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Occupational Sex Segregation: Persistence and Change

Early in the 1980s the media took notice of a new phenomenon: women's marked progress into occupations traditionally reserved for men. Commenting on newly published data from the Department of Labor and the Bureau of the Census, media accounts such as Frank Prial's were quick to portray women's gains in "men's" occupations as dramatic:

> An increasing number of women in the United States are working at what used to be men's jobs. Despite the unemployment rate, the number of women working [for wages] in the United States has risen 21 million, or 95 percent, over the last two decades, according to a new study by the United States Department of Labor, and many of the jobs they have taken are in categories once largely the province of men. (Prial, 1982)

Front-page stories in leading newspapers announced women's advancement in such occupations as executive, lawyer, pharmacist, physician, veterinarian, bartender, bus driver, and baker (e.g., Prial, 1982; Herbers, 1983; Castro, 1985). By 1980, for example, women represented nearly half of all bus drivers and bartenders. Moreover, as Prial noted, women had become the majority in six formerly male-dominated occupations: insurance adjusters, examiners, and investigators; bill collectors; real estate agents and brokers; photographic process workers; checkers, examiners, and inspectors; and production-line assemblers.

Published 1980 census data indeed confirmed that women had posted

Table 1.1
Occupational Distribution over Major Occupational Groups, by Sex and Race, Civilian Labor Force, 1980

Occupational Group	Men			Women			Percent Female
	Total[a]	*White*[b]	*Black*	*Total*[a]	*White*[b]	*Black*	
Executive, administrative, managerial	12.1	13.2	5.4	7.2	7.7	4.5	30.5
Professional specialty	10.5	11.2	5.6	13.7	14.4	11.2	49.1
Technicians and related support	2.9	3.0	1.8	3.0	3.1	3.2	43.8
Sales occupations	8.8	9.6	3.9	11.3	12.2	6.5	48.7
Administrative support, including clerical	6.7	6.5	9.0	30.7	31.9	25.2	77.1
Service occupations	9.4	8.2	17.0	18.2	16.4	29.3	58.9
Farming, forestry, fishing	4.3	4.2	3.4	1.0	1.0	.6	14.9
Precision production, craft, repair	21.0	21.7	15.5	2.4	2.3	2.4	7.8
Machine operators, assemblers, inspectors	10.0	9.2	15.1	9.3	8.1	13.0	40.7
Transportation and material moving	7.5	7.2	11.0	.9	.9	1.0	7.8
Handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, laborers	6.8	6.0	12.3	2.3	2.0	3.2	19.8
Total[c]	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.1	42.5

[a] All races.
[b] Whites of Hispanic background not included.
[c] Sample sizes: 59,625,553 (total men), 49,633,442 (white men), 5,161,234 (black men), 44,092,523 (total women), 35,624,861 (white women), 5,058,243 (black women).

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration (1982:1).

disproportionate gains during the 1970s in some predominantly male occupations (Bianchi and Rytina, 1984). But close inspection of the data suggests that media accounts of women's *progress* were exaggerated—women's representational gains exceeded their growth in the labor force as a whole in only a small number of the detailed occupations for which the Census Bureau collects data, and they even lost ground in a few occupations such as heavy-equipment mechanics, lathe and turning-machine operators, and production testers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984a).

The phenomenon underlying these news stories and census data is the segregation of the sexes into different lines of work. Occupational sex segregation is one of the most enduring features of the U.S. labor market (Reskin and Hartmann, 1986). As Table 1.1 confirms, in 1980 substantial differentiation

by sex existed at the level of aggregated occupational categories. Men tend to be overrepresented in managerial and craft occupations, traditionally the best paid of the white-collar and blue-collar workforces, respectively. They also predominate in transport operative and laboring occupations. Women are the clear majority in service occupations and in administrative-support occupations because of their predominance in clerical jobs. They are also slightly overrepresented in professional occupations because of their preponderance in the typically lower-paid female *semi*professions such as nursing, library work, social work, and teaching.

Table 1.1 reveals another fundamental feature of the U.S. occupational structure—its segregation by race. Blacks, whether male or female, are less likely than whites to command well-paid managerial or professional jobs.[1] Similarly, relative to white men, black men have garnered few of the better-paid blue-collar craft occupations. Compared with white women, black women are underrepresented in sales and administrative-support occupations. Instead, blacks of both sexes are overrepresented in service, operative, and laborer occupations. Like sex segregation, race segregation is problematic because it relegates blacks to the most poorly paid occupational sectors and hence helps to perpetuate the wage disparity between blacks and whites.

The segregation of the U.S. occupational structure by race and sex extends back to the turn of the century. Gross (1968), for example, found that occupational segregation by sex, as measured by the index of segregation, remained essentially constant between 1900 and 1960, reflecting the unusual persistence of this social phenomenon (see also Jacobs, 1989b).[2] Table 1.2 updates Gross's occupational segregation indexes across major census groups for both sex and race between 1940 and 1981. The data reveal that occupational segregation by race declined sharply after World War II, especially for women. Nonwhite women, 81 percent of whom are black (U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 1982:1), have gone a long way

Table 1.2
Occupational Segregation Indexes across Major Census Categories for Sex and Race, 1940–1981

	1940	1950	1960	1970	1981
Segregation by sex among					
Whites	46	43	44	44	41
Blacks and others	58	50	52	49	39
Segregation by race among					
Men	43	36	35	30	24
Women	62	52	45	30	17

Sources: For 1940–70, Treiman and Terrell (1975:167); for 1981, Reskin and Hartmann (1986:19).

toward reducing the occupational gap between themselves and white women. However, *nonwhite women* continue to lag far behind *white men*.

As we show in more detail below, occupational *sex* segregation has been more resistant to change than race segregation. Despite revolutionary transformations in the industrial and occupational structures, and changes in the composition of the labor force, the degree of occupational sex segregation among whites remained essentially constant between 1940 and 1970. During the same period, with black women's movement out of domestic work, occupational sex segregation among blacks declined to the level of whites. Beginning in the late 1960s another "revolution"—the women's liberation movement—promised to improve women's position in the workplace. By challenging social values, the feminist movement fostered and reinforced antidiscrimination regulations, thus opening to women the doors of some traditionally male occupations. As a consequence of these and other factors, the level of occupational segregation declined at a faster rate during the 1970s than in any other decade in this century (Beller, 1984). Nonetheless, the labor force remained segregated: in 1981 at least 39 percent of black women and 41 percent of white women would have had to change to a different major occupational category to achieve distributions identical to those of men of their race across broad occupational categories (Table 1.2).[3]

Thus, the 1970s represented a watershed for sex segregation. For the first time in this century women made notable gains in some occupations in which men had typically predominated. However, the level of occupational sex segregation at the end of the decade remained high. In 1980 almost half of all women and 53 percent of men worked in occupations that were at least 80 percent women and men, respectively (Rytina and Bianchi, 1984). Women made inroads into some "male" occupations but little or no progress in integrating most others. White women were more likely than black women to enter customarily male occupations, but black women and men did advance disproportionately into some sex- and race-atypical occupations (Reskin and Roos, 1989; Sokoloff, 1989).

The variability in women's increased representation in male occupations during the 1970s raises three important questions. First, how can we explain women's disproportionate movement into some traditionally male or mixed-sex occupations during a decade in which their advancement into most male occupations was modest at best? In other words, what factors facilitated women's movement into the particular occupations in which they made pronounced numerical inroads? Second, what forms did occupational feminization take? Did women's entry yield genuine sex integration within these desegregating occupations so that women and men did the same kinds of work? Finally, did women's integration bring them closer to economic equity with male incumbents in occupations that became more female during the 1970s? This book provides answers to these questions.

The changing race composition of occupations since 1970 (Sokoloff, 1989) raises similar questions, and they are equally pressing. As demonstrated in Table 1.1, the continued segregation of blacks in low-paid, low-skill occupations ensures blacks' continuing economic disadvantage. At the outset we planned to examine changing patterns of both sex and race segregation, but the depth and complexity of our research methods soon convinced us that we could not encompass both in a single volume; hence, this study emphasizes the changing sex composition of occupations. Because we believe that our theoretical approach applies equally to understanding the changing race–sex composition of occupations, however, we plan to examine that question in future work.

Trends in Industrial and Occupational Structure

Broad industrial and occupational changes have transformed the U.S. economy in this century. Most striking has been its *industrial* transformation from a goods- to a service-producing economy. As the data in Table 1.3 indicate, at

Table 1.3
Industrial Employment, 1910–1980

	1910	1940	1980
Goods-producing industries	64.1%	51.4%	32.9%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries	32.1	18.3	3.6
Mining	2.9	2.2	1.0
Manufacturing	22.8	23.9	22.1
Construction	6.4	7.0	6.3
Service-producing industries	35.9	48.6	67.1
Transportation and other public utilities	8.8	8.3	6.6
Trade	9.3	14.4	20.3
Finance and real estate	1.4	3.1	6.0
Educational and other professional service	4.6	8.0	20.0
Domestic and personal service	10.2	11.4	8.8
Government not elsewhere classified	1.5	3.3	5.4
Total N (in thousands) =	36,130	49,980	99,303

Note: Data are not exactly comparable across time. Data for 1910 and 1940 are based on "gainful workers", for 1980 on "employed civilians." Industries are named as in the 1970 census (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975:138). Equivalent 1980 titles are agriculture, forestry, fisheries; mining; construction; manufacturing; transportation, communication, and other public utilities; wholesale and retail trade; finance, insurance, real estate; professional and related services; services other than professional and related services; public administration (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1986b:388).

Sources: For 1910 and 1940, U.S. Bureau of the Census (1975:138); for 1980, U.S. Bureau of the Census (1986b:388).

Table 1.4
Occupational Employment, 1900–1981

Occupation	1900	1950	1981
White collar	17.6%	36.6%	52.7%
Professional, technical, and kindred workers	4.3	8.6	16.4
Managers, officials, and proprietors	5.8	8.7	11.5
Clerical and kindred workers	3.0	12.3	18.5
Sales workers	4.5	7.0	6.4
Blue collar	35.8	41.1	31.1
Craftsmen, foremen, and kindred workers	10.5	14.2	12.6
Operatives and kindred workers	12.8	20.4	14.0
Laborers, except farm and mine	12.5	6.6	4.6
Service	9.0	10.5	13.4
Private household workers	5.4	2.6	1.0
Other service workers	3.6	7.9	12.3
Farm	37.5	11.8	2.7
Farmers and farm managers	19.9	7.4	1.5
Farm laborers and foremen	17.7	4.4	1.3
Total N (in thousands) =	29,031	58,999	100,397

Note: The data are not exactly comparable. Data for 1900 and 1950 are based on the experienced labor force aged 14 and older, for 1981 on employed persons 16 and older.

Sources: For 1900 and 1950, U.S. Bureau of the Census (1975:139); for 1981, U.S. Bureau of the Census (1982c:388–90).

the turn of the century two-thirds of the labor force produced goods in manufacturing, mining, construction, or agricultural work. The remainder held jobs in the service sector—in trade, the professions, personal services, transportation, and so forth. By 1980 the distribution had flipped, with 33 percent of the labor force employed in producing goods and 67 percent in providing services. Most of the decline in the goods-producing sector stemmed from the shrinking number of agricultural workers. In 1910 nearly a third of the labor force worked in agriculture, forestry, or fishing industries; by 1980, this proportion had dwindled to less than 4 percent. As the need for agricultural workers declined, service industries absorbed much of the slack.

With these industrial changes came the *occupational* restructuring of the labor force (see also Oppenheimer, 1970: chap. 5). Table 1.4, which shows this change, depicts the shift from a farm and blue-collar labor force to a white-collar and service one. For example, from 1950 to 1981 the proportion of the labor force engaged in professional and technical work almost doubled; from 1900 to 1981 it nearly quadrupled.[4] Although the proportion of skilled