

## A Sociological Perspective on Gender and Career Outcomes

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**B**oth economists and sociologists have documented the association between gender and career outcomes. Men are more likely than women to participate in the labor force, and men average more hours of paid labor per week and more weeks per year. Women and men tend to hold different occupations and to work in different industries, firms and jobs. Furthermore, men outearn women, hold more complex jobs and are more likely to supervise workers of the other sex and to dominate the top positions in their organization.

The challenge for both disciplines lies not in showing that gender is linked to employment outcomes, but in explaining the associations. Economists have sought explanations in the characteristics and preferences of *individual workers* or *employers*. Some have attributed the associations between workers' sex and their career outcomes to sex differences in training and experience, career commitment or competing demands on time and energy. Others focus on employers' preferences for workers of one sex over the other ("taste discrimination") or on employers' beliefs that workers of one sex or the other are more costly or less profitable to employ ("statistical discrimination").

The sociological approach differs from that of economists in recognizing sex segregation as a causal mechanism that gives rise to other differences between women's and men's careers. This emphasis on segregation reflects sociologists' interest in the ramifications of societal-level systems of *differentiation* and *stratification*. It stems also from the discipline's concern with the impact of people's location in social structures on a variety of life outcomes. By concentrating men and women in different jobs, segregation exposes them to more or less similar employment

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practices and reward systems that can, in turn, exacerbate or moderate sex differences in other work outcomes.<sup>1</sup>

## Sex Differentiation and Sex Stratification

*Social differentiation* refers to the social processes that mark certain personal characteristics as important. We differentiate people by their birth cohorts (baby boomers, “generation Xers”), the vehicles they drive, their favorite music, whether they are “cat people” or “dog people,” their marital status, sexual preference and many other traits. The practice of social differentiation is ubiquitous. Indeed, cognitive psychologists agree that the impulse to categorize others appears to originate in automatic cognitive processes that free up mental resources for other purposes (Brewer and Liu, 1989).

Sex and age are treated as relevant in assigning roles and responsibilities in multiple spheres. These characteristics are “master statuses,” central in the organization of social and economic life. Societies reinforce and even exaggerate the differences that define group membership in master statuses through sumptuary and behavioral rules. For example, in feudal societies in which people’s status as peasants or landholders shaped their whole lives, class membership was distinguished in all realms of life, including dress, prescribed activities and legal rights.

Although social differentiation does not inevitably lead to unequal treatment for members of different categories, differentiation is a necessary precursor for *social stratification*—systematic inequality in the distribution of socially valued resources on the basis of people’s personal characteristics. Stratification is consequential for the lives of individuals to the extent that the same characteristic arrays groups in the same order across many domains. All societies use sex (as well as age) to stratify their members across virtually all domains (Huber, 1999, p. 66; Collins et al., 1993). In contrast, most characteristics (for example, religious affiliation or scholarly discipline) are linked to unequal rewards in just a few domains. Thus, sex differences and stratification are fundamental social processes.

The degree of sex differentiation in an organization or society is positively related to the amount of sex stratification, according to a synthetic model based on diverse empirical evidence (Collins et al., 1993).<sup>2</sup> Pervasive sex differentiation

<sup>1</sup> A body of economic research has investigated the earnings gap between the sexes; for a summary in this journal, see Blau and Kahn (2000). Since our focus in this article is on the sociological research and on the impact of structural location in the workplace on economic outcomes, we do not discuss the earnings gap here. However, it is worth noting that in 1999, the gross earnings ratio for women and men employed full-time was .72, unadjusted for other factors (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> As Collins et al. (1993, p. 186) explain, empirical evidence underlying sociological generalizations often take a variety of forms, including ethnographic research, interviews, historical and documentary analysis, as well as standard quantitative analyses. The diverse types of evidence on which sociological generalizations are based—perhaps especially true in the area of gender stratification—is another difference between sociological and economic approaches to gender and careers.

signals that people's sex is always relevant. Also, belief systems that justify pervasive sex differentiation simultaneously legitimate sex stratification. These belief systems hold that males are more valuable than females and that customarily male activities are more worthwhile than customarily female activities (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin, 1999; Cohen and Huffman, 2003). Although the extent of sex stratification varies, comparative historical research indicates that no societies accord advantage to women over men; most accord advantage to men across multiple indicia of social and economic well-being (Huber, 1999; Tilly, 1998). In the United States today, predominantly male lines of work display the most sex inequality.

## Sex Differentiation and the Sexual Division of Labor

All societies categorize their members by their sex. From individuals' biological sex, we infer personality traits, preferences and potential. These sex based inferences are sex stereotypes. Stereotypes matter because they are generally known and prescribe appropriate behavior. Moreover, all societies exaggerate biological differences between the sexes by prescribing different dress, comportment and tastes. As a result, in a face-to-face interaction, we are rarely in doubt regarding the other person's sex. By overstating biological sex differences, sex differentiation lends legitimacy to women's and men's concentration in different activities (Padavic and Reskin, 2002).

A primary manifestation of sex differentiation in activities is the sexual division of labor. In the broadest sense, men specialize in and are primarily responsible for market work, and women specialize in and are primarily responsible for domestic work. Within market work, a sexual division of labor also exists that distributes the sexes differently across work settings and assigns to them different tasks. Sociologists refer to this sexual division of labor in market work as *sex segregation*.

By the end of the twentieth century, the legal underpinnings of the sexual division of labor had eroded. The courts invalidated the so-called "protective" labor laws barring women from some lines of work and some working conditions, and the sex-neutral Family Medical Leave Act of 1993 recognized that male as well as female workers shared responsibility for babies and sick family members. The welfare reform bill passed in 1996 challenged the ideology that a mother's place is in the home, and many states have altered divorce laws to eliminate alimony. Nonetheless, expressions of the sexual division of labor persist. Indeed, the substantial stability with respect to which sex fills which occupations has led many occupations to be labeled as "men's" or "women's" work. This labeling of occupations as belonging to one sex or the other signals to labor market actors who should do what jobs.

The cultural consensus about which sex should do which jobs means that maintaining the sexual division of market work does not depend only on the preferences of individuals. Many workplaces have incorporated a sexual division of labor into employment structures and practices. Because work schedules often

reflect assumptions about the sex of the workforce, predominantly female jobs are far more likely than predominantly male jobs to be structured as part time. For instance, the academic tenure system assumes that assistant professors will do the work on which tenure decisions rest during the same years in which women often start their families. The sexual division of labor is also reflected in work equipment and work processes in occupations pursued primarily by one sex. For example, according to national survey data, female firefighters often cannot get firefighting gear that fits properly (Women in the Fire Service, 2003). In contrast, certain settings disadvantage men. For example, the rule that a female chaperone must be present during gynecological examinations tends to exclude male nurses in settings in which most doctors are male (Giuffre and Williams, 2000).<sup>3</sup> The more prevalent such practices are in workplaces, the greater the sex segregation.

### Sex Segregation at Work

Segregation is conceptualized and measured as the difference in two groups' percentage distributions across some set of categories. If the two groups—here, women and men—are identically distributed across each category—say, occupations—then people's sex will not be associated with the occupations they hold. On the other hand, the sexes would be completely segregated. Most researchers use the segregation index to measure sex segregation across occupations, industries, firms or jobs.<sup>4</sup> The formula for the “segregation index” (also termed the “index of dissimilarity”; Duncan and Duncan, 1955) is

$$D = \sum |(X_{fi}/X_f) - (Y_{mi}/Y_m)|/2.$$

In this equation,  $X_{fi}$  is the number of women workers in job  $i$ , divided by the total number of women workers  $X_f$ .  $Y_{mi}$  is the number of male workers in job  $i$ , divided by the total number of male workers  $Y_m$ . The absolute value of this difference, summed over all jobs and divided by two, indicates the extent of segregation. If every job were either exclusively male or exclusively female, then the index would sum to 100. If the sexes' representation in every job equaled their share of the labor force, the index would equal zero.

The most complete data available for tracking sex segregation in the U.S. labor

<sup>3</sup> Much of the evidence on this point comes from observational research and interviews. For example, a male corrections officer whom Britton (1998) interviewed said that “. . . the body armor that [prison guards] wear [is] not made for a woman. . . . It's like thirty-five pounds . . . and . . . a lot of the women are smaller, petite. Just to hold that body armor is a chore, let alone having to go in and [restrain a prisoner] with it. This stuff is made for a man.”

<sup>4</sup> For a method to compare the extent of segregation over time or across countries, see Charles and Grusky (1992).

force are Census data for detailed occupations. Occupations are artificial units constructed for the purpose of summarizing economic statistics. Segregation indices based on occupations underestimate the extent of sex segregation because each occupation includes a large number of jobs across thousands of firms, which themselves are often segregated (Peterson and Morgan, 1995).<sup>5</sup> Moderate to high levels of sex segregation indicate a strong link between workers' sex and the central aspects of their work lives: what job they hold and where they work.

For most of the twentieth century, the index of occupational sex segregation for U.S. Bureau of the Census "detailed occupations" fluctuated around 65, but between 1970 and 1990, it dropped to the low 50s, where it has remained (Jacobs, 1999; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003).<sup>6</sup> Levels of sex segregation depend on the sex composition of the applicant pool, whether hiring agents prefer either sex for a job, how free they are to act on their preferences, and how prospective workers find jobs and employers fill them (Kmec, 2003).

Female and male workers differ on their interest in performing some jobs or meeting some job requirements. They differ, on average, in their education, experience and number of hours worked (Maume, 1999). Although female and male students take the same core courses in high school, they are not identically distributed across elective courses (Brown and Corcoran, 1997). College majors are moderately segregated by sex (Jacobs, 1999). Differences in the field of the highest degree favor male college students over females in earnings, presumably partly through their effect on what jobs graduates take. In addition, men have more labor market experience than women and—for men over age 34—more seniority with their current employer (Blau, Ferber and Winkler, 2002). These differences explain about one-quarter of the earnings gap (Brown and Corcoran, 1997).<sup>7</sup>

Levels of job segregation by sex also depend on job assignment practices and promotion practices within firms. People who make job assignments sometimes take workers' sex into account. Some intentionally discriminate against one sex for certain jobs; others discriminate statistically, using sex as a proxy for productivity. Statistical discrimination is often based on sex stereotypes. Stereotypes of men as rational and women as emotional favor men for managerial positions (Kanter, 1977).<sup>8</sup> For example, law firms whose hiring criteria included traits that are stereotypically female (for example, "cooperative") hired more women than did firms whose criteria included stereotypically male traits (for example,

<sup>5</sup> For the sake of brevity, we use the term "firm" to include nonprofit and for-profit establishments.

<sup>6</sup> Because the 2000 census introduced a new scheme for coding occupations, the index of sex segregation based on 2000 census data is not directly comparable to those for earlier decades. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the index remained in the low 50s (except among Asian Americans, for whom it was considerably lower).

<sup>7</sup> In addition, the lower reservation wages of female college graduates may contribute to the pay gap (Orazem, Werbel and McElroy, 2003), in part because their reference group tends to comprise other women.

<sup>8</sup> So, too, do stereotypes of men as unwilling to work under a woman.

“competitive”) (Gorman, 2001). The sex composition of jobs and firms influences who applies and who is hired, presumably reflecting both the jobs’ sex labels and employers’ tendency to recruit through employees’ personal networks (Fernandez and Sosa, 2004). In the California savings and loan industry, to cite another example, the proportion of women already employed in a job was positively associated with the likelihood that a woman would be hired or promoted into that job (Cohen, Broschak and Haveman, 1998). In sum, whether the participants in the matching process view the job as appropriate for persons of a particular sex boosts the association between gender and people’s job or place of work.

Whether hiring agents act on their preferences depends on how much discretion they have in matching workers to jobs (Reskin, 2002). Personnel practices indulge or override employers’ preferences to the extent that they grant discretion to persons who make job assignments. Several factors constrain the discretion of hiring agents. First, if a firm’s personnel practices conceal a candidate’s sex, biases cannot influence job assignments (Wilson and Brekke, 1994). A compelling example comes from an econometric analysis that showed that the introduction of blind auditions was instrumental in opening major symphony orchestras to female players (Goldin and Rouse, 2000).

Second, objective and specific selection criteria can discourage discretion in job assignments, thus limiting the intrusion of sex biases, stereotypes or in-group favoritism (Bielby, 2000; Reskin, 2002). Thus, the specificity of the criteria; the availability of relevant, objective and consistent information for all candidates; and the extent to which the firm requires decisionmakers to use the criteria all affect the extent of segregation (Swim, Borgida, Maruyama and Myers, 1989, p. 421). Empirical research shows that the more bureaucratized personnel practices are, the weaker the link between workers’ sex and their jobs (Reskin and McBrier, 2000). Written job descriptions and prespecified criteria reduce the effect of irrelevant personal characteristics on job assignments. Publicly posted job opportunities inform those outside the “old boys” network of opportunities. Bureaucratization reduces job segregation by restricting discretion (Barnett, Baron Stuart, 2000; Konrad and Linnehan, 1995, p. 805).

Third, the extent to which allocators know that they will be held accountable for making unbiased judgments influences the likelihood of sex-based assignments (Tetlock, 1992). Accountability is most effective when allocators know they must justify their decisions to the candidates and their superiors. For instance, after the California state Personnel Board encouraged state agencies to integrate all jobs, but threatened budget cuts for agencies that failed to increase women’s presence in targeted jobs, the targeted jobs became more integrated, but the nontargeted jobs became more segregated (Baron, Mittman and Newman, 1991). In general, more bureaucratized or formalized personnel practices tend to discourage the use of discretion and create accountability along a chain of command and therefore are associated with lower levels of sex segregation (Tomaskovic-Devey, Kalleberg and Marsden, 1996).

## Sex Segregation, Jobs' Sex Composition and Unequal Rewards

There is considerable evidence that workers' sex is associated with various job rewards. Net of human capital characteristics and a variety of other control variables, men outearn women (Budig, 2002), have better benefits and more training (Knoke and Ishio, 1998) and hold more complex jobs (Maume, 1999) with more authority (Smith, 2002). In concentrating workers in predominantly one-sex jobs, sex segregation converts individual-level associations between workers' sex and their job rewards into job-level or occupational-level associations between sex composition and employment rewards. In short, the larger men's share in a line of work, the higher its rewards for workers of both sexes (Maume, 1999; Budig, 2002; Smith, 2002; Booras and Rodgers, 2003). Reflecting this association, few customarily female lines of work have attracted men, although mostly male occupations have drawn large numbers of women (Barnett, Baron and Stuart, 2000, p. 112; Wooton, 1997).

### The Effects of the Sex Composition of Jobs and Firms on the Earnings Gap

Much of the association between workers' sex and on their earnings stems not from unequal pay for men and women in the same jobs, but from the effect of jobs' or occupations' sex composition on how much incumbents earn. The higher the proportion of women in an occupation, industry, firm or job, the lower its compensation (Barnett, Baron and Stuart, 2000; Budig, 2002; Borass and Rodgers, 2003; Hertz, Tilly and Massagli, 2004).<sup>9</sup> More expensive restaurants, for example, are more likely to employ male servers, while lower-priced restaurants tend to employ women (Rab, 2001). Because pricier restaurants pay servers more, this cross-firm segregation yields higher pay on average for male servers, even if every restaurant pays its female and male servers equally.

Men as well as women earn less in predominantly female than predominantly male workplaces or jobs. A stratification perspective suggests that the negative association between proportion female workers and pay results from the cultural devaluation of predominantly female activities. A variety of research supports this interpretation. First, as the percentage of men in an occupation increases, hourly wages rise (Maume, 1999, p. 1449). Second, faculty members' relative salaries fell over time in disciplines that became more female (Bellus, 1994). Third, in addition, nurturing work—a customarily female activity—is penalized compared to otherwise equally demanding jobs (England, Reid and Kilbourne, 1996). Finally, employers and workers believe that men's work is more skilled and deserves higher pay (Steinberg, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Women also suffer wage penalties for motherhood (Budig and England, 2001) and time spent on housework (Hersch and Stratton, 1997).

### **The Effect of the Sex Composition of Jobs and Firms on the Promotion Gap**

The existence of predominately male or female jobs or firms exposes the sexes to different opportunities for advancement. Predominantly male jobs have longer ladders (the promotion paths connecting lower- and higher-level jobs) than do female jobs, so their incumbents most of whom are male work in jobs with longer ladders (Petersen and Saporta, 2004, p. 877). In addition, the rungs between the steps on ladders in predominately female jobs are closer together, so promotions yield less advancement for women than men (Barnett, Baron and Stuart, 2000). Differences in the spacing and lengths of the job ladders in male and female jobs create a mobility gap between the sexes. Men are promoted at a faster rate early in their careers when most promotions occur, but among older workers, the promotion gap narrows or disappears (Budig, 2002; Pergamit and Veum, 1999).

Qualitative research suggests the possibility that men in predominately female jobs advance more quickly than their female co-workers because their supervisors are uncomfortable with men doing customarily female jobs (Williams, 1992). However, the advancement gap between the sexes stems in part from sex composition of jobs, according to quantitative analyses showing that men in predominately female jobs are promoted more slowly than their counterparts in mixed-sex or predominantly male jobs (Budig, 2002).

### **The Effect of the Sex Composition of Jobs and Firms on the Authority Gap**

The sexes' concentration in different jobs and firms increases men's likelihood of exercising authority at work (Smith, 2002). In 2000, women were 41.5 percent of the full-time labor force, but just one-third of persons employed full time in the broad census category of "managers." The sex composition of the detailed occupations within this broad category varies widely, however. In the very top positions, women are far scarcer. For instance, seven out of every eight corporate officers at Fortune 500 firms were male (Catalyst, 2003). Reflecting this disparity, just 4 percent of the 2,500 people who numbered in the top five earners in Fortune 500 firms were female (<http://www.catalystwomen.org/research/censuses.htm#2001wbd>). Industry matters, too. Men comprised 94 percent of engineering and construction managers, but just 34 percent of medical and health service managers. As these examples suggest, women are more likely to be managers in heavily female industries (Reskin and McBrier, 2000). Analysis of a national survey of employers showed that the higher women's share of jobs in an establishment, the higher the proportion of female managers (Reskin and McBrier, 2000). One ramification of this association is that men and women usually have same-sex supervisors (Smith, 2002). Thus, moderate to high levels of segregation across firms contribute to the fact that between 50 and 70 percent of women and 60 to 90 percent of men have same-sex supervisors (Browne, Tigges and Press, 2002).

### **The Effects of Segregated Structures on Workers' Attitudes**

Sociologists and economists approach gender differences in workers' career commitment with different assumptions. Becker's (1985) formal model of the



allocation of effort accounts for gender differences in labor market outcomes solely on the basis of the job seekers' utility maximizing choices. This perspective implies that women with family responsibilities allocate less effort to their jobs than do men with similar levels of skill and labor market experience.

In contrast, sociologists assume that men's and women's concentration in different jobs or firms generate differences in their attachment to the labor force, their career aspirations and their work behavior. It is axiomatic in sociology that workers' location in social structures affects their work attitudes and behavior because location signals whether career advancement is possible, and workers react accordingly. Given sex segregation across work locations, female and male workers often get different signals regarding their career future. Based on her ethnographic analysis of a Fortune 500 corporation, Kanter (1977) concluded that the women's and men's work behaviors diverged because they were differently located in the corporation's "opportunity structure." Women's jobs were less likely to be on job ladders, their performance was less visible, and they had fewer resources and less access to power. Thus, Kanter argued that although most workers in dead-end white-collar jobs were women, anyone in such a job would lack job commitment, preferring instead to socialize with co-workers. Similarly, while men held most of the jobs on promotion ladders, both women and men in such jobs displayed career commitment and sought advancement. Kanter's conclusion that workers' location in an opportunity structure trumps gender socialization has considerable empirical support (for a review, see Williams, 1998), and most sociologists trying to explain sex differences in work attitudes and behavior now take into account workers' structural location.

The existence and direction of differences in the extent of women's and men's labor force participation are consistent with Becker's model. Women are less likely than men to be in the labor force (61 percent of women compared with 78 percent of men) and are more likely to work part time (34 percent of employed women compared with 12 percent of employed men; U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). The lack of structural supports for parents of young children, such as flexible schedules or on-site child-care,<sup>10</sup> traps many women between the demands of paid work and family work (Hays, 1996). Because women fear that the time they spend on paid jobs will be seen as signaling low commitment to their families, those who can afford to do so often work part time, according to analyses of nationally representative survey data (Sanchez and Thomson, 1997). However, the notion that women's productivity suffers from family demands is inconsistent with empirical research on how men and women allocate effort on the job. On average, employed women report investing at least as much effort in their jobs as men report doing, where effort was measured using job incumbents' self-reports of energy demands of their jobs and energy expended (Bielby and Bielby, 1988). Compared to men with

<sup>10</sup> Workers in predominantly female jobs have less flexible work schedules, less ability to set the timing of work breaks and less freedom to take time off for personal or family matters (Glass and Camarigg, 1992).

similar household responsibilities and human capital who worked in similar contexts, women allocate substantially more effort to their jobs. In other words, the work effort of women responsible for both family and paid work is the same as a typical man without family responsibilities (Bielby and Bielby, 1988).

Given the empirical support for Kanter's (1977) thesis, one might expect women to show less commitment and effort on the job because predominantly female jobs are less likely to reward such commitment and effort with pay or promotion. Early studies of job commitment found modest gender differences in attachment to the labor force. However, more analyses indicate that employed women are at least as committed as men (Marsden, Kalleberg and Cook, 1993). This convergence may reflect women's increasing opportunities in the workplace. When women and men have the same incentives to identify strongly with their jobs, their commitment levels are similar (Bielby and Bielby, 1989, 2002).

### **Implications of a Sociological Perspective for Reducing the Association between Gender and Career Outcomes**

The sociological approach to gender inequality in career outcomes outlined above suggests that the personnel practices through which workers are matched to jobs are an important locus for intervention. The extent to which firms' personnel practices foster segregated or integrated workforces often depends, however, on whether they are bound by external regulations constructed to minimize discrimination or encourage affirmative action.

Until the early 1960s, the impact of federal public policy on sex segregation was to preserve it. Congress enacted laws mandating differential treatment of the sexes and failed to pass any equal rights legislation. The federal courts sustained state and federal laws requiring differential treatment as constitutional (Reskin, 2002). In 1963, Congress took a cautious step toward mandating equal treatment for the sexes by the Equal Pay Act. The law has all but eliminated unequal pay for women and men who do the same job in the same firm. However, it may have encouraged employers who sought to pay men more than women to give the sexes different jobs or at least different job titles.

In 1964, southern congressmen who hoped to kill a pending civil rights bill added "sex" to the section of a bill banning employment discrimination by race, national origin and religion. To everyone's surprise, Congress passed the amendment including sex and the entire bill, thus outlawing employment discrimination based on sex. Specifically, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act made it illegal to "limit, segregate, or classify . . . employees in any way which would deprive or tend to deprive any individual of employment opportunities or otherwise adversely affect his status as an employee." The bill also created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to enforce the law.

Although the EEOC initially balked at addressing sex discrimination, and the

huge number of complaints of race and sex discrimination overwhelmed the Commission's limited resources, eventually a combination of Title VII, the EEOC, the federal courts and private lawsuits opened up tens of thousands of customarily male jobs to women (Reskin, 2002; Sturm, 2001).<sup>11</sup> For firms whose personnel practices (like recruiting through workers' personal networks) continue to exclude workers of one sex, workers' access to the EEOC or parallel state agencies have helped to level the playing field. For example, before being sued, most women employed at Home Depot were cashiers. Following the class-action discrimination lawsuit, Home Depot agreed to change its personnel practices, and job segregation at Home Depot has fallen (Sturm, 2001).

The other governmental restriction on sex segregation originated in Presidential Executive Order 11375. This 1967 Order both bars discrimination by federal contractors and requires contractors to take affirmative action to ensure that the sex and race distribution of their major employment categories approximates the sex and race composition of the qualified labor pool. Although enforcement of this executive order has been uneven, when enforced, however, it has reduced sex segregation among federal contractors compared to noncontractors (Konrad and Linnehan, 1995; Holzer and Neumark, 1999). The effectiveness of both Title VII and Executive Order 11375 has varied, depending, at the macro level, on the political will of the government and, at the micro level, on the ability of victims to detect and successfully challenge discriminatory hiring practices and job assignments. The latter can be difficult since unsuccessful applicants can rarely detect hiring discrimination, because they lack information about the candidate pool.

Laws bar employers from basing pay or conditions of employment on workers' sex, but do not address disparities that results from the fact that predominantly male jobs provide better rewards and opportunities than predominantly female jobs. Lawsuits that have tried to expand Title VII to cover discrimination stemming from sex composition ("comparable worth discrimination") have been unsuccessful. In the contemporary judicial climate, legal or regulatory mechanisms are unlikely to weaken the association between organizations' or jobs' sex composition and their rewards.<sup>12</sup> This means that much of the source of the link between gender and career outcomes is beyond the reach of legal remedies, except by enforcing Title VII's prohibition of sex segregation.

Other avenues for external pressures exist. For example, Asian women in California's civil service were better able, on average, than other women to avoid the penalty of working in a predominantly female occupation because they were concentrated in bargaining units whose contracts incorporated language regarding comparable worth (Barnett, Baron and Stuart, 2000, pp. 134).

<sup>11</sup> Amendments to the 1964 law have enhanced its effectiveness against large employers by providing to lawyers monetary incentives to take discrimination cases.

<sup>12</sup> The only exceptions are state laws that require state agencies to conduct job analyses to detect composition-based pay disparities for state employees and sometimes to reduce those disparities (Steinberg, 1990).

## Conclusions

Of the characteristics upon which societies differentiate and stratify their members, the most basic is sex, and a fundamental expression of sex differentiation is the sexual division of labor. Researchers have shown that more often than not, men and women are concentrated in different firms or hold different jobs within the same firm. This segregation stems in part from the difference in preferences, skills and experience that the sexes bring to the labor market. But it results as well from employers' preferences and practices. Building on this body of research on occupational segregation, sociologists have increasingly turned to surveys of establishments and case studies of firms to identify the employment practices that link workers' sex with the jobs they hold and the places they work (for example, Bielby and Baron, 1984; Fernandez, Castilla and Moore, 2000; Kanter, 1977; Peterson and Saporta, 2004; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993). This trend recognizes the importance of organizational contexts and personnel practices for producing varying levels of gender equality at work.

Two kinds of firm-level decisions matter. *Hiring* decisions can influence the amount of sex segregation *across firms*. Although a firm's decision not to hire women may not doom women to unemployment, it increases the likelihood that they will work instead at a firm that employs fewer men (and pays lower wages). The second consequential decision by firms is the jobs to which new or existing workers are assigned. Decisions about *job assignments*, which occur at hiring or promotion, and about transfers and layoffs set the level of sex segregation *across jobs* within a firm. Some large firms, for example, hire applicants regardless of their sex, but take it into account in job assignments. The men that department stores hire are usually assigned to sell furniture, shoes or men's clothing, whereas women are assigned to sell cosmetics, women's and children's clothing or housewares.<sup>13</sup> Hiring workers regardless of their sex, but using their gender in making job assignments, maintains job segregation within firms, while lowering across-firm segregation.

Sociologists have stressed sex segregation because it is a central mechanism linking individuals' sex to unequal career rewards. But sociologists have no monopoly on this insight. As economists Blau and Ferber (1987, p. 51) observed, "Once men and women are channeled into different types of entry jobs, the normal everyday practices of the firm will virtually ensure sex differences in productivity, promotion opportunities, and pay." Employment practices that link workers' sex to the firms that employ them or the jobs they hold engenders disparate economic opportunities and outcomes between women and men. Firm- and job-level sex segregation gives rise to disparate outcomes for women and men, at least partly

<sup>13</sup> Notice, too, that the level of job segregation depends on the level of firm segregation. If the firms in some labor market were completely segregated, then one cannot calculate a job segregation index, although it is implicitly 100. If the firms were perfectly integrated (that is, workers were employed in each firm in proportion to their share of the labor force), then job segregation within each firm could vary from zero to 100.

because of the devaluation of predominantly female jobs (England, Reid and Kilbourne, 1996; Barnett, Baron and Stuart, 2000, p. 127). In sum, a variety of gender-linked work outcomes arise primarily from the *sex composition of jobs and firms* rather than the sex of individual workers. The more similarly the sexes are distributed across positions within a firm and the more evenly they are distributed across firms, the more likely women and men are to enjoy equal opportunity and equal rewards.

Sex segregation across jobs reflects the long-standing association between workers' sex and their careers, and it is the primary mechanism through which workers' sex is associated with other career outcomes, such as earnings, job authority and promotion chances. Title VII outlawed segregation *within* firms, but litigation and enforcement actions have been confined to a few industries. And Title VII does not address sex segregation *across* firms or industries, although there is considerable establishment-level segregation (Peterson and Morgan, 1995).

Within some firms, women and men are becoming more equal. Growing evidence indicates that formalizing hiring and job-assignment practices curtails bias. The pay gap between the sexes has narrowed over the last 25 years. Sex segregation across occupations declined from 1970 until 1990, after which it has changed little. Although we do not have time-series data on sex segregation within or across firms to monitor trends (Tomaskovic-Devey, Kalleberg and Marsden, 1996), as long as women and men remain segregated at work and our culture devalues women's work, paid jobs will provide higher payoffs and more opportunities for men than for women.

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