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Gender Differences in the West Michigan Marketplace

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Introduction

One of the most visible indicators of change in gender roles is the convergence between the number of men and women working outside the home. The number of men and women working or looking for work (participation rate hereafter) has been converging since 1950 as the number of men working has fallen steadily and the number of women has risen. However, the participation of males in the labor market is still substantially above the number for females. In 1980, for example, the gap between the proportion of women and men working in West Michigan was about 20%, with 39.71% of the women and 59.38% of the men participating in the labor market. If we look at the work participation rates for 1990, it is clear that even in a short span of ten years there was considerable convergence in women's and men's participation, primarily as a result of the increase in the proportion of women participating to 45.25% but also due to a small decline in men's participation to 53.7%.

These shifts in women's and, to a smaller extent, men's participation in the labor market are noteworthy as they have implications for how we conceptualize the family. Earnings or working outside the home may influence one's bargaining power within the family and, therefore, may have implications for gender roles in general and the division of labor within the family in particular.

However, the proportion of women and men working outside the home gives no indication about hours worked, as they include individuals employed both part-time and full-time. Therefore, comparison of participation rates by gender does not provide a complete picture of the attachment of women and men to the labor force. For instance, women could be working in greater numbers but for fewer total hours. To this extent, participation rates are misleading measures of the relative amount of work that men and women do, unless their part-time rates are similar. Thus, the gap in participation rates of men and women underestimates the difference between them since men are more likely than women to work full-time (defined as averaging 35 or more hours per week). In this study I delve further into these work participation patterns by considering variations in time spent in paid work by gender as well as other demographic variables such as age group, marital status, presence or absence of children, and educational attainment.

Data and Discussion

The data for this study are derived from a Time-Use survey of 700 households in West Michigan. The survey was conducted by the students enrolled in my Gender and Economics course in Fall 2001 as part of a class project. Responses were received from 334 households (47.7% response rate). Descriptive sample statistics of the relevant variables are given in Table 1. Table 2 presents data on hours spent in paid labor for employed men and women by demographic group. It is clear from this table that men on average spend 10 more hours per week in paid labor than women. In addition, the size of this gap varies by marital status, number of children, age cohort and educational level. The gap between single women and men (5.12 hours) is smaller than the gap between married women and men (10.08 hours). Among those who are unmarried, cohabiting women spend less time in paid labor than single women but more time in paid labor than married women. Among men, cohabiters spend more time in paid labor than individuals in any other category.

These comparisons suggest that marriage affects men and women differently. While men spend more time in paid labor after marriage, the time spent by women decreases. As is the case with marital status, presence of children involves different kinds of investment for men and women. The more children women have, the less time they spend in paid labor, while for men the opposite is true. These findings suggest that marriage and children reinforce the "breadwinning" role of men and the non-financial role of women.

With respect to age, the table reveals that the largest gap (14.25 hours) in paid work time is between women and men 40–44 years old. While women work more hours in paid labor when they are 45–55, men's paid work time peaks when they are in their forties. The gap between women's and men's paid labor time is largest for those with less than a high school degree and smallest for those with a college degree or more. It is clear that women's paid labor time is responsive to their wage level, such that the more women earn, the more time they spend in the labor force. The results also display the divergence in time spent in paid labor by race for the two largest racial groups—whites and blacks. While black and white men have similar attachment to the labor force, black women work approximately three hours more per week in paid labor than white women.

Finally, the earnings ratio between full-time year around employed women and men reveals that women in West Michigan earn 60% of what men earn compared to 67.4% for the State of Michigan. This suggests that pay equity for women varies greatly depending on where they live. Nationally, the State of Michigan ranks 47 on pay parity. Cities with heavy concentrations of manufacturing are likely to rank low on pay parity as these sectors pay relatively well and continue to remain dominated by men.
Conclusion
This research has sought to identify the demographic characteristics of West Michigan labor markets and the impact of these characteristics on the gender gap in paid labor. Identifying and reporting on demographic characteristics that affect men and women differently is important as it helps to design policies that speak to these differences, especially as lack of disaggregated data often masks regional differences among men and women within states.

Acknowledgments
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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

- Average age of respondents: 42 for men, 40 for women
- 92% of the households were white
- 77% of the households were married; 10% were cohabiting; 7% were divorced or separated; and 6% were single
- Average years of schooling: 15.3 years for men, 14.8 years for women
- 48% of the households surveyed had children living in the home
- 58% of the women were employed full-time, 28% were employed part-time, and 14% were unemployed*
- 89% of the men were employed full-time, 5% were employed part-time, and 6% were unemployed*
- While 20% of the males surveyed earned more than $75,000 per year, only 3% of the female population earned more than $75,000 per year
- Most of the male respondents earned more than $45,000 per year, while most of the female respondents earned $35,000 or less per year
* Note: the unemployed individuals are either stay-at-home parents or are in school.

Table 2: Time Spent in Paid Labor by Gender and Demographic Group

- Overall: On average women work 38.44 hours and men work 48.10 hours per week outside the home.
- By marital status: Cohabiting men work the most, 49.59 hours, followed by married men (48.35 hours), divorced or separated men (48.28 hours), and single never-married men (46.67 hours). Divorced or separated women, on the other hand, work the most (42 hours), followed by single never-married women (41.55), cohabiting women (40.97), and married women (38.27 hours).
- Married households, by number of children: Men with no children spend 42.39 hours per week on the job, whereas men with a single child work 46.35 hours, and men with 2 or more children work 50.45 hours per week. Women with a single child work 4.39 hours more per week than women with no children (37.88 hours compared to 33.49 hours). However, having 2 or more children reduces their number of hours worked outside the home per week to 26.40 hours.
- By age: Men work the most in paid labor when they are 40–44 years of age (51.91 hours) and least when they are 20–24 years of age (39.61 hours). In general, the time men spend at work displays a single-peaked pattern. It increases with age, peaks at 40–44 years of age, and drops off thereafter. The pattern for women, however, displays a double-peak. It increases up to 35–39 years of age (42.93 hours), drops to 37.66 hours in the age bracket 40–44, and picks up thereafter.
- By educational attainment: Time spent in paid labor rises with education for women. Women with a college or higher degree work (41.01 hours) 4 more hours per week compared to women with a high school diploma (37.02 hours), while men with a high school diploma work the most, (49.08 hours) followed by men with a college or higher degree (47.78 hours).
- By race: White (48.20 hours) and black (47.09 hours) men work similar hours, whereas black women work more (41.67 hours) compared to white women (38.33 hours).

1 Information on range of earnings instead of actual annual earnings is used to estimate this wage gap.