



Americans for Democratic Action

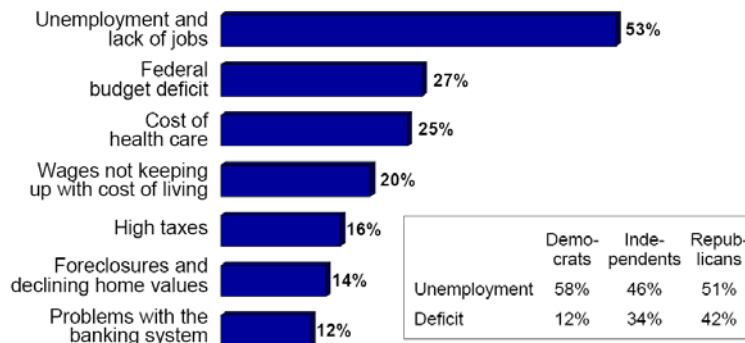
FIRST FRIDAY REPORT

Friday, March 5, 2010

AN IMPERCEPTIBLE RECOVERY

Today's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) report lists **the officially measured unemployment rate as 9.7% for February 2010**, showing a statistically insignificant improvement in the job market. However, this figure discounts the actual number of people who are out of work and actively seeking fulltime employment. The new data also indicates that 8,791 Americans were working part-time last month because they were unable to find full-time jobs and additional 2,527 had given up looking for work. In addition, 5.2% of the employed work more than one job in order to support themselves and their families. As shown in the following graph, in September 2009, 53% of Americans thought that unemployment and jobs were the most important economic problems facing the country, far ahead of other issues like the federal budget deficit and taxes. Today, six months later and with the job market still in the doldrums, the urgency of unemployment would undoubtedly rate even higher.

Which one or two of these are the most important economic problems facing the country?



Jobs & the Economic Recovery: Voters' Survey – Sept. 2009 – Hart Research for EPI

The “real” jobless rate of 16.8%--which takes into account part-time workers desiring full-time employment and discouraged job seekers--is a more accurate indicator of the

challenges of the labor market.¹ In a strong economy there is on average a four-point difference between the official and unofficial rates, but during a recession this gap grows. This is because as the labor market weakens; workers accept whatever jobs are available. Highly qualified applicants take entry level positions, making it harder for less qualified applicants to find work. Thus, the number of underemployed and discouraged workers increases and will continue to do so (if history is any judge), even after the official unemployment rate begins to decline.

Employment and Women: Behind the Numbers

The fact that women face a lower unemployment rate (8.6%) as compared to men (10%), may seem like reason to celebrate both for what it says about strides made by women in the workplace, and as an indicator of better times ahead. After all, if women are finding jobs, can opportunities for men be far behind? But a look behind the numbers demonstrates what gender and employment really means.

First; the female unemployment rate, while lower than that for men, is still alarmingly high and represents real economic pain for women across America. Secondly, the figure for women is influenced by both historic and current relationships with the labor market that differs from the male experience.

Over the years, women have come to represent an ever larger part of the total labor force, while their unemployment rate has trended downward². In fact, women were more often victims of unemployment than men until fairly recently. Only since the 1980s have women enjoyed greater job security (figure 1); a discrepancy which has grown in the current recession (figure 2).



Figure 1
Source: BLS

¹ This statistic is known as U-6 in Table A-15, *The Employment Situation—February, 2010*, BLS report;

² Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Women in the labor force: a databook (2009 Edition)*, Table 7. *Employment status of women by presence and age of youngest child, March 1975-2008*

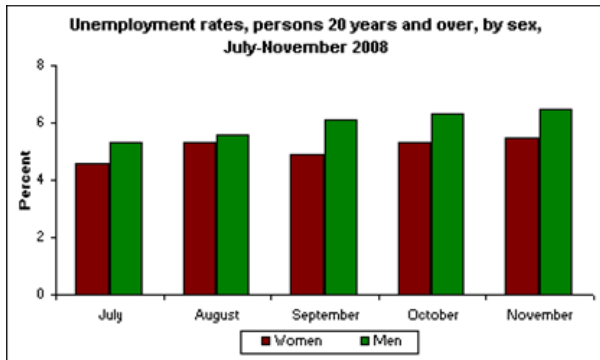


Figure 2
Source: BLS

This discrepancy is explained in part by continuing **differences in the employment profiles of men and women and the jobs they hold**. Over the past 30 years—and especially in the current downturn—the blue-collar manufacturing and construction jobs dominated by men have borne the biggest brunt of the economic downturn. Professional and office workplaces, where the majority of women are employed, have fared comparatively better³ (figure 3). But women are not immune from unemployment, as the current recession proves.

Also worth noting is that **almost half of the female civilian population is not part of the labor force**⁴. How many women are “stay-at-home moms” for economic rather than personal reasons is hard to measure, but historic gender roles add an element of uncertainty when measuring female employment.

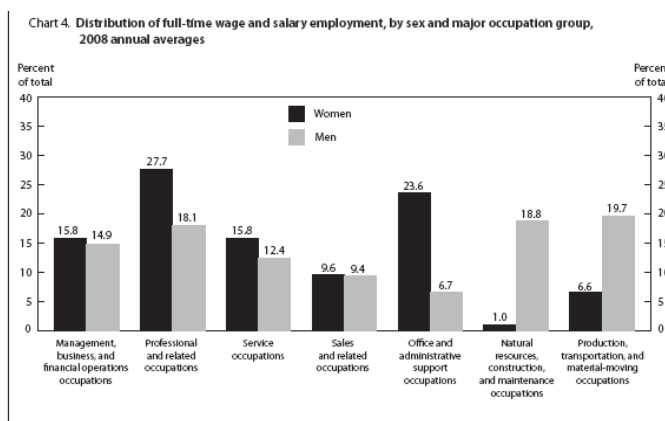


Figure 3
Source: BLS

As for lower unemployment indicating structural gains for women at work, it’s important to remember that women still face significant hurdles in achieving a balance of

³ Center for American Progress, Figure “The recession by gender, Employment in December 2007” http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/09/august_gender_interactive.html

⁴ BLS, Labor force statistics from the current population survey

motherhood and work, equal opportunities for promotion, as well as pay equity⁵ (figures 4 and 5).

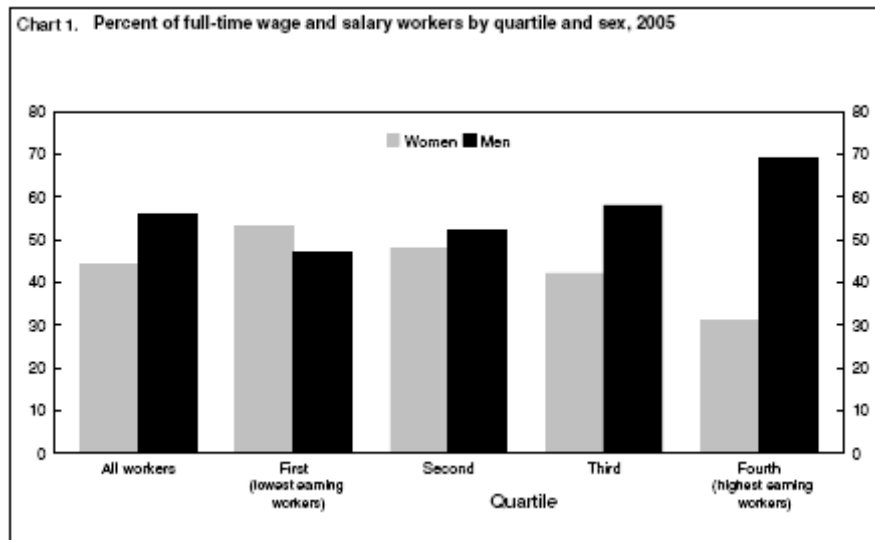


Figure 4

Source: US Department of Labor and BLS, March 2006 “Women still underrepresented among highest earners”

None of this diminishes the fact that working women have made tremendous progress in recent decades. A recent study found that “70% of men today are comfortable having women work outside of home, and 75% of Americans view the rise of women in the work place as a positive development for society.” But even though “women are more likely than men to graduate from college, are running more than 10 million businesses with combined annual sales of \$1.1 trillion, and are responsible for making 80% of consumer buying decisions,” women still “earn 77 cents for every 1 dollar a man earns, and are less likely to be in leadership positions in corporate America”.⁶

The progress of women has been uneven, the gains heavily influenced by **differences in marital and motherhood status**. For instance, an unmarried women or one with a younger child is more likely to be unemployed, as shown in the figure below and other studies⁷. This is not the case for men.

⁵ Center for American Progress, “Interactive graphic: equal work without equal pay”, Heather Boushey, September 2009, http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/09/august_gender_interactive.html

CAP, “Lifetime losses: the career wage gap”, Jessica Arons, December 2008
http://www.americanprogressaction.org/issues/2008/lifetime_losses.html

⁶ The Shriver Report: a woman’s Nation changes everything”, Maria Shriver, CAP, October 2009

⁷ Center for American Progress, “The recession brings higher unemployment to unmarried women”, Lize Weiss and Heather Boushey, November 2009

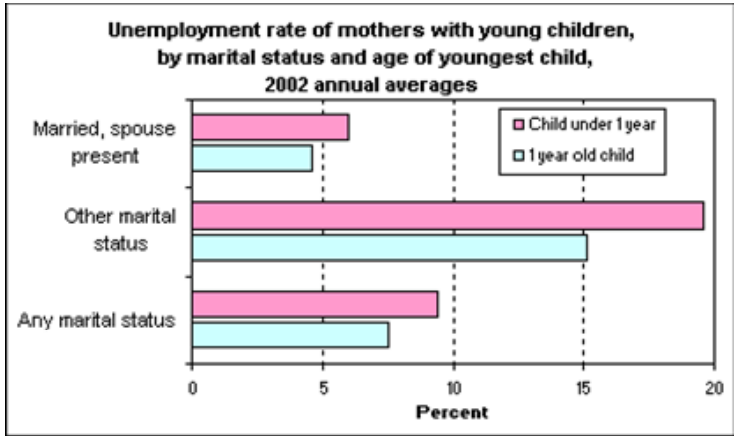


Figure 5
Source: BLS

Americans for Democratic Action continues to advocate for elimination of gender-based discrimination at the workplace. Despite the percentages that favor women in the workplace in the current economic downturn, there are **millions of women in precarious, low-wage, dead-end jobs that face economic peril every day**—peril that is heightened during the current Great Recession, but exists regardless.

Celebrating the gains made by women at work does not negate the necessity that those **gains must be shared more widely**. In addition, that expanded prosperity must be shared by women, as well as by men.