

This is the pre-peer reviewed version of the following article: "Why Do Most Women Take and Keep Only Low-paying Jobs? What Should be Done?" Rowe, Mary. *Business and Society Review* Vol. 5 (1973): 55-60, which has been published in final form by Wiley. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Use of Self-Archived Versions.

WHY DO MOST WOMEN TAKE AND
KEEP ONLY LOW-PAYING JOBS?
WHAT SHOULD BE DONE? (1972)

Draft of an Article for the
Business and Society Review

No 5 (Spring 1973) pp 55-60

Republished in
Corporate Social Policy edited by
Heilbroner & London, Addison Wesley
1975

Mary P. Rowe, Ph. D.
Economic Consultant

Why do most women take and keep only low-paying jobs? What should be done?

"Meeting Revised Order 4 is going to give me another ulcer--where can I find qualified women for my middle and top management jobs?"

"Something has to be done about the welfare rolls; how are we to get all those dependent women to be self-supporting? With the taxes I pay for welfare, I feel like I'm supporting two or three families!"

"Look--maybe women haven't had a fair shake; what can we do?"

Many people have an instant, simple answer to the question of why women take and keep low-paying jobs. Those with simple answers also often have clearcut feelings about both question and answer.... "Women take and keep low-paying jobs because it is their destiny to be the primary family guardians and homemakers, not to support themselves." Conversely, "Women take and keep low-paying jobs because men exploit them."

To this author the question seems extremely complex. On the one hand, 10 percent of all families are headed by women, nine out of every ten young women eventually take paid employment, nearly half of all mothers of school-age children are in the paid labor force, and more than a third of mothers of pre-school children are in the paid labor force. Clearly, American women are taking a substantial amount of responsibility for support of their families; at least a third of all American families would find it difficult to make ends meet without the salaries of working mothers. On the other hand, why do employers report difficulty in finding skilled women; why do

professional women so often choose off-line jobs and odd research specialties and where are the women to run for political office? And how bad is the situation anyway?

How Bad Is It?

- The wage gap for women--women are paid about 60 percent of men's wages across the board--has been increasing for twenty-five years. Everyone knows the striking gap between the average wages of blacks and of whites. The gap is even wider for all women than for all blacks and has been getting worse rather than better in many areas of employment.
- Women are earning proportionately fewer Ph. D. 's than in 1940 and are proportionately fewer among professional and technical workers. Education for women is far less worthwhile than for men; college-trained women earn, on the average, little more than grade-school trained men.
- The median wage for women professional and technical workers is less than 70 percent of the earnings for comparable men. Studies show persistent, in many cases illegal, wage gaps even where age, education and years of experience are controlled.
- No woman is in a top policy-making position in the military, Cabinet or Federal Budget affairs. Of the six hundred persons

named in the Pentagon Papers, not one is a woman. Women are less-well-represented in national politics and top Civil Service positions than in 1940, comprise fewer than 2 percent of top business executives, and represent a relatively (sometimes absolutely) smaller proportion in top professional positions than since before World War II.

- The facts above refer to all U. S. women. Black women, on the average, earn even less than white women and are even less likely to be financially rewarded for pursuing an education, although a fourth of all black families is headed by a woman and proportionately more black women support themselves than do white women.

Why Does the Situation Persist?

A. The Biological Explanation: Women are Less Able

A good many people believe that women are innately different from men in ways that affect their physical and psychic ability to compete for high wages and high status. Such persons believe that most women are genetically less aggressive, less competitive, or in some way genetically less able. I do not wish to spend much time on this argument because the evidence is so inconclusive. Girls are demonstrably intellectually equal to boys in school achievement through high school, at least on the basis of our imperfect yardsticks of intellectual ability and achievement. As for later

"competitiveness" and "aggressiveness," biologic evidence of sexual differences has been reviewed by several researchers in the last several years. I conclude from these studies that the overlap, or similarity, of male and female inheritance is striking. Although the least "aggressive" 5 percent of the population is likely to be female on any objective index and the most "aggressive" 5 percent is often found to be male, the area of overlap is ordinarily found to be huge. Known biological differences do not begin to explain the economic and job-status data cited above.

B. The Discrimination Argument

Many people believe women are so discriminated against as to account for their inferior economic position. There is a major discussion in the literature as to the circumstances under which an employer might find it profitable to discriminate against women, but most people believe that some discrimination some of the time is profitable in the short-run. Clearly, overt discrimination must end. Unfortunately, it is not yet universally illegal in this country to discriminate against women.

Despite the many recent damage suits won by women and court rulings forbidding discrimination, in WIN placements, for instance, other legal discrimination persists. Some states still grant husbands exclusive rights to manage community property; most permit husbands to dispose of savings without wives' consent. Widows' inheritance and Social Security rights are discriminatory in many ways. There are still no Federal laws

generally prohibiting discrimination against women in housing or public accommodations or even in education; such protection as exists is still specific to certain groups and/or certain circumstances. Married women are restricted in ability to conduct business in many states. Hundreds of State work laws restrict women's paid employment. The Federal Government has yet to withdraw a contract from an employer in violation of anti-discrimination orders. Welfare women receive very little legal protection compared with their erstwhile and present employers. The fact that most women take their husband's names (often legally required) makes job-finding much harder simply because it's difficult to find most married women in the phone book and to uncover previous educational and work histories filed under maiden names. It is also legal to maintain an entire occupation at low wages; for example, secretaries, under circumstances where effective affirmative action to ^{gender-}sex-integrate an occupation would almost certainly result in higher wages for all workers in that occupation.

While I believe all these matters to be serious impediments to women's economic equality, I do not believe they alone explain the gross disparity in incomes between the sexes. Clearly, legal impediments should be removed--in the opinion of the author via ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution--but this alone will not resolve all of women's labor problems. Illegal discrimination must also be ended but even this will not resolve all of women's labor problems.

C. Social Structure Problems in the Lives of Women

It is a frequently noted fact that most women have had their children during the years that many men acquire education and training. Pregnancy and nursing appear indeed to have been a major impediment to women's job advancement. As we consider the 1970's and 1980's, however, these two factors appear to have less and less power to interfere with women's paid employment. In the first place, the birth rate has fallen rapidly; the typical mother of the 1970's has only two children. In the second place, employers and colleges are less and less inclined to reject a visibly pregnant woman, and infant feeding has become a function that can be shared. Finally, evidence persists that women are paid inferior wages even with the same education and work record as men. Clearly, the current trend toward smaller families and maternity and paternity leaves will assist new mothers to continue their training and employment, but reproduction itself will probably not be a basic problem for employed women in the future.

The need for adequate child care arrangements is, however, a clear handicap to parental employment outside the home. As nineteenth century men left farms and crafts for industrial employment, as older children spent longer and longer hours in school, as grandparents were left behind many moves ago, mothers came to be the principal child carers of American pre-schoolers. (This apparently obvious arrangement is by no means universally obvious. The principal child carers of pre-schoolers ^{in many countries} ₁

around the world have been pre-adolescent children under the supervision of grandparents, employed parents, and other relatives and neighbors.)

In our present stage of social evolution, the state of child care should be considered very serious. The need to care for children is a principal consideration for American mothers seeking paid careers, not least because so many are single. Child care arrangements are grossly inadequate. At least 10 percent of our 0-14-year-olds are, regularly, simply left alone during parents' working hours. In probably half of two-parent families where both parents work outside the home, the parents must work staggered hours at least some of the time to care for young children and they do not satisfactorily see each other. (In hundreds of thousands of such families, the parents cannot regularly even spend nights together.) Many women are restricted to jobs near home or at home because of the need for child care; thus many women are restricted from work they want and have irregular work records because of the lack of adequate child care.

Many studies of welfare reform programs and of employee turnover have referred to the necessity for our society to provide more adequate child care. Legislation barring discrimination against (most) part-time workers, provisions by employers for released-time in child care centers, encouragement by employers of split-work arrangements and paternity leaves, will all help. Federal support of child care for poor families and for training and supervision of child care providers is, however, indispensable

if mothers are to have equal employment opportunity and children are to be adequately cared for.

The reader will doubtless recall many other "structural" difficulties in the lives of adult women workers: the need to travel with husbands who move, the desire of wives to help with husbands' entertaining, the difficulties women run into as travelling salespersons. Of all the "structural" impediments to work, in addition to reproduction and child care, probably the most serious is housework. Married women spend on the average an hour per day longer at work (in home and out of home) than married men. In homes with children, the average woman has a workweek at least nine hours longer than the average man, counting paid work, housework and commuting.

There is a demonstrable change in these patterns in industrial countries. Family life is receiving more legal support. Companies are less inclined to move families. According to the Department of Labor, men are sharing the housework more and more and reentering the lives of children. Clearly, further progress is necessary, however, for women to receive equal opportunity in employment.

D. Image: Our Discriminatory Cultural Views of Women and Men

Legal and structural equality for women will help enormously to provide for equal employment opportunity, but there are many more subtle issues involved in our images of men and women. Much imaginative research has

been conducted on this topic in recent years. Several studies of children's books and TV demonstrate the inferior lot of girls and women ("role models") in the media. The Oxford English Dictionary illustrations of words pertaining to "women," "mothers," and "women's work" have been found to be full of irrelevant derogatory images, e. g., under "work" (women's), "[her work was]... the reform of an extravagant husband "

Many a parent has come to realize how very differently he or she treats boys and girls and to muse on the effects this will have on their children's later jobs. And many psychologists and linguists are beginning to be seriously concerned about the generic use of "man" to mean "human."

Of all studies in this area, possibly the most illuminating are those which show how profoundly we equate "adult" qualities with those of adult males. Research on our images of "adults," of "men," and of "women," consistently shows that we see "adults" as independent, creative, aggressive, outgoing, dominant, assertive, self-controlled, innovative. "Men" are seen the same way. "Women," however, are conventionally seen as dependent, adaptive, submissive, quiet, passive, patient, emotional. It is very hard for a woman in our society to be simultaneously "adult" (creative and independent in paid employment outside the home) and "feminine" (patient and dependent in unpaid employment in the home). There are examples which show it can be done, but it isn't easy. And the conflict set up in women as a result of mutually exclusive goals (adulthood, conventional femininity) often results

in a deeply debilitating kind of self-hatred and/or fear of success, as Dr. Matina Horner has so lucidly described.

In the wide area of cultural discrimination against women, I would like to discuss in more detail several reasons why women find it difficult to "compete" for good jobs in the world of paid employment and in predominantly male, hierarchical, pyramidal work organizations, where only a few can reach the top.

- Our society has difficulty in determining what women are worth or even in seeing traditional women's work as "work." Most of the economy is relatively "free" ^{major} (resources move quite readily, ^{although} with ~~few~~ exceptions), and most of the economy is monetized (products and services are ordinarily exchanged for money, not for each other). In a relatively free, monetized economy, a good or service is said to be worth its "opportunity cost" (the price or wage it would bring in its next-best use). Thus a man earning about \$25,000 a year and certain fringe benefits and prestige at ITT would probably earn about that salary and benefits from the nearest competitor; otherwise, over time he would be sacked or would move. Because we rationally evaluate movable, monetized resources roughly at opportunity cost, there is a strong psychological tendency also to evaluate homemakers' services at their apparent opportunity

cost, namely, zero. The fact that the market for mothers and housewives is not really "free" (it's relatively difficult to exchange one set of services for another) and that the market is relatively nonmonetized (most housework and child care are not directly reimbursed by wages) gets lost in our thinking.

In the opinion of this author, women are even more likely to make this error than are men. Quite aside from our mythology that a good mother is "priceless," if pressed, ~~most~~^{many} men understand their wives' homemaking services to be "worth" thousands of dollars on the open market. For instance, at first glance, most men are likely to be astonished that good day care costs at least \$2,000 per child per year but, on reflection, will understand that good-quality monetized child care is worth a good deal as soon as it is paid at all. Many women, however, have difficulty in seeing themselves as bona fide working adults worth serious salaries. This point of view is formally reflected in our national accounts. The Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Department of Commerce do not count homemaking as contributing to GNP, nor as "work." Women refer to themselves as "not working" when engaged in homemaking. "I stopped work when our second child was on the way." (A woman

is probably slightly more likely to think of herself as "working" when in volunteer community activities which receive public recognition.)

In the opinion of this author, the fact that the work of many women is not directly paid or evaluated causes many women to think of themselves as having an opportunity cost of zero as well as depriving them of the experience of being evaluated at a higher rate. I think this mind set also persists sometimes even after a woman has entered the paid labor force and results in a lack of ~~ambition~~^{confidence} and initiative on her part. The lack of recognition of the value of conventional women's work also fosters illegal exploitation in paid employment in situations where women are paid lower wages for equal work. Some men believe it is "all right" to discriminate in paid employment-- "after all, women are never paid very much, are they?"-- and women lack the self-confidence to protest.

- Men and women are taught with great care not to compete with each other as adults. I would like to suggest several hypotheses as to why this might be so. I suggest that boys are carefully taught not to "fight girls" in part because aggression, competition and sexual drives are very closely linked. Allowing public, competitive, aggressive behavior between adult men and women is,

I think, very scary in a world where men and women are not supposed to be overtly attracted to each other. I believe this is one reason why adult men so readily react flirtatiously^{aggressively} or seductively when dealing with women in situations which may be seen as competitive. (This reaction is very likely to affront or insult an insecure woman but ~~may~~^{may} end the competition of insecure women.) I also believe that our conventional sexual mores (men aggressive, women passive) make analogous situations like business competition very uncomfortable when women step into the conventional male role. The woman is inevitably assumed to be mimicking "male" sexual behavior and will often arouse very primitive feelings^{including the one} that "underneath she must be a lesbian."

- ~~There~~^{Researchers suggest that there} may be another very primitive linkage between sexual behavior and business success. Men demonstrate virility; potency is directly linked to a man's ability to change appearance, to "produce," to "show off"; virility is visible and the product is tangible. Women therefore may not have exactly the same need to acquire visible status or to produce a tangible product in the world of paid work. If this hypothesis is true, then women would tend to be less interested in seeking status positions. Men, on the other hand, would be very much concerned

to keep status positions for themselves; it is disconcerting to have a woman demonstrate "virility" by acquiring visibility in business.

- In 1972 most boys are brought up by women. In 1850 men were very much more involved in the care of boys--in teaching apprentices, working with sons on the farm, teaching elementary grades. In 1850 becoming "adult" meant joining the world of men or women. Men and women often worked together for survival. The nuclear family is, however, a very different child-rearing environment, often involving only one woman and one or two children home at a time for very long periods of time.

In 1972 becoming "adult," for many men, is equated with escaping female direction and/or domination and escaping work with women.¹ I believe this is one reason why many contemporary men (and women) find it difficult to work under or even with women.

- Both men and women sense difficulty when a woman is more innovative or produces more or is paid more than a male colleague. This is especially true when a wife is more creative in the labor force and/or produces more or is paid more than

¹I am indebted to a colleague, David Warner, for pointing out that this phenomenon also applies to women brought up in too close contact with a domineering mother.

her husband, a situation which women avoid like the plague and which automatically limits the extent to which they will innovate or seek well-paying jobs. I suggest that here again there is a very primitive energy source for these feelings. Women are seen as creating life itself and as able to nurture life directly from their own beings. For many men the ability to invent, to "produce" in the process of proving virility, and to support a family is their unique gift and possibility in life. If women can reproduce and nurse and invent and produce and support a family, do they "need" men? Trained from childhood to repress emotions, I believe that a great many men find it difficult to believe and accept that they are of course really needed, interpersonally. If all the other demonstrations of "male achievement" can be performed by women, some men then feel they have lost their identities and have become obsolescent.

- In the face of many deep discomforts from male/female competition in business, I believe that many men tend unconsciously and consciously to band together against the "other," women. Only 2 percent of top business executives are women; men therefore hold power. No powerful group is ever likely to give up power gratuitously, especially since underpaying women can be profit-

able. Women therefore must compete and fight even harder than the ordinary drive for profits would dictate if they wish to gain top positions in business. Since women are socialized not to compete ^{directly} with men in the first place, the necessity for political struggle is simply an added deterrent. I believe this also helps explain why ^{some} women who have somehow "made it" may be reluctant to fight on for their sisters.

Of course there are exceptions. Women who never leave the labor force after age 18 need never wonder if their "opportunity cost" is zero. Many men and women find ways of working together in business, minimizing interpersonal competition. Men who were cared for in childhood by both men and women and who have shared real work with girls in childhood may not need to "escape" women and may readily find women to be good work companions. Men who bottle-feed and care for children, who are in touch with and enjoy their loved ones' deep need for them, are very much less likely to feel threatened with "obsolescence" as males. Secure as "needed" adults, they find it easier to support the achievements of wives and colleagues. Many men find work with women much less difficult as they grow older. Often a man will have sudden insights into his negative feelings about women colleagues and suddenly find that women are not so threatening as they once seemed. Women, in turn, often appear to gain self-confidence and initiative as they gain experience in paid employment.

Moreover, there will always be very large numbers of women and men who are deeply concerned about all interpersonal competition, not just competition between men and women. Many people of both sexes will prefer housewifery and househusbandry to business success, and many will prefer low-paying jobs which offer deep human satisfactions not obtainable from top business success. Clearly, men and women of such persuasion who are socially responsible should be encouraged to live their own lives as they will.

I believe Revised Order 4 can be complied with. More women can and will become self-supporting. Equal employment opportunity for women will someday be a fact. But until then, we must work on the tangled complex of factors which discriminate against women, not the least of which are our deepest feelings about ourselves.