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Stretched to Limit, Women Stall March to Work

By EDUARDO PORTER

For four decades, the number of women entering the workplace grew at a blistering pace, fostering a powerful cultural and economic transformation of American society. But since the mid-1990's, the growth in the percentage of adult women working outside the home has stalled, even slipping somewhat in the last five years and leaving it at a rate well below that of men.

While the change has been under way for a while, it was initially viewed by many experts as simply a pause in the longer-term movement of women into the work force. But now, social scientists are engaged in a heated debate over whether the gender revolution at work may be over.

Is this shift evidence for the popular notion that many mothers are again deciding that they prefer to stay at home and take care of their children?

Maybe, but many researchers are coming to a different conclusion: women are not choosing to stay out of the labor force because of a change in attitudes, they say. Rather, the broad reconfiguration of women's lives that allowed most of them to pursue jobs outside the home appears to be hitting some serious limits.

Since the 1960's, tens of millions of women rejiggered bits of their lives, extracting more time to accommodate jobs and careers from every nook and cranny of the day. They married later and had fewer children. They turned to labor-saving machines and paid others to help handle household work; they persuaded the men in their lives to do more chores.

At the peak in 2000, some 77 percent of women in the prime ages of 25 to 54 were in the work force.

Further changes, though, have been proving harder to achieve, stretching the daily challenge facing many mothers at nearly all income levels toward a breaking point.

"What happened on the road to gender equality?" said Suzanne M. Bianchi, a sociologist at the University of Maryland. "A lot of work happened."

Consider Cathie Watson-Short, 37, a former business development executive at high-technology companies in Silicon Valley. She pines to go back to work, but has not figured out how to mesh work with caring for her three daughters.

"Most of us thought we would work and have kids, at least that was what we were brought up thinking we would do  no problem," Ms. Watson-Short said. "But really we were kind of duped. None of us realized how hard it is."
Professor Bianchi, who studies time-use surveys done by the Census Bureau and others, has concluded that contrary to popular belief, the broad movement of women into the paid labor force did not come at the expense of their children. Not only did fathers spend more time with children, but working mothers, she found, spent an average of 12 hours a week on childcare in 2003, an hour more than stay-at-home mothers did in 1975.

Instead, mothers with children at home gained the time for outside work by taking it from other parts of their day. They also worked more over all. Professor Bianchi found that employed mothers, on average, worked at home and on the job a total of 15 hours more a week and slept 3.6 fewer hours than those who were not employed.

"Perhaps time has been compressed as far as it will go," she suggested. "Kids take time, and work takes time. The conflicts didn't go away."

Indeed, the research suggests that women may have already hit a wall in the amount of work that they can pack into a week. From 1965 to 1995, Professor Bianchi found, the average time mothers spent doing paid work jumped to almost 26 hours a week from 9 hours. The time spent on housework fell commensurately, to 19 hours from 32.

Then the trend stalled. From 1995 to 2003, mothers, on average, spent about the same amount of time on household chores, but their work outside the home fell by almost four hours a week.

"Looking toward the future," said Francine D. Blau, a professor of economics at Cornell University, "one can question how much further increases in women's participation can be had without more reallocation of household work."

This is having broad repercussions for the economy. Today, about 75 percent of women 25 to 54 years old are either working or actively seeking a job, up from around 40 percent in the late 1950's. That expansion helped fuel economic growth for decades.

But the previous trend flattened in the early 1990's. And since 2000, the participation rate for women has declined somewhat; it remains far below the 90 percent rate for men in the same age range.

There is one big exception to the trend: while the rate of labor participation leveled off for most groups of women, the percentage of single mothers in the work force jumped to more than 75 percent from 63 percent. That of high school dropouts rose to 53 percent from 48 percent.

Economists say that these women were pushed into work with the help of changes in government policy: the expansion of the earned-income tax credit and the overhaul of welfare in the mid-1990's, which replaced long-term entitlements with temporary aid.

To be sure, mothers' overcrowded lives have not been the only factor limiting their roles in the work force. The decline in participation rates for most groups of women since the recession of 2001 at least partly reflects an overall slowdown in hiring, which affected men and women roughly equally.

"The main reason for women's declining labor-force participation rates over the last four years was the weakness of the labor market," said Heather Boushey, an economist at the Center for Economic and Policy Research, a liberal research institute in Washington. "Women did not opt out of the labor force because of the kids."
But even if the recent decline was driven more by economic factors, other experts note that the leveling off began well before the economic slump a few year ago. And whatever the mixture of causes, the changing pace of women's participation in the work force has recently risen to the top of the agenda among scholars and policy makers.

A report by the White House Council of Economic Advisers, presented to Congress in February, contended that the slowdown in the rate of women moving into the workplace, was weighing on the nation's potential for economic growth.

"The new factor at play," the report said, "is the change in the trend in the female participation rate, which has edged down on balance since 2000 after having risen for five decades."

Claudia Goldin, an economics professor at Harvard University, said in a keynote speech to the annual meeting of the American Economic Association in Boston in January that the trend across nearly all groups of women had "led many to wonder if a 'natural rate' of labor force participation has been reached."

A broad set of social and economic forces pushed women into the work force. From the 1960's onward, women flooded into higher education and began to marry later.

Professor Goldin said that a typical female college graduate born in the mid-1960's married at 26, three years later than the typical female college graduate born in the early 1950's.

This alone had large-scale implications for women's ability to work. Many families delayed the arrival of their first child. Today, only about 43 percent of women 25 to 29 have children under 6, compared with about 71 percent of women in that group in the 1960's.

Chinhui Juhn, an economics professor at the University of Houston, pointed out that women in their mid-to-late 20's accounted for most of the increase in work force participation from 1970 onward. But now, she said, "the increase in participation of women in their prime child-bearing years is largely over."

Women's participation in the labor force is being restrained by a side effect of delayed motherhood: a jump in 30-something mothers with toddlers.

"The childbirth effects are coming later," said Janice Madden, a sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania.

By 2004, about 37 percent of women ages 33 to 37 had children under 6, compared with 28 percent in 1979.

At midcareer, these women had to deal with more child care chores. "There have been a lot more household responsibilities in this group," Professor Goldin, the Harvard economist, said. "The fact that their participation rate has not declined much is what is surprising not that there is a plateau."

Most women, even those with young children, need to work. Many more want to. Ms. Watson-Short, the former California executive who is now a mother of three, said that her stay-at-home-mom friends, like her, felt blindsided by the demands of motherhood.

"They had a totally different idea of where they would be," Ms. Watson-Short said. "They thought they would be in the workplace and have someone help them raise the kids."
But those who kept working are also torn. Catherine Stallings, 34, returned to her job in the communications department of New York University's medical center last month because she could not afford not to. Dealing with work and her 5-month-old daughter, Riley, has been stressful for her and her husband, the marketing director of a sports magazine.

"Usually, we are so tired we pass out around 10 or so," Ms. Stallings said. "And my job is not a career-track job. If I were climbing the ladder, it would be a no-win situation."

Some economists argue that it is premature to conclude that the gender revolution in the workplace has reached its limit.

Yet for the participation rates of women to rise significantly, they agree, mothers may have to give up more of the household burden.

Professor Blau of Cornell noted that in Scandinavian countries, where laws provide for more generous parental leave and subsidize day care, women have higher rates of labor participation than in the United States.

Ms. Watson-Short, whose husband is a patent lawyer, expects to go back to some sort of paid work but sees a full-time job as well off in the future. Making the transition back into the work force, even through part-time jobs, will not be as easy as she and her contemporaries once hoped.

"We got equality at work," Ms. Watson-Short said. "We really didn't get equality at home."