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Still Earning Less

By Mary Ann Mason

Consider a few facts: Women are now half of all workers on U.S. payrolls; there is no longer a clear timeline for marriage and childbirth; and a record 40 percent of children born in 2007 had unmarried mothers. Those figures are from a recently published study, led by Maria Shriver, called "The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Changes Everything."

The study also found that nearly two-thirds of women are either the main breadwinners or co-breadwinners in their families. Nonetheless, they still earn less than men, while handling more than their fair share of caregiving responsibilities at home.

My contribution to "The Shriver Report" focused on higher education. Does it prepare women to become breadwinners? The good news is that women today receive 62 percent of associate degrees, 57 percent of bachelor's degrees, 60 percent of master's degrees, half of all professional degrees (including law and medicine), and just under half of all Ph.D.'s

Now for the bad news: Our economy is increasingly dependent on workers skilled in advanced technology, but at each education level, from K-12 onward, structural barriers discourage women from entering into the challenging, and much higher-paid, fields of science, technology, engineering, and math.

Women are diverted from such fields at each stage of their education. In K-12, girls receive less encouragement than boys in math and science. In high-school programs, they are channeled into certain service professions, like hair styling rather than computer repair. At the undergraduate level, women are clustered in education and health programs, while men dominate engineering and the physical sciences.

In graduate school, the segregation is even more pronounced, and fewer women still go on to careers in academic science. Even in professional schools like medicine, with gender parity in admissions, women are far more likely to train in the lower-paying specialties of primary care. At every level, the American educational system is failing young women by encouraging them to take a route that leads to lower pay, a route that will eventually limit them in providing for their families.

Once a woman has chosen a career, whether traditional or not, inflexible workplace policies can exacerbate gender inequalities. In higher education, if they pursue advanced degrees, such as a Ph.D., an M.D., or an M.B.A., women find that their institutions probably do not support them in starting a family even if they are in their 30s, their chief reproductive years. That discovery causes many women to turn away from their original career goals and seek less demanding career tracks.

After completing their education, whether it is a bachelor's or a graduate degree, many women enter the work force only to find that their employers do not offer support systems that allow women and men to balance challenging career and family obligations while rising to positions of leadership and higher pay. Instead, most workplaces still maintain the structure established in the 19th century, when husbands worked full time and never had to consider taking time off to care for a family member, because they had wives at home to attend to such matters. Under that model today, workers are penalized for working less than full time, or for taking a break from their jobs to care for their families.

Even as women have increasingly become breadwinners, however, they have not abdicated their role as family caregivers. Our research shows that the second shift is alive and well in academe. From the graduate student through the faculty ranks, academic mothers routinely put in 15 or more hours a week than fathers do. Other studies show that this pattern crosses all workplaces.

As a result, women bear the brunt of antiquated work policies. Unfortunately, here in the United States, one of the few industrialized countries that does not routinely offer paid family leave, there are few workplaces, whether scientific laboratories or retail stores, that have strong incentives to create flexible family-leave policies. Denied flexibility, many women are also denied raises and promotions, with the wage gap widening as a result.

Although women have narrowed that wage gap nationally, they still earn only about 78 cents to the dollar earned by men for the same work. That average can vary widely by field. Women in sales occupations earn just 64.8 percent of men's wages in equivalent positions. At the higher end of the wage scale, female corporate executives earn 72 cents to the dollar earned by men; female partners in law firms, 68 cents; and female doctors, 59 cents.

When compared with men's pay at the same level of educational attainment, women's pay is even more unequal: Women earn only 67 cents to their male counterparts' \$1. That difference remains steady at every level of education.

The discrepancy between men and women is even more skewed at the top power positions. Only 9 percent of the members of the National Academy of Science are women, only 8 percent of the nation's top corporate managers, and only 5 percent of managing partners in large law firms. In Congress, female senators and representatives account for only 17 percent of their chambers' membership. Without equal representation in positions of power, we as a society have less will to make the structural changes that would allow women to achieve equity in education and in the workplace.

Simply opening the door to higher education has not allowed women to achieve gender equity in the work force. Education does lead to higher incomes for women, but female breadwinners will continue to take home less than their male counterparts until educational segregation is eliminated and workplaces adopt flexible policies.

The hopeful news is that the educational system may finally be poised for change. Women now represent over 50 percent of the American work force. As women become equal in numbers and take on more leadership positions, traditional workplace policies may be revised to allow for alternate career ladders.

We have seen significant changes among institutions of higher education in the past 10 years, and many corporations have gone further. And our existing gender-equity laws, particularly Title IX, are being looked at in new ways. President Obama and others have urged equitable enforcement of Title IX as a tool to level the playing field for women in math and science, much as it has done in sports. But women themselves must realize their responsibilities and make appropriate career choices—ones that will give them breadwinner capacity.

In our studies, women rarely imagine themselves to be primary breadwinners, even when they are. The myth of the male breadwinner dies hard, but it is just a myth.

Mary Ann Mason is a professor and co-director of the Berkeley Law Center on Health, Economic & Family Security and the author (with her daughter, Eve Ekman), of Mothers on the Fast Track. She writes regularly on work and family issues for our Balancing Act column, and invites readers to send in questions or personal concerns about those issues to careers@chronicle.com or to mamason@law.berkeley.edu.