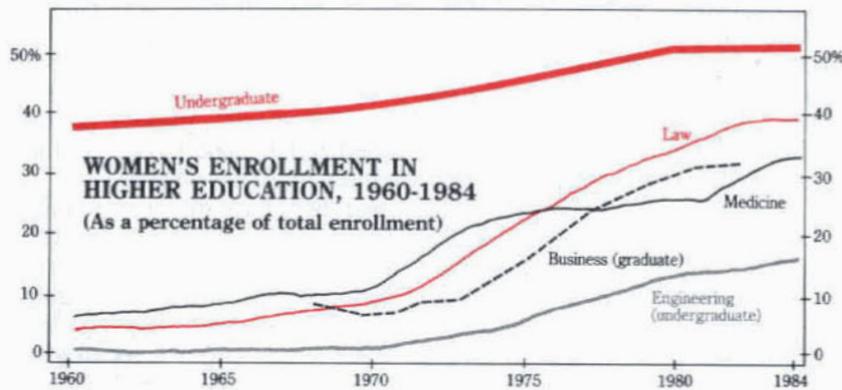


FAMILY STATUS OF POOR PEOPLE, 1960-1984

Of the nation's 33.7 million poor in 1984, 35 percent lived in female-headed households. Without the sharp increase in the number of such families, overall U.S. poverty would have dropped significantly between 1960 and 1984.



During the past 15 years, some 17 million women have entered the labor force, the vast majority taking "traditional" jobs. Of those women who work full time, most have no children under 18; of those mothers employed full time, about one-third are the sole support of their children.



Have women "displaced" men in colleges and professional schools? Yes and no. Overall, enrollments of women and men have grown rapidly. But at some elite institutions, e.g., the Harvard Business School, women have increased their numbers at the expense of men.

percent of all women their age) were childless. Nearly half of the 71 women in Harvard Law School's Class of '74 were still childless after 10 years, according to Jill Abramson and Barbara Franklin, authors of *Where They Are Now* (1986).

Abramson and Franklin provide some of the few available insights into the attrition rates of women on the fast track. Sixteen of the 38 mothers in the Class of '74 lowered their sights or abandoned their law careers entirely to devote themselves to their children. Of the 49 women who followed the well-worn male path from Harvard to the big-league law firms on Wall Street and elsewhere, 24 remained after 10 years, 16 as partners. Many of the women encountered discrimination of some kind—inferior assignments, paternalistic attitudes, clients who preferred male lawyers—but none cited it as a reason for falling behind their classmates or dropping out.

What about women in blue-collar nontraditional jobs? In the civilian work force, the changes are too recent or the numbers too small to provide answers. In 1985, only some 6,000 women were employed as auto mechanics and 2,000 as telephone "linepersons." But the U.S. military's experience provides some clues as to how working-class women behave in a nontraditional milieu.

Pregnant Soldiers

No other nation has moved so far so fast to *integrate* women into the military. Today, after a decade of rapid change, 10 percent of the nation's 1.7 million service people, all volunteers, are female, including 10 percent of the officers; eight women are generals or admirals. Women are barred by statute or policy from combat, but not from battle zones. During the brief 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada, 114 Army women (including a helicopter pilot, military police, clerks, and prisoner interrogators) joined 5,000 male troops on the island; they got high marks from most senior Army officers.

Even so, the Pentagon's busy researchers have discovered, military enlisted women are different. More likely to have completed high school, and better disciplined than their male peers, first-term Army enlisted women nevertheless suffer greater attrition (roughly 45 percent versus 34 percent). If they stay on, they have shorter service careers. Army women on maneuvers, reports sociologist Charles Moskos, work just as hard as their male comrades, but they are more likely than men to view the Army as "a way station to a better civilian life," including college.

Contrary to the hopes of feminists and Pentagon civilian officials, enlisted women have gravitated toward "traditional" female work (administrative, clerical, medical). Their attrition rates went up, or they sought transfers, when they were assigned to serve as truck drivers or aircraft refuelers, or in other "male" jobs.

Half of all enlisted women are married. Roughly seven to nine percent of enlisted women, married or unmarried, get pregnant (no longer cause for automatic discharge from the service) in the course of a year. To unit commanders in the field, pregnant soldiers—and young single mothers—are a chronic “readiness headache.” Such women cannot easily pull extra duty, or rapidly deploy overseas.

All in all, however, enlisted women have fared well during the past decade. Those who have stayed in the military have been promoted as fast as, or faster than, men.

Back to the Spaghetti

Whether feminist pressures or attitudes per se have caused or simply abetted changes in women’s roles in the workplace and the military may never be known for certain. The same is true for the changes that have swept the lives of women, men, and children at home as women have gone off to work.

One thing has not changed. Even in two-income families, mothers still take primary responsibility for child-rearing and keeping house. Several surveys show that husbands do less than one-quarter of the cooking, cleaning, and diapering around the house in an average week, and that they have increased the time they spend on such chores by only about six percent during the past 20 years. Undoubtedly, many men are unwilling to do “women’s work.” But, if the evidence of women’s magazines and other popular sources is to be believed, wives often do not want husbands to play *too* large a role in the home. “If the children ever turned first to Daddy in time of need,” Shirley Sloan Fader wrote recently in *Working Woman*, many mothers would be “devastated.”

Whatever her sentiments, the working mother’s continuing responsibilities at home mean that she is doing two jobs at once. And chances are that she is not doing either job as well as she would wish. Feminists cite this tension when they urge Washington and private employers to expand day care subsidies and programs. Contrary to the predictions of many child psychologists, most of today’s academic research on how children (at least those over one year old) fare in day care, emotionally and intellectually, is reassuring. Indeed, the bottom line, according to Sylvia Ann Hewlett, is psychologist Claire Etaugh’s finding that “satisfied mothers—working or not—have the best-adjusted children,” even if the children are in day care.*

Of course, many children are in day care because their mothers are divorced and *must* work. The causes of divorce are complex. But most scholars seem to agree that the wife’s employment may be a

*Data on child care are scarce, but, by one estimate, less than 10 percent of children under age three with working mothers are enrolled in formal day care programs. The rest are tended by relatives, nannies, or neighborhood women offering “family day care”; many mothers *prefer* this.

factor. Largely for lack of adequate data (a chronic hurdle in such determinations), the issue remains unresolved. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, for example, eight percent of all women over 18 were divorcées in 1984, yet 16 percent of those with incomes of \$25,000 or more, and 23 percent of those with incomes of \$50,000 or more, were divorced. But nobody knows how many of these women enjoyed high incomes *before* they got divorced.

As Peter Uhlenberg and David Eggebeen note in *Public Interest* (Winter 1986), the increase in divorce and the absence of working mothers from the home, combined with fathers' reluctance or inability to fill in for their wives, add up to this: America's parents are giving less time and attention to their children.

The effects can be seen in a paradox of the 1960-80 period: While nearly every statistical predictor of adolescents' well-being (education outlays, family income, available social services) improved, other indicators revealed disturbing trends. Children's academic achievement dropped while delinquency, drug abuse, teen suicide, and illegitimate birth rates all soared among whites and minorities.

Uhlenberg and Eggebeen assign much of the blame to "an erosion of the bond between parent and child—one characterized by parental commitment and willingness to sacrifice self-interest."

To ask why American parents may have drifted toward egocentricity is to return to our bowl of overcooked spaghetti. There is much that researchers have yet to untangle, and much they never will untangle, about the effects of feminism as such. For all the antifamily rhetoric of the 1970s militants, it seems premature to single out feminism, as some do, as the chief cause of today's family difficulties. What we *do* know is that as women went to work during the 1970s—whether in search of equality and fulfillment, out of necessity, or lured by rising wages—they did not discard responsibility. Young college-educated single women took jobs or pursued careers, much as their male peers did, while most married women struggled to strike new compromises between work and family when children came along. As the results of these practical, often painful trade-offs of everyday life emerge, they may show the larger society how better to respond to the various cultural shifts that the latest wave of American feminism has helped to bring to the nation.

