

# The Persistence of Workplace Gender Segregation in the US

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## Abstract

Occupational gender segregation remains one of the defining elements of gender inequality in modern societies. Recent trends for the United States show that occupational segregation remains high and did not substantially decline in the decade of the 2000s for the first time since 1960. Men and women work in different occupations because of a combination of forces, including culturally defined choices by workers themselves, discrimination by employers, and differences in skill levels and qualities. Research has shown that occupational segregation is an important aspect of gender inequality in earnings and contributes to other forms of inequality as well. The prospects for reducing gender segregation in the short term appear slim, based on the weak effects of educational attainment, cultural attitudes, and state intervention in the current period.

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## Introduction

Nothing defines the nature of gender in a society more than the tendency of men and women to do different works. In both paid and unpaid works, contemporary societies exhibit a remarkable level of differentiation between the tasks done by women and those done by men – the gender segregation of work. This basic feature of society has proven highly resilient in the face of dramatic social change in many other arenas, including the workplace, the family, and the state (Geist and Cohen 2011). However, variation in the pattern of segregation belies the common assumption that it is immutable (Yaish and Stier 2009). Rather, although gender segregation is a universal aspect of gender inequality, the form that it takes reveals the nature of the gender system, and in theory, it is no more inevitable than gender inequality itself (Charles and Grusky 2004).

This review concerns gender segregation in the paid workplace, known as occupational or job segregation. As Kim Weeden (1998) has written, occupational segregation is at once a direct measure of inequality and a precursor to other forms of inequality associated with occupational status. Segregation is a lynchpin of gender inequality because it serves as a key site of gender differentiation and, in Barbara Reskin's (1988) phrase, "differentiation is the *sine qua non* of dominance systems" (64). After discussing some issues of measurement, I provide a brief status update on the state of segregation in the United States. Second, I review recent research on its causes and consequences. In the last section, I offer some thoughts on the near future of gender segregation.

## How segregated are men and women at work?

To describe the level of segregation between men and women, we need not only data on what jobs people do but also a measure of the difference in the distribution of occupational positions. The issue of measurement has been debated extensively in the sociological literature, as different measures produce results with different implications (Charles and Grusky 2004). The primary distinction is between measures that identify the extent to which *occupations* are segregated versus those that identify the level of segregation among *workers*

themselves. For example, if there are 10 jobs and only 1 of them has an equal share of men and women, then one could say that the other 9 jobs were segregated. However, if almost all of the workers are in that one integrated job, then we could say that most workers work in an integrated job.

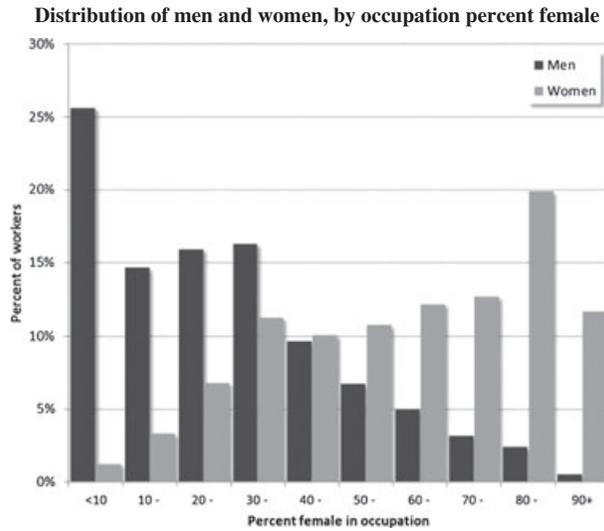
The most common measure of segregation is the index of dissimilarity. This measure reports what percentage of men, or women, would have to change occupations to make the gender distribution equal across all occupations (Duncan and Duncan 1955). A simple variation on that measure, known as the size-standardized index of dissimilarity, treats each occupation as a single observation, rather than treating individual workers as the units of analysis. By that logic, for example, the gender composition of 4 million truck drivers would constitute one data point and 1000 blacksmiths would constitute another. A further variation constructs log-multiplicative models using gender ratios in each occupation, at which point the computations and assumptions become much more complex (Bridges 2003; Charles and Grusky 1995).

Another important factor to consider in measuring segregation is the level of detail used. Researchers almost always find that looking at the distribution of men and women in greater detail – for example, differentiating between physicians as a general category versus pediatricians, surgeons (Ku 2011), or between public interest versus corporate lawyers (Kay and Gorman 2008) – yields higher levels of segregation. The same is true if one can identify the specific geographic location of workers or the industry in which they work (Cohen and Huffman 2003a; Rotolo and Wilson 2007). Even further, when researchers are able to look at specific workplaces, rather than occupations, a still greater degree of segregation emerges (McTague et al. 2009; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2006). Put another way, gender segregation persists within occupations, not just between them.

In the United States, the Census Bureau counts the occupations of workers according to a federal classification scheme that was overhauled in 2000 (making it impossible to make exact comparisons with earlier periods). Using that data on about 500 occupations for 2000 and 2010, including only workers employed full-year and full-time, I calculated the index of dissimilarity.<sup>1</sup> Over the decade of the 2000s, there was almost no change: The index of dissimilarity was 51.0 percent in 2000, and for 2010, it was 50.1 percent.<sup>2</sup> That is the slowest progress toward integration of any decade since 1960, when segregation started a long trend downward (Cotter et al. 2004).

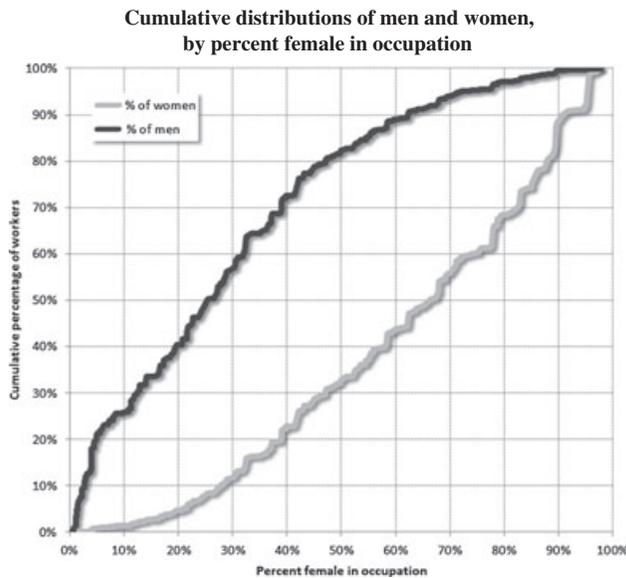
To get a better picture of this level of segregation, consider Figures 1 and 2, which describe the data from 2010. The first shows the distribution of men and women in occupations grouped according to their gender composition. For example, the figure shows that the most common type of occupation for men is less than 10 percent female, with 26 percent of men working in such jobs. On the other hand, the most common location for women is in the 80–89 percent female range, where 20 percent of women work. The second figure shows the cumulative distributions of men and women, again including only full-time, year-round workers. Thus, each point on a line shows the percentage of workers in occupations at or below that level of female concentration. This allows us to see, for example, that the median occupation for men is 25 percent female. That is, half of men work in occupations with fewer women, and half work in occupations with more. On the other hand, the median occupation for women is 67 percent female.

Finally, for a more detailed description of the occupations involved, Table 1 shows the 25 most common occupations for full-time, full-year workers in 2010, listed from those with the highest percentage of women to those with the highest percentage of men. The table also includes median earnings for men and women in each occupation. Thus, we can see, for example, that the most gender-segregated occupations – secretaries (96 percent female)



Note: Full-time, year-round workers. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey.

Figure 1. Distribution of men and women, by occupation percent female.



Note: Full-time, year-round workers. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey.

Figure 2. Cumulative distributions of men and women, by percent female in occupation.

and construction laborers (98 percent male) – are relatively low paid. On the other hand, the highest paid occupations on this list – managers, lawyers, and chief executives – are male-dominated but not completely segregated, in the range of 67–78 percent male. This is consistent with the pattern observed in 2000 as well (Cotter et al. 2014).

**Table 1.** Gender composition and median earnings of the 25 largest occupations

	Number of workers		Gender composition		Median earnings		
	Men	Women	Percent male	Percent female	Men's	Women's	Women's as percent of men's
Secretaries and administrative assistants	111,126	2,391,057	4.4	95.6	34,584	34,304	99.2
Registered nurses	195,969	1,703,779	10.3	89.7	61,438	61,184	99.6
Bookkeeping, accounting, and auditing clerks	109,925	807,909	12.0	88.0	35,186	34,731	98.7
Nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides	177,628	1,121,650	13.7	86.3	25,071	24,587	98.1
Elementary and middle school teachers	483,966	1,717,323	22.0	78.0	48,659	47,379	97.4
Cashiers	302,920	747,572	28.8	71.2	19,790	18,947	95.7
Customer service representatives	466,395	992,085	32.0	68.0	31,373	30,614	97.6
First-line supervisors of office and admin. support workers	439,828	730,318	37.6	62.4	44,780	41,435	92.5
Accountants and auditors	678,697	957,553	41.5	58.5	59,243	51,680	87.2
Financial managers	454,493	506,684	47.3	52.7	65,572	53,095	81.0
First-line supervisors of retail sales workers	1,442,456	1,044,972	58.0	42.0	37,475	31,152	83.1
Retail salespersons	1,016,234	650,403	61.0	39.0	30,981	24,560	79.3
Cooks	660,434	391,462	62.8	37.2	19,663	17,717	90.1
Stock clerks and order fillers	503,029	291,530	63.3	36.7	25,965	25,171	96.9
Managers, miscellaneous	1,768,367	853,914	67.4	32.6	70,998	59,366	83.6
Lawyers	558,684	247,471	69.3	30.7	113,373	100,704	88.8
General and operations managers	597,151	242,891	71.1	28.9	70,732	57,464	81.2
Production workers, miscellaneous	617,517	231,433	72.7	27.3	31,639	25,919	81.9
First-line supervisors of non-retail sales workers	735,355	273,982	72.9	27.1	55,417	50,217	90.6
Janitors and building cleaners	1,078,987	367,004	74.6	25.4	26,105	20,957	80.3
Sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing	868,685	280,562	75.6	24.4	60,245	50,408	83.7
Chief executives	710,054	196,479	78.3	21.7	107,250	87,093	81.2
Laborers and freight, stock, and material movers, hand	940,687	187,899	83.4	16.6	29,091	24,961	85.8
Driver/sales workers and truck drivers	2,077,567	86,605	96.0	4.0	38,396	29,699	77.3
Construction laborers	791,591	19,105	97.6	2.4	30,853	28,600	92.7

Note: Full-time, year-round workers. Source: US Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey.

## What are the causes of segregation?

### *Preferences, choices, and opportunities*

Paula England (2010) has suggested that social change with regard to gender segregation is largely one-sided, as women seek access to male-dominated jobs more than the reverse – because female-dominated jobs are compensated less. Thus, changes in women’s occupational distribution have been more pronounced than those for men. However, women’s desire for upward mobility is constrained by the continuing presence of gender “essentialist” views which hold men and women to be inherently, categorically different in terms of preferences and aptitudes (Hollander and Howard 2000). Essentialism pushes women toward jobs traditionally done by women, such as teaching, nursing, and other care-related service work, while men under the influence of essentialism prefer to stay in male-dominated fields. In England’s view, it may be women with higher earning potential – especially those whose parents and themselves went to college – who more often seek to integrate male-dominated jobs; for them, upward mobility may require crossing the gender line. On the other hand, women with less access to high-status jobs can pursue an upwardly mobile path that includes female-dominated work; for them, getting into a white-collar administrative job, nursing career, or teaching credential represents upward mobility even though their destination career is still female-dominated. As a result, gender integration has advanced much more among higher-status occupations.

England’s explanation fits the historical pattern described by Cotter et al. (2004), in which the bulk of gender segregation has occurred among workers with at least a college degree. However, a simpler explanation results from the fact that women’s education college completion rates have risen much faster than men’s. That means there are many more women with college degrees for employers to choose from. In contrast, the pool of workers without college degrees looking for work has skewed much less female, and there is little pressure to hire women for traditionally blue-collar jobs. From the employer’s perspective, then, the supply of workers has become much more integrated at the high end of the occupational scale (Cohen 2007).

The role of women’s preferences, and the socialization processes that produce them, is controversial and difficult to study (Correll 2001). Clearly, there is an element of choice or selection operating in the distribution of workers across occupations, beginning with childhood socialization and the educational aspirations of adolescents, and culminating in a series of contingent decisions that emerge over the life course of the individual (Jacobs 1989). When women – through choice or necessity – prioritize family obligations over paid employment, the consequences with regard to time and labor force experience lost are irreversible (Polachek 1981).

Our understanding of these dynamics is hampered because data are usually only recorded for people who already have obtained the jobs in the question (Fernandez and Mors 2008). Current occupations cannot be said to measure mere occupational “choices” but must rather represent the outcome of interactions among both workers and employers (not to mention teachers, parents, peers, and other involved agents). Nevertheless, even among those attending college, both men and women continue to pursue gender-typed courses of study, ironically exercising their growing freedoms in ways that reinforce traditional gender divisions and stall occupational integration. As a result, gender segregation across professional fields remains strong, whether indicated by areas of study (Charles and Bradley 2009) or professional specialization (Ku 2011).

Identifying the causes of segregation is further complicated by the distinction between two different kinds of gender segregation (Charles and Grusky 2004): that which is a more benign

division between comparably rewarded manual versus non-manual tasks, or “horizontal” segregation; and that which involves separation into hierarchically ranked occupations within those spheres, or “vertical” segregation. In practice, this differentiation is very difficult to define, sometimes resulting in circular definitions in which what men do is perceived as more “manual” and also higher status than what women do. In any event, this scheme at least attempts to address the fact that segregation results from a combination of both culturally based “choices” and hierarchically imposed status rankings.

### *Economic transformation*

Transformation in the US economy has had paradoxical effects on gender integration. On the one hand, growth in the service economy has commodified many of the unpaid tasks historically performed by women in their homes, especially in the areas of health, childcare, education, and food services (Cotter et al. 2001). This has created massive employment opportunities in areas that are culturally tilted toward women’s work. Thus, millions of women have shifted their energies from the unpaid workplace at home toward the paid workplace, where work for pay provides independence (from family) but also creates dependence (on the market) – even as it helps to break down society’s gender division of labor (Thistle 2006).

On the other hand, however, the expanding service sector has also created “occupational ghettos” (Charles and Grusky 2004), where high concentrations of women perform labor associated with their historical family roles. In fact, much of the growth in employment opportunity for women has been in segregated occupations. Nevertheless, the overall effect of moving women’s labor away from households and toward the paid economy has been in the direction of desegregating the labor force (Cohen 2004).

### *Employer practices*

Employer discrimination against women in hiring and promotion places some men and women in different jobs (Tomaskovic-Devey and Stainback 2012). Some discrimination is overt and intentional, while other practices are the result of unconscious biases and stereotypes (Ridgeway 2011). Although the overall contribution of such practices to the observed level of segregation is hard to measure, by looking at various characteristics of workplaces and their management practices, we can at least gain a better understanding of the social mechanisms at work (Kalev 2009).

One form of discrimination – known as “statistical discrimination” – is based on the employers’ expectations or assumptions about how workers will perform based on the groups to which they belong (Pager and Karafin 2009). For example, hiring managers may assume that female employees will take maternity leaves or move away if their husbands get better job offers elsewhere. Such assumptions – although often or even usually incorrect – can be powerful drivers of decisions because managers must act on limited information about potential workers (Bielby and Baron 1986).

One recurring theme in this research is the role of bureaucratic or formalized employment practices, especially in hiring (Kmec, McDonald and Trimble 2010). Replacing discretion by individual managers with formal human resource practices has been shown to reduce gender segregation in some cases. On the other hand, formal rules also may be a “smokescreen,” hiding traditional sexist practices (for a review, see Baron et al. (2007)). Clearly, larger employers are under greater legal and regulatory scrutiny, and may be more successfully pressured to implement gender-equity practices, especially by the threat of law suits.

However, Bergman (2011) points out that government anti-discrimination efforts have put more pressure on employers of professional workers than those who hire blue-collar workers. And civil litigation to confront gender discrimination requires money and other resources that are more available to professional women. In contrast, while women's college completion rates have increased, women's access to the training required for work in the non-college skilled trades – carpentry and plumbing, for example – has been much more restricted.

Another line of research has examined the role of managers as motivated actors in the gender segregation regime, whose choices and actions may be driven by their own gender and related experiences. Following this insight, we find that the gender of managers affects segregation, as workplaces with more women in positions of authority also exhibit higher levels of integration (Huffman, Cohen and Pearlman 2010). This heightens the importance of integrating managerial jobs, because such access for women may be a prerequisite for more widespread desegregation (Cohen, Huffman and Knauer 2009; Reskin and McBrier 2000).

### **What are the consequences of segregation?**

The most-studied effect of occupational segregation is its contribution to the gender wage gap (Shauman 2006). However, the sorting of men and women into different jobs has a variety of consequences, including job satisfaction and stress as well as employee turnover (Reskin, McBrier and Kmec 1999). Because wages are more easily measured and compared across work settings – both for researchers and for workers comparing job opportunities and outcomes – focusing on the wage gap is both substantively and methodologically reasonable.

The gender wage gap could result from three mechanisms. First, if women earn less than men on average, then it follows that female-dominated occupations will have lower average pay. That is true, but it does not account for the entire effect of gender composition; even statistically holding constant the lower wages of women, average pay is smaller in jobs with more women in them (Cohen and Huffman 2003a). Second, women may be sorted into jobs that have lower expected earnings. That could result from employers' hiring practices (Fernandez and Mors 2008), from women's lower levels of skills and experience (England, Hermsen and Cotter 2000), or from women's acting on their own occupational "preferences," such as the need to choose flexible jobs so they can care for family members (Cha 2013; England 2005).

All of these processes do contribute to the tendency of women to cluster in jobs that pay less than men's or to specialize in lower-paid areas within their fields (Boulis and Jacobs 2008). However, a third mechanism is particularly revealing about the deeply embedded nature of gender in modern society: devaluation (Reskin 1988). Occupational gender devaluation occurs when occupations with high concentrations of women are paid less *because* women disproportionately fill them. That results from a number of factors which are difficult to differentiate in a study, such as the greater power of men to protect their own privileges in the workplace and the discriminatory practices of managers and employers who profit from paying women less. However, recent research, which carefully sequences the changes in occupational composition and earnings over time, provides strong evidence that average pay in occupations does in fact decline *after* women enter them (Levanon, England and Allison 2009). Further research is needed to help further understand this process.

The structural nature of devaluation is underscored by the finding that in labor markets (such as cities or metropolitan areas) with relatively higher levels of segregation, women's earnings are lower regardless of the gender composition of their own jobs (Cohen and Huffman 2003b; Cotter et al. 1997). That is, it is worse to work in a female-dominated

job in a labor market where the segregation level is high than it is to work in the same job in a more integrated market. And in workplaces with greater task segregation between men and women, women appear less likely to advance into management positions (Kalev 2009). We might speculate that this pattern occurs either because segregation allows different kinds of labor to be more thoroughly associated with one gender versus another, or because segregation strengthens men's hand in shaping outcomes to their ends. In any event, the pattern is pervasive and important, and remains a fruitful area for future research.

### Where are we going from here?

After the rapid pace of desegregation in the 1970s and 1980s, it became common to assume that integration was inevitable (Cotter, Hersen and Vanneman 2011). In his book *Destined for Equality*, for example, Robert Max Jackson (1998) describes the tension between men's power and the growing rationalization of economic organizations, which makes gender segregation impractical or unprofitable – because it retards the development of workers arbitrarily. Rationalization is essential for competition, and eventually, in Jackson's view, it would overwhelm men's desire or ability to maintain their own power as men. Now, the stalled progress of gender equality's march has undermined its aura of inevitability (England 2010).

Whether or not gender integration will eventually regain momentum, there are reasons to be doubtful about such a change in the immediate future. First, consider the role of *higher education*. Women now earn more college degrees than men, representing a reversal of long-standing inequality (DiPrete and Buchmann 2013; Goldin, Katz and Kuziemko 2006). However, the fields of study remain highly segregated between men and women, and that segregation even increased in the last decade (England 2010). By my calculation, using the same index of dissimilarity measure I used above, with data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2010), the segregation of male and female bachelor's degree recipients, after falling until the 1990s, was flat and then rose slightly in the last decade to 29.2 percent in 2008–09. Specifically, some of the most common majors for women in college are in the health and clinical sciences, where 85 percent of the graduates are women. On the other hand, engineering-related majors are among the most common for men, and these are 84 percent male. Even if women continue to increase their advantage in overall graduation rates, therefore, if men and women do not increase their overlap in fields of study, educational attainment alone may not trigger more reduction in occupational segregation.

Second, consider the role of *cultural attitudes*. An important basis for change is in attitudes toward the work that men and women should do and what they want to do. And here, too, there is a stall in the long-term trend toward egalitarianism. In an analysis of attitudes toward women's work, parenting, education, and roles in politics, Cotter et al. (2011) argue that, although the ideal of gender egalitarianism has become popular in the United States, it occurs simultaneously with a newly valorized view of motherhood. The result is a rising frame of “egalitarian essentialism, combining support for stay-at-home mothering with a continued feminist rhetoric of choice and equality” (Cotter et al. 2011:261). In this context, in which freely chosen “traditional” roles for women are culturally celebrated, it is not surprising that occupational segregation shows little if any movement toward equality (Ridgeway 2011).

Finally, there is the possibility of *state intervention*. Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, there have been two principal mechanisms by which the government has influenced the level of occupational segregation as a form of gender inequality. One way is through the legal system and the courts, to enforce anti-discrimination laws; the other is by setting standards for employment at government agencies and the private companies that have

government contracts (Hirsh 2009; Kalev and Dobbin 2006). In actuality, both of these mechanisms have been weak, especially since the mid-1980s. In the absence of blatant, provable discrimination, most employers have been free to hire and promote men and women into different positions with little fear of legal or regulatory consequences (Tomaskovic-Devey and Stainback 2012). One recent study concludes that anti-discrimination law in the United States is “a system whose symbolic presence is more powerful and pervasive than its practical effect” (Nielsen and Nelson 2008).

Despite the pessimism of this conclusion, in the realms of education, cultural attitudes, and state intervention, there remains the potential – at present unrealized – for renewed movement toward gender integration. Any one of these areas might provide impetus for change in the others – for example, shifting cultural attitudes (and political pressure) could spark a change in government policies. But the evidence to date does not clearly show what combination of forces necessary to reduce occupational gender segregation might arise in the future.

## Short Biography

Philip N. Cohen is a professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park. His research concerns social inequality in the area of gender, work, and family; family demography; and labor market inequality. Particular areas of expertise include demography of family structure, cohabitation, demographic measurement and the US Census, occupational segregation, the household division of labor, and homogamous (same-sex) marriage. His work has appeared in the *American Sociological Review*, the *American Journal of Sociology*, the *Demography*, the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, the *Pediatrics*, the *Gender & Society*, the *Administrative Science Quarterly*, and other journals. His current projects include a textbook for courses in family sociology (to be published by W. W. Norton in 2014) and writing the blog Family Inequality ([www.familyinequality.com](http://www.familyinequality.com)).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The 2000 data are from the tables supplemental to Weinberg (2004), using the 2000 Decennial Census; the 2010 data are from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, extracted with the American FactFinder ([factfinder2.census.gov](http://factfinder2.census.gov)).

<sup>2</sup> The size-standardized version of this measure is very similar: 52.2 percent in 2000 and 52.3 percent in 2010.

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