Career Aspirations of Women in the 20th Century

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ABSTRACT

Women have increasingly become more involved in the workforce following World War II. Paid employment of women has shifted from primarily traditional female-oriented jobs to more non-traditional, and previously male-oriented careers. Women's participation in the workforce has lead to the study of career aspirations of women. Career aspirations are influenced by factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, race, parents' occupation and education level, and parental expectations. This review of literature presents an overview of women's participation in the workforce and the progress of women's career development and career aspirations in the latter half of the 20th century.

INTRODUCTION

At various times throughout history, working women were viewed as immoral and unfeminine objects of pity. Some critics accused working women of being negligent mothers. Frequently, women employees were not taken seriously by their bosses, colleagues, or society (Nieva & Gutek, 1981). Having a career posed challenges for women due to their family responsibilities (Valdez & Gutek, 1987). Women were expected to perform duties as wife and mother, in addition to fulfilling their professional responsibilities. Some women experienced feelings of guilt or selfishness if they put their career interests first (Heins, Hendricks, & Martindale, 1982). Because women's work and family demands were simultaneous, these demands had a significant impact on women's careers (Valdez, & Gutek). As stated by Heins et al., "Achieving professional status may be more difficult for women than for men" (p. 455).

Despite their increasing numbers, women have tended to enter the workforce in lower-status, lower-paying jobs, and remain clustered in a limited number of conventional careers (Tinklin, Croxford, Ducklin, & Frame, 2005). Low-paying traditionally female careers, including administrative support, sales, service, nursing, teaching, social work, and clerical jobs, reflected society's persistent attitudes regarding stereotypical occupational roles for males and females (Rainey & Borders, 1997; Sellers, Satcher, & Comas, 1999; Stephenson & Burge, 1997; Watson, Quatman, & Elder, 2002). Because women's career choices were restricted, their earnings lagged behind their male counterparts with comparable education and experience (Farmer, 1985; Stephenson & Burge). Income earnings have been found to increase with educational level and years employed (Day & Newburger, 2002). However, women earned roughly two-thirds the income of their male counterparts. This discrepancy in income was partially attributed to the disparity between traditionally male and traditionally female occupations. For example, women are less likely to be employed in science or engineering jobs, as these are considered traditionally male occupations. However, females who are employed in these jobs earn roughly 20% less their male counterparts (Graham & Smith, 2005). Factors narrowing women into traditional role occupations included social and familial influences, a lack of awareness regarding nontraditional options, an unwelcoming environment in many male-dominated fields, discrimination within career fields, high turnover rates for women, and less seniority in given occupations. These factors also contributed to earning gaps between men and women (Stephenson & Burge).

Women's Participation in the Workforce

The view of a woman's role in the workforce has changed significantly throughout time. Historically, society believed a woman's place was in her home, caring for her husband and children, as opposed to the workplace. Valued feminine traits such as a meek nature and submissiveness were feared to be lost if women entered the workforce (Astin, 1984; Nieva & Gutek, 1981). The earliest cases of women working outside the home date back before the Industrial Revolution. Women commonly assisted their husbands with maintaining the family or acted as a business partner, although they often received no pay. If they were paid for their work, women earned less than their male counterparts (Nieva & Gutek).

Eventually, women began extending their work outside the home in the form of domestic and other jobs such as clerical workers. The integration of women into the workforce was a slow process and was often viewed unfavorably by society (Nieva & Gutek, 1981). Although some women were beginning to experience life in the workforce, they were frequently regarded as temporary employees. Their jobs were expected to take second place next to marriage and childbearing (Gutek & Larwood, 1987; Tinklin et al., 2005). By the middle of the nineteenth century, more women became involved in teaching, nursing, and clerical work. These jobs were perceived as feminine, and society deemed them appropriate for single women (Nieva & Gutek).

In 1890, less than 3% of married women worked outside the home. By 1900, 25% of all women were participants in the labor force. This percentage gradually rose over the next decade, and by 1910, nearly 7.5 million women worked outside the home. These numbers remained fairly stable until the beginning of World War II (Nieva & Gutek, 1981). The onset of World War II sparked a sharp increase in labor participation among women. In addition to the typically female-oriented jobs, women were hired for skilled jobs and union jobs, positions which were previously unavailable to them (Nieva & Gutek).

Following World War II, women continued to enter the workforce in growing numbers, regardless of their marital or parental status (Rainey & Borders, 1997; Watson et al., 2002). Labor market participation among women increased from 30% in 1950 to more than 50% in 1980 (Astin, 1984; Farmer, 1985; Stephenson & Burge, 1997). By the late 1970s, nearly 50% of all married women and 40% of all women over age 16 were working (Nieva & Gutek, 1981). However, they still viewed employment as secondary to their domestic responsibilities (Tinklin et al., 2005). In 1990 approximately 57 million adult women ages 16 and older were in the paid workforce (Rainey & Borders; Watson et al.). Despite a brief stall in the early 1990s, women's workforce participation rates were on the rise once again by 1994 (Hayghe, 1997).

By the mid-1990s, approximately 46% of the American workforce was female (Stephenson & Burge, 1997). Such large numbers of working women defied the traditional stereotype of the stay-at-home housewife and breadwinning husband, which characterized only 7% of American families in the mid-1990s (Jalilvand, 2000; Stephenson & Burge; Tinklin et al., 2005). An estimated 48% or approximately 72 million of the labor force will be comprised of women by the year 2005 (Rainey & Borders, 1997; Stephenson & Burge; Tinklin et al.; Watson et al., 2002). In fact, Fullerton, Jr. (1999) projected a continued rise in women's workforce participation through the year 2015. Nieva and Gutek (1981) credited the increase in women's employment rates to more favorable attitudes toward working women, longer life expectancies, changing marriage patterns, and improvements in and acceptance of birth control methods. Today, there is no longer much question whether women will participate in the workforce. In addition, working women are no longer considered deviations from the norm, but rather they are the norm (Rainey & Borders).

Barriers to Women's Workforce Participation

A barrier is any obstacle that prevents forward movement or any event or condition that makes career progress difficult (Brown & Barbosa, 2001). Swanson and Woitke (1997) indicated barriers partially explain the gap between the abilities of women and their achievements, or these barriers could explain the inhibitions of women's career aspirations. Barriers are significant factors in the career development process, and the onset of such barriers frequently begins when women are children. Barriers are reinforced throughout women's schooling, college, and work, and they become more complex over time (Brown & Barbosa; Stephenson & Burge, 1997). Swanson and Woitke acknowledged barriers could be overcome, although successfully conquering a barrier depended on the type of specific barrier and the individual's personality.

Women often perceive barriers and role conflicts as obstacles in their career development process (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Brown & Barbosa, 2001; Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001; Stitt-Gohdes, 1997). Common barriers faced by women included sex-typing of occupations and sex discrimination, both of which women felt they were unable to control (Stitt-Gohdes). Inadequate occupational skills, poor academic achievement, and lack of transportation were also found to be major reasons women failed to succeed in the workforce. Childcare was another issue women saw as a potential barrier to career success (Brown & Barbosa; Stitt-Gohdes). Despite these perceptions by women, findings from recent studies revealed that females showed an interest in a greater number of careers and exhibited more gender-role flexibility in their career aspirations than males (Francis, 2002; Mendez & Crawford, 2002; Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000).

Female Heads of Household

The number of single parent families headed by women rose from 11% in 1970 to 16% in 1985 (Stephenson & Burge, 1997). As a result, many women needed to work to support their families. Farmer (1985) estimated one-half of the women in the labor market were single heads of households due to divorce, separation, or widowhood. Statistics showed these women earned considerably lower

salaries compared to men with similar training, meaning a large number of these women and their families lived below the poverty level (Farmer; Stephenson & Burge).

Career Aspirations of Women in the 20th Century

Gutek and Larwood (1987) defined a career as "a series of related jobs within an organization or different jobs within various companies" (p. 9). Career development refers to the many jobs a person holds, and it should represent progress, whether through increased recognition or salary, or the respect one receives from colleagues. The more a person's career progresses in this manner, the more he or she will be judged successful (Gutek & Larwood).

Career aspirations represent an individual's orientation toward a desired career goal under ideal conditions. More simply stated, career aspirations "provide information about an individual's interests and hopes, unfettered by reality" (Hellenga, Aber, & Rhodes, 2002, p. 200; Rojewski, 1996). Adolescence would be an ideal time to study the career development of young women, as many changes occur during this time that strongly influence the formation of career aspirations and preferences (Watson et al., 2002).

Factors Influencing Women's Career Aspirations

Career aspirations are influenced by factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, race, parents' occupation and education level, and parental expectations (Khallad, 2000; Watson et al., 2002). Researchers examine such factors to determine their role in career behavior and how they affect individuals' career decisions (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996; Rojewski & Yang, 1997). In recent years there has been an increased awareness of the impact of socioeconomic status, race, gender, and on the career decision-making process and career development (Stitt-Gohdes, 1997).

Gender influences. Osipow and Fitzgerald (1996) stated, "Gender is clearly one of the most powerful of all influences on vocational behavior" (p. 63). In the past, fewer occupational choices were available to women due to factors such as sexism, discrimination, and limited education. Studies on gender and career aspirations in the 1970s revealed girls had more restricted career aspirations than boys, and girls often opted for a narrow range of occupational categories (Looft, 1971a; Mendez & Crawford, 2002; Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000). Additionally, Heins et al. (1982) reported that families often encouraged the educational and career aspirations of male children but not those of female children. Thus, not only did sex differences in career aspirations develop early in childhood, girls appeared to learn quickly that certain adult statuses were available to them, reflecting societal sex-role expectations (Looft, 1971b).

Replications in the 1980s of earlier studies showed girls had broadened their career preferences, yet their expectations for career attainment remained low, especially for high status, traditionally male jobs (Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000). Recent studies refuted earlier findings and asserted that females demonstrated an interest in a greater number of careers and displayed more gender-role flexibility in their career aspirations than males (Francis, 2002; Mendez & Crawford, 2002). Jones and Womble (1997) revealed that female secondary students had more positive attitudes toward work than males. However, Watson, et. al. (2002) noted adolescent females were more conflicted between their future careers and commitment to marriage and family.

Occupational status and educational level of parents. The occupational status and educational level of females' parents have had a significant impact on their career aspirations and career choice (Burlin, 1976). Wahl and Blackhurst (2000) indicated children's career aspirations were more closely related to parental occupations. Among adolescent females in particular, career choice was strongly influenced by the mother's occupation (Burlin; Wahl & Blackhurst). The mother's occupation was credited with impacting children's aspirations because children often attended work with their mothers and were more likely to know what their mothers did for a living. Likewise, Burlin (1976) deduced career choices and aspirations in females were significantly predisposed by the mother's type of work. In an early study of college women, Burlin determined daughters of working mothers chose a life pattern comparable to their mothers more often than life patterns comparable to their fathers. Burlin's findings reiterated the importance of mothers as role models in the development of their daughters' career goals and aspirations. Similarly, Signer's and Saldana's (2001) study found the social status of mothers' occupations, as opposed to the social status of fathers' occupations, had a stronger correlation with the social status of female students' career aspirations. The researchers attributed this finding to the fact that mothers exhibit a greater presence in many homes.

Parents' educational level has been positively related to aspirations of youth (Mau & Bikos, 2000). Burlin (1976) stated that both parents' education level wielded a strong influence on career choices of their daughters. Signer and Saldana (2001) noted the positive relationship between adolescent females' career aspirations and their mothers' educational achievement. Jones and Womble

(1998) found that students whose mothers completed either a two-year or four-year postsecondary degree had higher perceptions of work and career-related issues.

Women's education gains in the workplace. Research supports the idea that the more education a woman receives, the more likely she is to engage in paid employment (Nieva & Gutek, 1981; Schiffler, 1975). Increases in post-secondary enrollment among females have been the result of changing roles and expectations of women in society and a growing interest among women in professional careers (Bronstein, Black, Pfenning, & White, 1987; Tinklin et al., 2005). Over a 31-year period from 1970 until 2001, women have steadily become the majority of the undergraduate population in degree-granting institutions in the U.S. (Peter & Horn, 2005). Even though women's enrollment in postsecondary education is expected to comprise 57% of the undergraduate population by 2013, their incomes continued to be lower than their male counterparts. This is especially true for men employed in fields that are traditionally less female-oriented, including mathematics, science, and engineering (Peter & Horn, 2005). While men earned the majority of professional and doctorate degrees, women earned more degrees than men overall (Troumpoucis, 2004).

A woman's educational level has also been a strong predictor of the number of years she will be employed. With more women choosing majors that require continuous employment, women are extending their participation in the workforce (Nieva & Gutek). In addition, women themselves have tended to associate a postsecondary degree with success and increased salary, thus perceiving a greater payoff to pursuing postsecondary education than men (Troumpoucis, 2004).

Race. Race refers to a subgroup of individuals who share a distinct combination of physical attributes and genetic origin (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996). Results of studies examining the effects of race on career aspirations have been mixed (Mau & Bikos, 2000). Hellenga et al. (2002) noted that previous research typically found African Americans to possess lower career aspirations than their European American counterparts. Osipow and Fitzgerald (1996) supported this notion, stating African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans exhibit considerably lower educational and occupational outcomes than Caucasians. Further studies asserted people from minority groups, especially those from lower class backgrounds, had more limiting factors influencing their career aspirations compared with Caucasian persons from lower class backgrounds (Farmer, 1985; Gottfredson, 1981). In contrast, a study conducted by Arbona and Novy (1991) determined there were no ethnic differences with regard to their career aspirations.

Socioeconomic status. Although few studies exist regarding effects of socioeconomic status on career choice, researchers agree socioeconomic status influences career choice (Gottfredson, 1981; Sellers et al., 1999). Mau and Bikos (2000) cited previous findings showing a positive association between a family's socioeconomic status and aspirations. Youth from higher socioeconomic statuses were more likely to be knowledgeable of and choose professional occupations (Sellers et al.). In contrast, Brown and Barbosa (2001) found career aspirations of young females who came from low-income families were confined to experiences of their relatives and friends. Influential siblings are thought to play a key role in the career development of adolescents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Ali, McWhirter, & Chronister, 2005).

Herr and Cramer (1996) stated socioeconomic status affects information about work, work experience, and occupational stereotypes, which influences vocational interests. Studies show a positive association between high school students' aspirations and their family's socioeconomic status, which is frequently related to parental education levels (Mau & Bikos, 2000; Signer & Saldana, 2001). Trusty (2002) indicated that a low socioeconomic status resulted in reduced and unrealized expectations. Additionally, socioeconomic status had a direct effect on unequal aspirations and expectations. Compared with middle and upper class individuals, lower class individuals faced more obstacles that limited their career aspiration levels (Gottfredson, 1981; Farmer, 1985). Regardless of socioeconomic status, Stitt-Gohdes (1997) stressed that the career aspirations of all individuals are important in the career development process.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Despite the fact that women represented almost half of the workforce in the 1990s, they were still clustered in 20 of 400 occupational categories and 70% of female secondary CTE students were preparing for low-wage jobs (LeBrenton & Loevy, 1992). These statistics, coupled with the findings of research on self-esteem and identity formation, mandates included in the Carl D. Perkins Act, motivated renewed emphasis on the creation of an environment in which individuals consider career options and make career choices based on their abilities rather than on stereotypes and expectations (Nash, 1991). A set of issues accompanied the renewed interest in gender equity, including attitudes and stereotypes, sexual harassment, equity and males, learning and communication styles, and accountability.

The most important issue, however, appeared to be that of how gender equity could be achieved (Robin, Flansburg, & Eisenberg, 1992). CTE has been traditionally characterized as gender biased in favor of males (Wonacott, 2002). Unfortunately,

gender bias has still been evident in CTE in areas such as program enrollment, level and quality of classes available in traditionally male and traditionally female CTE programs, and wages earned by female versus male graduates. Such disparities have limited females' access to the benefits of CTE (Wonacott). An annotated bibliography of 15 print resources for vocational educators interested in accelerating gender equity in education and work was published regarding issues related to gender equity in career and technical education (Kerka, 1993).

CONCLUSION

Women's career aspirations have evolved steadily during the twentieth century, resulting in their increased workforce participation rates. A multitude of factors have influenced and inhibited women's career aspirations and career development over the years (Nieva & Gutek, 1981). The types of careers women choose and factors influencing their choices are relevant issues to examine, especially since most research reveals women continue to work in lower-paying, traditionally female-oriented jobs (Rainey & Borders, 1997; Watson et al., 2002). Continued research on the lifelong processes of women's career aspirations and career development is necessary to explain their unique occupational paths (Rainey & Borders, 1997; Schoon, 2001). Of equal importance is the need to study female adolescents in the early stages of career development, as aspirations are often crystallized during this time (Hellenga et al., 2002; Rainey & Borders). It is necessary to continue studying the career interests and career development processes of women, as they will remain an important sector of America's workforce (Gutek & Larwood, 1987). Gaining insight into career aspirations and career interests may also be useful in expanding career options available to young women (Rainey & Borders).

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