

# 18 Million Cracks and Counting

Examining the Labor Force Participation Rate in America in 2019 and How  
Institutional Sexism Affects Female Participation

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The Bureau of Labor Statistics puts the civilian labor force participation rate for October 2019 at 63.2%. The Bureau defines the labor force as the sum of employed and unemployed persons and that it is the labor force as a percent of the civilian noninstitutional population. Their definition of employed persons include persons who did any work for pay or profit during the survey reference week, as well as persons who did at least 15 hours of unpaid work in a family-operated enterprise, and persons who were temporarily absent from their regular jobs because of illness, vacation, bad weather, industrial dispute, or various personal reasons. The Bureau defined unemployed if they do not have a job, have actively looked for work in the prior 4 weeks, and are currently available for work. They also note that receiving benefits from the Unemployment Insurance program has no bearing on whether a person is classified as unemployed<sup>1</sup>.

To calculate the 63.2% rate stated above, first you have to compile the necessary data, as displayed below<sup>2</sup>. Using the supplied data, the rate can be calculated.

Number (in millions)	Percent
Population (P)	259.845
Not in Labor Force	95.481
Marginally attached	1.229
Discouraged	0.341
<b>Labor Force (LF)</b>	<b>164.364</b>
Employed	158.510
Unemployed	5.855
	<b>63.3% of Population</b>
	<b>61.0% of Population</b>
	<b>3.6% of Labor Force</b>

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<sup>1</sup> "Charts Related to the Latest 'The Employment Situation' News Release | More Chart Packages." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Accessed November 24, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Amadeo, Kimberly. "Labor Force Participation Rate and Why It Hasn't Improved Much: 5 Reasons Why People Dropped Out of the Labor Force and Won't Return." The Balance. The Balance, November 1, 2019.

The basic equation to determine the labor force participation rate is

*labor force participation rate* =  $\frac{\text{labor force}}{\text{civilian non-institutionalized population}}$ , where the *labor force* = *employed + unemployed*. By civilian non-institutionalized population, the Bureau of Labor Statistics refers to everyone living in the United States who is 16 or older *minus* inmates of institutions such as prisons, nursing homes, and mental hospitals and *minus* those on active duty in the Armed Forces<sup>3</sup>. So, using the data above, the equation becomes

$$\text{labor force participation rate} = \frac{164.364}{259.845}, \text{ so labor force participation rate} = 63.2\%.$$

59.2% of the female civil labor force population participated in October of 2019, an increase from approximately 34% in 1950 when the Bureau started tracking the data<sup>4</sup>. There are many social, economic, and political reasons that contributed to this increase. In 1916, Margaret Sanger began the organization that would become Planned Parenthood and started a conversation of birth control, family planning, and female health. This was fundamental, as it gave women some incremental control of their own bodies and the ability to choose how many kids they want. When a woman can make these choices, she can make choices about the rest of her life, including her role in the workforce<sup>5</sup>.

In 1920, the 19th Amendment was passed, giving women the right to vote and have a say in decisions that affect them. Women started filling more and more roles in the American government, but even now after the 2018 midterms, while a record 102 women will serve in the incoming House of Representatives, that number is only 23.4% of the chamber's voting members. In the Senate, there are 25 women serving in the 116th Senate, making up 25%<sup>6</sup>. This gender disparity does not help fix the labor participation rate, as men are continually trying to pass policies that infringe of the rights of women.

<sup>3</sup> Amadeo, Kimberly. "Labor Force Participation Rate and Why It Hasn't Improved Much: 5 Reasons Why People Dropped Out of the Labor Force and Won't Return." The Balance. The Balance, November 1, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Toossi, Mitra, and Teresa L Morisi. Women In The Workforce Before, During, And After The Great Recession, Women In The Workforce Before, During, And After The Great Recession § (n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> Young, Hilary. "Women's Movement Successes of Past 3 Centuries." Women's Movement Successes | Right at Home | Blog. Accessed November 24, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> DeSilver, Drew. "A Record Number of Women Will Be Serving in the New Congress." Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, December 18, 2018.

One major push for women to join the workforce outside of policies giving them more access was World War II. With such large amounts of the men fighting, there were many spots in the workforce for women to fill at home. According to the Metropolitan State University of Denver, in 1944, 37 percent of all adult women were employed. In 1944, women comprised 35.4 percent of the civilian labor force. In 1945, women comprised 36.1 percent of the civilian labor force. At the height of the war, there were 19,170,000 women in the labor force<sup>7</sup>. During these years, women showed the western world that women can still work full time and take care of the children at home. It shifted perceptions about married women and mothers working, as well as the fragility of women. They filled traditional male jobs and did their duty. Famously, the Queen was a mechanic in England during the war while Prince Phillip fought in the Navy. Show of force and strength from women all through the western world was instrumental in shifting the balance of power in the workplace and society. Soon, women began fighting for more and more equal protections under the law.

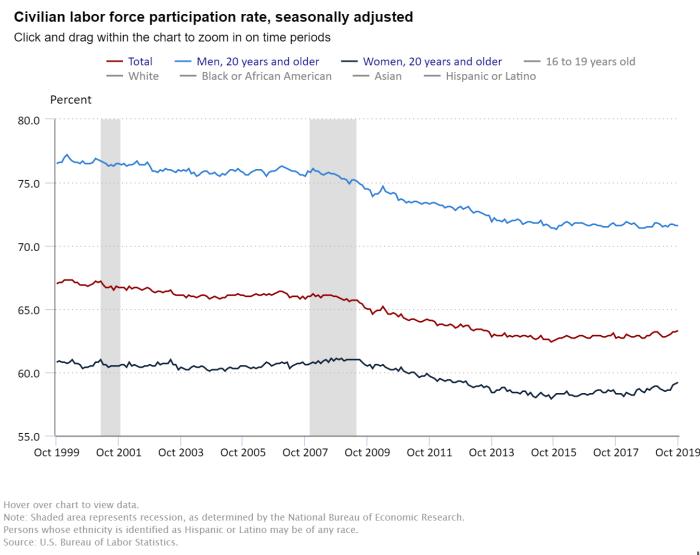
In 1963, Congress passed the Equal Pay Act, aimed at eradicating the pay gap between men and women. However, despite the Equal Rights Amendment being entered into Congress in 1923 and again in 1971 where it was then sent to the states for ratification, it has still not passed and made into law. The passage of Title IX in 1972 , now known as the Patsy Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act, brought greater educational opportunities to women<sup>8</sup>.

59.2% of the female civil labor force population participated in October of 2019, compared to 71.6% of men. While this is a startling division in 2019, what is even more interesting is that while the female participation rate has averaged around approximately 60% for the past twenty years, the male rate has been steadily declining in that same time period from 77% in February of 2000 to the near 70%.

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<sup>7</sup> "Women & World War II." Women & WWII | Camp Hale | MSU Denver. Accessed November 24, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Young, Hilary. "Women's Movement Successes of Past 3 Centuries." Women's Movement Successes | Right at Home | Blog. Accessed November 24, 2019



Civilian labor force participation rate<sup>9</sup>

The disparity between the two groups can be traced back to one major societal factor: dramatic increases in women completing college and receiving at least a bachelor's degree. As Claudia Buchmann, a professor of sociology at Ohio State and the co-author of *The Rise of Women: The Growing Gender Gap in Education and What it Means for American Schools*, described how in the early 1900s, when some elite colleges started opening up to women, women quickly got better grades than men. She goes on to describe how in the 1970s, as female attendance rates grew, they started graduating at higher and higher rates, while men's enrollment and graduation rates remained relatively flat<sup>10</sup>. As seen below, between 1940 and 2018, while both groups see a near 30% increase in degree attainment, women are increasingly overtaking men in receiving bachelor's degrees that are more and more relevant in today's workforce. And yet, for every 100 men getting their first promotion, just 72 women are promoted on average, with 68

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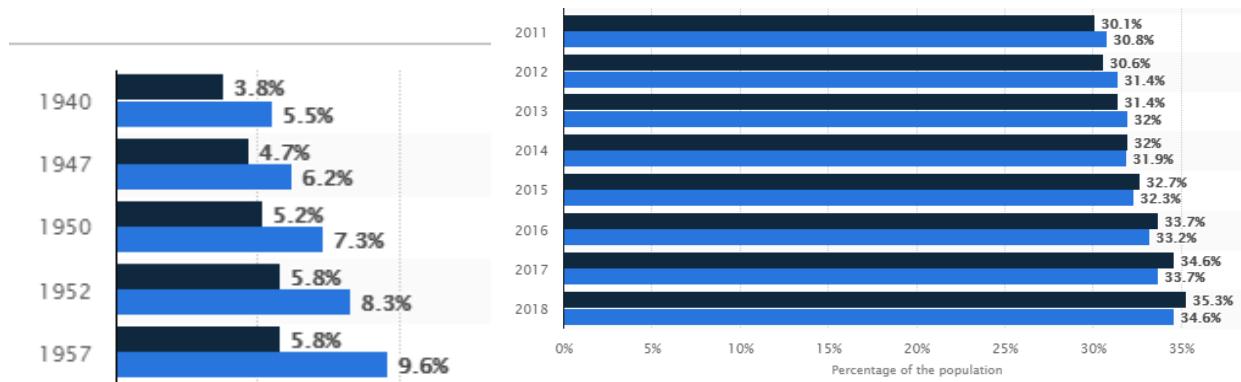
<sup>9</sup> "Charts Related to the Latest 'The Employment Situation' News Release | More Chart Packages." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Accessed November 24, 2019.

<https://www.bls.gov/charts/employment-situation/civilian-labor-force-participation-rate.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Semuels, Alana. "Poor Girls Are Leaving Their Brothers Behind." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, November 27, 2017.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/11/gender-education-gap/546677/>.

Latinas and 58 Black women promoted at that level<sup>11</sup>. Even though the amount in the workforce is decreasing and more women are graduating with college degrees than men, men are still the preferred choice to move into higher positions in companies.



Percentage of the U.S. population who have completed four years of college or more from 1940 to 2018, by gender<sup>12</sup>

Despite the shift in the ratio of men to women receiving degrees and the increases in female labor force participation rates since the passage of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 (women's labor force participation rate in 2012 was 57.7 percent, over fifty percent higher than it was in the early 1960s<sup>13</sup>), women on average still make 80.7 cents for every dollar a man working full time earns. Black women earn only 79 cents to a white man's dollar, while hispanic women earn only 58 cents<sup>14</sup>. The number for disabled women is even worse.

Another important factor that hurts the female labor participation rate is the amount of time women, especially those with children, have to spend doing housework. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as women contribute more to household income, they're still doing the majority of the unpaid domestic work. University College London (UCL) conducted research

<sup>11</sup> Boorstin, Julia. "One of the Biggest Reasons Women Aren't Getting Ahead at Work, According to a New Survey." CNBC. CNBC, October 15, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Duffin, Erin. "Americans with a College Degree 1940-2018, by Gender." Statista, August 9, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. "Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population by age, sex, and race." Current Population Survey. (2012).

<http://bls.gov/cps/cpsaato3.htm>; Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. "Labor Force Participation: 75 Years of Change, 1950-98, and 1998- 2025." (1999).

<sup>14</sup> Andy Kiersz, Sonam Sheth. "7 Charts That Show the Glaring Gap between Men and Women's Salaries in the US." Business Insider. Business Insider, August 26, 2019.

of heterosexual couples and published in the journal *Work, Employment and Society*, describing how when both individuals in the couples were in full-time employment, women were found to be five times more likely than men to spend at least 20 hours a week doing household chores, adding that while women do approximately 16 hours of household chores every week, while men do closer to six<sup>15</sup>. This further limits their ability to work as much, or even at all, when even in today's modern society women are still viewed as the main childcare and homemakers in the family.

While the last fifty years have seen sharp increases in female labor force participation due to a range of sociological, political and economic reasons, there is still persist gender bias in both pay and the role of women in society that affect how women participate. Despite having higher college graduation rates, men still are more likely to get hired for jobs requiring the same degrees. Men are still paid more for the same work and even when women are working full time just as much as men in heteronormative relationships and families, women still do a bulk of the caretaking and housework compared to their male partners. There is still a systemic gender (and racial) bias in society that fundamentally affects a woman in her professional and home lives, of which one also affects another creating a cycle that keeps women from breaking over 65% participation in the labor force. Women all around the world and in the United States have been fighting for centuries to break out of the patriarchy that controls every facet of life and break the glass ceiling. The ceiling is still there, but as Hillary Clinton said, "it's got about 18 million cracks in it". It is socially acceptable for women to be stay-at-home moms, yet the same is not true for dads. Perhaps greater gender equality would be reflected in the labor participation rate by showing that equal number of men to women participate in the workforce.

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<sup>15</sup> Barr, Sabrina. "Women Are Still Doing the Majority of Household Chores, Study Finds." The Independent. Independent Digital News and Media, July 26, 2019.