Some 6 million women entered the workforce for the first time in the 1940s to support the war industry. Beginning in the 1960s, women constituted about one-third of the workforce, aided by passage of employment antidiscrimination laws such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Also during this time, the U.S. labor market was marked by significant gender stratification among occupational lines, a concept known as occupational sex segregation. Starting in the 1970s, however, and until about 2000, women became increasingly integrated in jobs they historically had been excluded from, such as lawyers and physicians. Unfortunately, the speed of women’s occupational integration has slowed since 2000 and appears to have stalled.

**Where is Occupational Sex Segregation Most Prevalent?**

In the United States, three out of four workers in education and health services are women, nine out of 10 workers in the construction industry are men, and seven out of 10 in the field of computer programming are men. Among occupations, women make up 80 percent of all secretaries, teachers, and home health aides.

In California, health services occupations are composed of 80 percent women. Conversely, construction occupations are composed of 98 percent men. Legal occupations have the most gender parity. The chart on the next page illustrates the 10 occupational sectors in California with the highest level of gender segregation and is followed by a chart representing the five occupational sectors with the most gender parity based on U.S. Census data from the American Community Survey. These occupational sectors may be found in both the private and public sector. Each sector is composed of anywhere between a half-dozen to more than 60 occupations, and taken together, represent more than 500 occupations.

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4. Ibid.
A few examples of the occupations within each of these sectors are: health services—nursing aides and phlebotomists; personal care—funeral directors and hairdressers; medical—physicians and medical record technicians; office support—secretaries and proofreaders; education—preschool/Kindergarten teachers and librarians; transportation/materials—aircraft pilots and subway workers; military—tactical operations leaders and air/weapons specialists; extraction—earth drillers and explosives workers; repair—locksmiths and automotive glass installers; and construction—construction trades helpers and carpenters.

A few examples of the occupations within each of these sectors are: sales—cashiers and real estate brokers; finance—accountants and tax collectors; legal—paralegals and lawyers; science—astronomers and psychologists; and business—event planners and compliance officers.
What Explains Occupational Sex Segregation?

The literature identifies a number of factors that contribute to occupational segregation based on sex. This paper addresses one such factor—implicit bias—that has drawn increasing attention. Implicit bias involves “attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.” According to a body of scholarly research, the unconscious attitudes we hold about other people often are based on categories such as race, gender, age, or ethnicity. Studies suggest implicit bias is pervasive, not necessarily in line with our declared beliefs, developed early in life, and not fixed. Further, implicit bias is expressed at both an individual and institutional level.

Unconscious attitudes based on gender operate in different facets of our society. In the employment context, some argue that gender bias influences occupational choices and patterns, ultimately limiting women’s economic opportunities. Since the 1980s, a growing body of research has sought to explain how implicit gender attitudes impact career choice and progression. Specifically, a number of studies conclude gender bias is a significant contributor to the overrepresentation of men or women in certain occupations. The impact of segregation has long been studied in a number of contexts and has been found to create social inequality by sorting groups into a dominant or subordinate status.

A few theories seek to explain the link between implicit gender bias and occupational segregation. First, a theory grounded in sociology contends the allocation of men and women in different jobs is a result of long-term exposure to and compliance with cultural beliefs regarding gender appropriate attributes, skills, and occupations. According to this perspective, men are encouraged to pursue occupations that involve masculine stereotypes, skills and authority, while women are encouraged to pursue occupations associated with feminine

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6 Ibid.
7 For this paper, I use the term gender and sex interchangeably with the understanding these labels often are not binary and may be fluid.
stereotypes, skills and traits.\textsuperscript{10} In addition, while men and women may choose to enter male- or female-associated occupations, their choice can be seen as the result of a complex interaction between cultural bias, social pressures, and even discrimination.\textsuperscript{11} These biases and pressures may operate over a long period and result from interactions with teachers, peers, family, mentors or role models, coworkers, and employers. As a complex process, occupational choice also may be influenced by personal interest, skills and abilities, educational opportunities and attainment, and concerns for work-family balance. These factors also can be shaped by our cultural and social experiences.

Drilling this concept down further, sociological research also looks at the impact of women’s college major choice on career choice and explores the societal pressures influencing college major choice. This research reveals women overwhelming major and graduate in education, psychology, and social work, while men favor engineering, a field with much higher earning potential.\textsuperscript{12} In particular, researchers have studied how gendered expectations about women’s aptitudes for science and math careers influence their educational, and ultimately, professional choices.\textsuperscript{13} The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a multinational economic justice think-tank of which the United States is a participating member, surveyed 15-year-olds from 60 countries in 2006 and found only 5 percent of girls contemplated a career in computing or engineering.\textsuperscript{14} In addition, in 2012, OECD surveyed parents of 15-year-olds in 10 countries and found parents were more likely to expect their sons, rather than their daughters, to work in a science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) field even when their daughters perform at the same level in mathematics.\textsuperscript{15} The study concluded that parental expectations for gender-normative careers can be a factor in their children’s occupational outcomes.


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p. 139.
Another major theory linking gender bias to occupational segregation focuses on employers’ implicit attitudes about appropriate workplace roles for men and women. This theory posits that employers contribute to job segregation by exercising their own gender biases in hiring, performance reviews, and promotional practices. Hiring practices are influenced by an employer’s perception of the appropriateness of an individual for a particular job or occupation, and gender bias in some cases may guide that perception. According to this theory, engrained assumptions that men are more status-worthy and competent may lead employers to hire women disproportionately into lower-wage and less prestigious positions. In 2014, women held two-thirds of lower-wage jobs despite representing just under half of the workforce overall.

**Occupational Segregation and the Gender Pay Gap**

A number of studies conclude that sex-based occupational segregation is a major contributor to the pay gap. The gender pay gap measures what women are paid relative to men. In the United States, as of 2015, women’s median earnings were approximately $40,700, compared with $51,200 for men. This translates to women making 80 cents for every dollar earned by men. In California, the gap is somewhat less, with women making 84 cents on the dollar. The gap persists regardless of a woman’s education level and is the largest overall for women with advanced degrees. In terms of tangible income, women are losing a little more than


$8,000 annually to the pay gap. An analysis of census pay data for 2014 reveals California’s gender pay gap amounts to $39 billion annually in lost wages for women.\(^\text{23}\)

Gender-based occupational segregation contributes to the pay gap because female-dominated work pays less overall than male-dominated work both historically and presently.\(^\text{24}\) Studies estimate that sex segregation accounts for one-third to 40 percent of the gender pay gap.\(^\text{25}\) In fact, female-dominated jobs at every skill level—low, medium, and high—are associated with lower median earnings than comparable male-dominated jobs.\(^\text{26}\) According to 2010 Bureau of Labor Statistics data, examples of low-skilled female-dominated occupations are home health aides and housekeeping cleaners; examples of medium-skilled female-dominated occupations are secretaries and administrative assistants; and examples of high-skilled female-dominated occupations are elementary school teachers and registered nurses.\(^\text{27}\) The share of women working in an occupation appears directly correlated to pay. A compelling study of 50 years of U.S. workforce data found when there is an influx of women into a previously male-dominated profession, average wages for the occupation decrease.\(^\text{28}\)

—Prepared by Megan Lane


\(^{27}\) Ibid., p. 8–10.

Additional Resources


