Women's Careers

PATHWAYS AND PITFALLS

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Occupational Sex Segregation in Canada and the United States: Does Affirmative Action Make a Difference?

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PREVIEW

Twenty years ago, casual observation of any office would have shown men and women working at different jobs. What about today? Has there really been a change in the pattern of the types of jobs that men and women do? It would seem that there have been changes since, for example, women are an increasing proportion of managers compared to a few years ago. Many would argue that this change has been due to the implementation of affirmative action and equal employment opportunity programs. But, at the same time, we can see that men have not become secretaries in the same proportions. What does this say about these programs?

One perspective on such programs is afforded by comparing the United States, which has had federally mandated and enforced affirmative action and equal opportunity programs, and Canada, which has had no comparable federal programs. This chapter makes this comparison and provides insights into occupational segregation in the two countries, as well as the changes that have occurred between 1950 and 1981.

As can be easily observed, men and women usually work at different jobs. Men are managers, women are secretaries. Men are doctors, women are nurses. Men are university professors, women are grade school teachers. Men are engineers, women are home economists. Patterns of male jobs and female jobs, referred to as occupational segregation, have been repeatedly demonstrated for the United States (e.g., Gross 1968; Oppenheimer 1970; Blau and Hendricks 1979; Beller 1982; Bergmann 1986) and for Canada (e.g., Gunderson 1976; Armstrong and Armstrong

1978; Nakamura, et al. 1979b; Merrilees 1982; Robb 1984). One reason why public attention and research effort has been focused on the phenomenon of occupational segregation by gender is because women's jobs tend to pay less than men's jobs (e.g., Treiman and Hartman 1981; Bergmann 1986). On average, working women in the United States and Canada earn about 60 percent of what working men earn (e.g., O'Neill 1985, for the U.S.; Gunderson 1979, for Canada), and a large portion of this earnings differential seems to be attributable to the segregation of working women in low-paying jobs.

Many in both the United States and Canada believe that discrimination by gender on the part of (largely male) employers is one important factor contributing to the occupational segregation of women. Many have also hoped that this discrimination could be lessened by the adoption of laws and other measures making it illegal and costly for employers to discriminate on the basis of gender. The reasoning has been that once discriminatory barriers were lowered, more women would enter better-paying, previously male-dominated occupations. As a result of this, the occupational distribution of working women and men would become more similar, and the earnings gap between working women and men would shrink.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of equal employment opportunity measures were introduced in the United States. The most significant of these measures were at the federal level: the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 issued in 1965 (which mandated affirmative action by federal contractors and grantees), and the 1972 amendments to Title VII, which gave the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (originally created by Lyndon Johnson) the authority to bring discrimination suits. Equal employment policies were also instituted in Canada during the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Gunderson 1985). However, these policies were mostly provincial rather than federal. They were also less vigorous than the U.S. measures in several important respects. For instance, in Canada discrimination suits must be initiated through the action of the affected individual. There is no Canadian counterpart of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Also, although there are some affirmative action programs in Canada, they cover a limited number of organizations and individuals, and compliance with them is largely a voluntary matter.

What we would like to know is whether the more far-reaching (and much more costly) U.S. affirmative action and equal opportunity measures were more effective in reducing occupational segregation than the Canadian measures. Evidence that this is so would bolster the case for tougher Canadian measures. Moreover, it would also constitute new evidence that occupational segregation can, in fact, be reduced by measures attacking gender-related employment discrimination. In studies

based solely on U.S. data, the effects of equal opportunity and affirmative action programs are inextricably mixed with the effects of changes over time in other factors such as family structure, technology in the home and workplace, and the industrial mix of the economy that could also have resulted in changes in the extent and nature of occupational segregation by gender.

Starting with published U.S. and Canadian census data for hundreds of detailed occupational categories, we have compiled occupational data for 22 major categories that are comparable over the periods of 1950 to 1980 for the United States and 1951 to 1981 for Canada (for more information on this recoding, see Nakamura, et al. 1979a). Using this unique data set, we first establish that the patterns of occupational segregation by gender were very similar and have exhibited little change in both Canada and the United States over the periods of 1950/51 and 1970/71. We then look for signs of greater reductions in occupational segregation in the United States compared to Canada over the periods of 1970/71 to 1980/81. This latter period is when we might expect to see some divergence in the U.S. and Canadian patterns of occupational segregation, since it was in the early 1970s that the U.S. measures outlawing employment discrimination on the basis of gender began to be vigorously enforced.

OCCUPATIONAL SEGREGATION OF U.S. AND CANADIAN WOMEN

As Canadians do know, and U.S. citizens may know, the commonalities between the two countries are numerous. Geographically, Canada is slightly larger, but its population is approximately one-tenth that of the United States. Similarities between the two countries ensure a common culture that is basically a U.S. culture. U.S. multinational corporations control a significant part of Canada's economy. Canadians watch U.S. television stations, they attend U.S. movies, they read U.S. books and magazines, they listen to U.S. music, and they observe U.S. political events. Few U.S. citizens do the reverse.

However, Canada and the United States are not identical. The observed work behavior of U.S. and Canadian women, and a number of factors that are thought to affect this work behavior, are really quite different. For instance, female employment rates have been and still are substantially lower for Canadian than for U.S. women. On average, Canadian women do not stay in school for as many years as their U.S. counterparts. Also, employed wives in Canada must file separate tax returns, rather than file jointly with their husbands as most U.S. wives must do (Nakamura and Nakamura 1981). Thus, even though it has long been known that working women are occupationally segregated in both countries, it cannot simply be assumed that the patterns of occupational

Table 10.1
Proportion of Workers Who Are Women, by Occupation for the United States and Canada, 1950/51–1980/81

Occupation	1950/51 U.S.	1950/51 CAN.	1960/61 U.S.	1960/61 CAN.	1970/71 U.S.	1970/71 CAN.	1980/81 U.S.	1980/81 CAN.
Teaching	68.4	67.2	64.4	64.4	65.2	60.4	66.9	59.7
Clerical	62.3	56.1	68.1	61.0	74.8	68.4	77.7	77.8
Medicine and health	61.4	68.5	67.2	72.1	73.1	74.3	76.2	77.8
Service	53.4	45.1	57.9	46.7	55.1	46.2	54.0	52.7
Social sciences	34.3	27.8	32.8	29.4	39.7	37.4	45.4	52.5
Materials handling	34.3	27.2	36.2	19.4	24.1	19.7	24.6	22.6
Artistic, literary	34.1	30.7	35.0	31.2	32.2	27.2	41.1	39.4
Sales	26.6	33.3	28.5	32.0	29.6	30.4	38.9	42.3
Fabricating, repairing	26.6	22.6	27.6	22.8	31.8	23.7	27.7	24.6
Processing	20.8	14.8	19.8	13.7	24.3	17.8	34.0	22.3
Religion	17.1	39.7	15.5	28.9	10.1	15.7	13.4	29.9
Managerial, administrative	12.8	8.7	14.6	10.4	17.5	15.7	30.7	25.1
Not elsewhere classified	9.7	13.4	9.3	9.2	18.3	13.0	21.1	16.4
Other crafts	9.6	8.4	10.0	9.1	15.8	12.4	21.5	21.2
Machining	9.2	4.8	9.7	4.3	14.1	5.7	12.4	6.8
Farming	8.4	3.9	9.1	11.7	9.3	20.9	14.6	21.6
Natural sciences, engineering	6.3	6.9	5.2	4.8	8.0	7.3	16.3	13.9
Fishing, hunting, trapping	1.5	0.0	1.3	0.1	4.1	1.6	6.4	5.5
Transport	1.3	0.5	1.7	0.6	5.1	2.4	9.1	6.5
Forestry	1.2	0.0	1.1	0.4	2.8	1.9	5.4	6.1
Construction	1.1	1.0	0.9	0.8	2.0	0.9	3.0	1.9
Mining	0.8	0.0	0.4	0.0	3.9	0.5	2.5	2.1
All occupations	27.7	22.0	32.5	27.3	37.9	33.5	42.6	40.4

Source: Calculated from 1951 Census of Canada Vol, IV, Table 4; 1961 Census of Canada, Vol III - Part I, Table 6; 1971 Census of Canada Vol III - Part 2, Table 8; 1981 Census of Canada, Cat. No. 92-917, Table 1; 1960 U.S. Census, Vol. I, Part 1, Table 201; 1970 U.S. Census, Special Report PC(2) 7A, Table 1; 1980 U.S. Census, Special Report PC 80-2-7C, Table 4.

Table 10.2
U.S. and Canadian Occupational Distributions for the Female Labor Force, 1950/51–1980/81

Occupation	1950/51		1960/61		1970/71		1980/81	
	U.S.	CAN.	U.S.	CAN.	U.S.	CAN.	U.S.	CAN.
Teaching	5.5(5-6)	6.8(5)	6.0	7.4	7.8	8.0	7.2	6.2
Clerical	27.1(1)	30.4(1)	30.5	31.4	34.3	35.6	33.9	36.3
Medicine and health	5.5(5-6)	6.6(6)	6.6	8.8	7.8	9.2	9.3	8.7
Service	22.1(2)	19.7(2)	22.1	20.0	17.6	16.9	14.6	15.7
Social sciences	0.8(13-14)	0.5(15)	0.9	0.7	1.3	1.1	1.9	2.1
Materials handling	1.4(10-11)	1.7(10)	1.4	1.7	2.2	1.5	1.5	1.2
Artistic, literary	1.4(10-11)	1.0(12)	1.5	1.1	1.0	0.8	1.3	1.4
Sales	11.4(3)	8.9(4)	10.4	8.6	8.8	9.4	8.4	9.4
Fabricating, repairing	10.2(4)	9.6(3)	9.6	6.9	8.3	5.7	5.2	4.9
Processing	5.1(7)	5.0(7)	3.5	2.8	2.7	2.3	3.8	2.3
Religion	0.2(18-19)	1.1(11)	0.2	0.6	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2
Managerial, administrative	1.8(9)	3.4(8)	2.3	3.4	3.0	2.2	6.9	5.4
Not elsewhere classified	0.8(13-14)	0.4(16-17)	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.5
Other crafts	0.6(15)	0.6(14)	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.6
Machining	1.3(12)	0.7(13)	1.1	0.5	1.5	0.5	1.1	0.4
Farming	3.7(8)	2.8(9)	1.9	4.4	0.9	4.1	0.9	2.3
Natural sciences, engineering	0.4(16)	0.4(16-17)	0.4	0.4	0.8	0.6	1.4	1.2
Fishing, hunting, trapping	0.0(20-22)	0.0(20-22)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Transport	0.2(18-19)	0.1(19)	0.2	0.1	0.4	0.3	0.7	0.6
Forestry	0.0(20-22)	0.0(20-22)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
Construction	0.3(17)	0.3(18)	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.3
Mining	0.0(20-22)	0.0(20-22)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
All occupations	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

[1]Number in parentheses are the occupations' country-specfic ranks for proportion of workers in the occupation who are female.

Source: Calculated from 1951 Census of Canada Vol, IV, Table 4; 1961 Census of Canada, Vol III - Part 1, Table 6; 1971 Census of Canada Vol III - Part 2, Table 8; 1981 Census of Canada, Cat. No. 92-917, Table 1; 1960 U.S. Census, Vol. I, Part 1, Table 201; 1970 U.S. Census, Special Report PC(2) 7A, Table 1; 1980 U.S. Census, Special Report PC 80-2-7C, Table 4.

segregation are similar. The extent of similarities in these patterns has not been investigated by other researchers since the definitions of the occupational categories for which data are published are not the same from country to country, or over time in either country. The reclassification we have undertaken is not completely accurate, and the resulting occupational groupings are quite highly aggregated (though not nearly as aggregated as the white-collar and blue-collar sorts of classifications used in some studies). Nevertheless, these reclassified data are probably adequate to reveal major trends or changes in the overall patterns of occupational segregation in the United States and Canada (for further evidence on this point, see Nakamura, et al. 1979b).

The U.S. and Canadian proportions of workers who are women for the 22 occupations, and for all occupations combined, for the years 1950/51, 1960/61, 1970/71 and 1980/81 are shown in Table 10.1 The occupations are listed in all our tables, including Table 10.1, according to the 1950 U.S. proportions of workers in each occupation who are women. For example, teaching, where 68.4 percent of the 1950 U.S. work force was female, comes first because it has the highest degree of female concentration according to this measure. The numbers in Table 10.2 show the U.S. and Canadian proportions, respectively, of all employed women in the labor force in each country in each of the occupations, and the numbers in parentheses in the first two columns show the country-specific rankings of these proportions from largest to smallest. Thus, we see that in 1950 in the United States, 5.5 percent of all women in the labor force were employed in the teaching profession, and we also see that the teaching profession tied with medicine and health as the fifth largest female occupational group. Table 10.1 shows the extent to which various occupations are female-dominated or male-dominated, while Table 10.2 allows us to see the importance of each occupation in terms of female employment. For instance, we see that the clerical profession is both female-dominated and a major employer of women. On the other hand, whereas the ratios of women to all workers are higher in each census year in the social sciences than in the work force as a whole, it can be seen from Table 10.2 that the social sciences is not a major employer of women.

As can be seen from the first three pairs of columns in these tables, the patterns of occupational segregation are very similar for 1950/51 through 1970/71. In both countries, a significant proportion of women were employed in clerical occupations, followed by service, sales, and fabricating and machining (a manufacturing classification). Similarly, very few women in either country worked in the natural resource occupations of fishing, forestry, and mining. Moreover, from 1950/51 to 1970/71, there was little change in the extent of occupational segregation in both countries, in the sense that the proportion of women in the traditionally female occupations remained almost the same. If the affirmative action

Table 10.3
Summary Statistics on Occupational Segregation of Women

	U.S.	CANADA
Percentage of all women workers in Clerical, Service and Sales occupations:		
1950/51	60.7	59.0
1960/61	63.0	60.0
1970/71	60.7	61.9
1980/81	56.9	61.4
Percentage of all women workers in fabricating, repairing; Teaching; and medicine and health occupations:		
1950/51	21.2	23.0
1960/61	22.2	23.1
1970/71	23.9	22.9
1980/81	21.7	19.8
Percentage of all women workers in teaching, clerical, and medicine and health occupations:		
1950/51	38.2	43.8
1960/61	43.1	47.6
1970/71	49.9	52.8
1980/81	50.4	51.2
Percentage of all women workers in service, Social sciences, and materials handling occupations:		
1950/51	24.3	21.9
1960/61	24.4	22.4
1970/71	21.1	19.5
1980/81	18.0	19.0

Source: Calculated from Tables 10.1 and 10.2.

and equal employment measures enacted in the United States were effective, we might expect to find that working women in the United States were less occupationally segregated than their Canadian counterparts in 1980/81. Looking at these figures in the fourth pair of columns of Tables 10.1 and 10.2, however, it is not at all obvious that this is the case.

Summary information in Table 10.3 provides a sharper picture of these U.S. and Canadian similarities in the occupation-specific concentrations of women and the distribution of women over occupations in 1950/51, 1960/61 and 1970/71 versus 1980/81. From Table 10.2 we find that the top three occupational groups of women in the United States in 1950 were clerical, service, and sales. From the top segment of Table 10.3, we find that over the census years 1950/51 through 1970/71 these three occupations accounted for roughly 60 percent of female employment in both the United States and Canada. Nor is there any sign of change in this pattern in Canada between 1971 and 1981. On the other hand, the 56.9 percentage for the United States in 1980 does represent a low over the 1950–1980 period. This might be interpreted as a sign of lessening occupational segregation in the United States.

The next three largest occupational groups of women in the United States in 1950 were fabricating and repairing, teaching, and medicine and health. These three occupations accounted for approximately 22 percent of all female employment in the first three census periods. There is a slight dip in the proportion of all women working in these occupations in 1980/81 versus 1970/71 in both the United States and Canada.

Looking now at Table 10.1, we find that the highest occupation-specific concentrations of women are in teaching, clerical, and medicine and health professions. From the third segment of Table 10.3, we see that from 1950/51 through 1970/71 roughly 40 to 50 percent of all women workers in the United States and Canada were employed in these three most female-intensive occupations, with the proportion growing slightly between 1970 and 1980 for the United States and falling slightly between 1971 and 1981 for Canada. From section four of Table 10.3 we see that about 20 percent of women workers were employed in the next three most female-intensive occupations—service, social sciences (includes, among others, lawyers, librarians, and social workers) and materials handling (includes stevedores and packagers) over the period of 1950/51 through 1970/71, with this percentage falling slightly for Canada and somewhat more for the United States from 1970/71 to 1980/81. Thus the evidence from section four of Table 10.3, like the evidence from section one of this table, might possibly be viewed as an indication of greater reductions in occupational segregation by gender in the United States than in Canada over the period 1970/71 through 1980/81. The observed changes are relatively small, however, compared to the observed fluctuations in the percentages of interest over the 1950/51 through 1970/71 period.

It might be argued that the broad occupational groupings used in our analysis mask or cover shifts in specific occupations. For example, the occupational group of medicine and health includes both doctors and nurses. Shifts may have occurred between these two occupations, with the overall percentage of women in the larger occupational group

remaining the same. While this is true, the shifts in the United States and Canada have been fairly similar. For example, in Canada in 1971, women were 10.1 percent of all physicians; they were 17.1 percent of all physicians in 1981. In the United States comparable figures are 9.0 and 13.3 percent, for 1970 and 1980. A similar pattern is observed for lawyers. Women were 4.8 percent of this occupation in Canada in 1971, and 15.1 percent in 1981. The 1970 and 1980 figures for the United States are 4.8 and 13.6, respectively.

From the information presented so far, we would argue that women are occupationally segregated in both the United States and Canada. This is true whether we look at the employment of women in the most female-intensive occupations, or if we simply look at the employment of women in the occupations in which the largest number of women are employed. Second, we would argue that, in the time period of 1950/51 to 1970/71, there are clear U.S.–Canadian similarities in the patterns of female occupational segregation. Finally, we do not find any major erosion in these historical similarities in 1980/81.

OCCUPATIONAL SEGREGATION AND EARNINGS

Of course, equal opportunity and affirmative action measures in the United States could have played an important role in moving women from lower- to higher-paying occupations without necessarily altering any of the specific aspects of occupational segregation focused on in the previous section. Thus, in this section, we look for evidence of specific effects on the concentrations of women in occupations that traditionally have been higher versus lower paying.

We have defined occupations as traditionally higher or lower paying based on the average wage and salary incomes of both all wage earners and all women wage earners in Canada in 1951 (see Nakamura et al. 1979a, for this data). Using criterion, the three highest paying occupations are managerial and administration, natural sciences and engineering, and social sciences. Table 10.4 shows that the proportion of all women workers in these three occupations has risen from 1950/51 to 1980/81 from 3.0 to 10.2 percent for the United States and from 4.3 to 8.7 percent for Canada. The 1970/71 to 1980/81 changes of 5.1 percentage points for the United States and 4.8 percentage points for Canada account for most of the rise for both countries over the 1950/51 to 1980/81 period. Moreover, from Table 10.2 we see that the largest shares in observed U.S. and Canadian increases in the proportions of women working in the three highest income occupations are due to the increases in the proportions of women working in the managerial and administrative category. The increases in the proportions of women working in higher income occupations have tended to be slightly larger for the United States than for Canada.

Table 10.4
Further Summary Statistics on Occupational Segregation of Women

	U.S.	CANADA
Percentage of all women workers in managerial, administrative; natural sciences, engineering; and social sciences:		
1950/51	3.0	4.3
1960/61	3.6	4.5
1970/71	5.1	3.9
1980/81	10.2	8.7
Percentage of all women workers in service, religion and farming:		
1950/51	26.0	23.6
1960/61	24.2	25.0
1970/71	18.6	21.1
1980/81	15.6	18.2

Source: Calculated from Tables 10.1 and 10.2.

Again using our criterion, the three lowest income occupations are service, religion, and farming. From the bottom portion of Table 10.4, we see that the proportion of total female employment in these three occupations has been falling over the period of 1950/51 through 1980/81 in both the United States and Canada, with the decline being somewhat greater in the United States. It is also true that the female concentrations (that is, the ratios of female to all workers) have risen steadily since 1950/51 in both the United States and Canada in farming, and have fluctuated without showing any downward trend for the service and religion occupations. But this just means that men have been moving out of (or failing to enter) these occupations at a rate at least as high as the female rate of exit (or nonentry).

In summary then, the proportions of women employed in the three highest-paying occupations have been rising, and the proportions employed in the three lowest-paying occupations have been falling, in both the United States and Canada. The patterns of change are basically similar in the two countries, although the rate of change in the United States seems to be a little greater.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

We have found that women workers are occupationally segregated in the United States and Canada, and that the pattern of this occupational segregation has changed somewhat over the period of 1950/51 to 1980/81. The nature of this occupational segregation and the observed changes in it are found to be quite similar, however, for both the United States and Canada. This is true even in 1980/81, despite the introduction of more vigorous and far-reaching equal opportunity and affirmative action programs in the United States than in Canada.

Could it be that the value of affirmative action and equal opportunity programs lies more in the social climate they help to create than in their specific provisions, including enforcement? As was mentioned before, Canada is both aware of, and familiar with, affirmative action programs, but any that have been implemented have been voluntary. Our data suggest the possibility that enforcement provisions of the sort adopted in the United States have, at best, only a modest effect in the short run. Perhaps the efects of these programs are due more to the social climates they create. Effects of this sort would have been observed in both the United States and Canada, because of the extent to which Canadians are exposed to U.S. news, magazines, and television programs.

These possibilities have clear implications for both organizations and individuals in the years ahead. How much commitment to affirmative action and equal opportunity should there be? In the United States, the government has been backing away from such programs, while in Canada (paradoxically) the government is slowly moving towards them. What should be the response of these moves? Perhaps these programs have accomplished all that can be done at this point: a recognition of the necessity for expanding employment opportunities. It may be that the changes brought about by this initial consciousness-raising will continue even in the absence of difficult-to-enforce, mandated programs.

Our data also suggest that any changes in response to such programs will be slow. It seems that the reality for most women in Canada and the United States is that they will continue to work in the low-paying, pink-collar jobs. Given this, a concerted focus on equal pay for work of equal value (comparable worth) might benefit larger numbers of women than would a focus on affirmative action and equal opportunity. Equal pay for work of equal value can provide immediate economic benefit for women by raising the wage levels in the occupations where women are clustered, while affirmative action and equal opportunity programs seek to move women into the traditionally higher-paying male occupations. While the two issues clearly go together, the effects of equal opportunity and affirmative action programs may be more indirect and long-term than those of equal pay for work of equal value.

Individuals choose occupations for many reasons, one being interest in the work itself and another being the wages paid for that work. Women who seek higher wages must enter traditionally male occupations; affirmative action and equal opportunity programs may help them to do so. But what of those women (and men) who find the traditionally female occupations intrinsically appealing or satisfying? Must they forego higher wages to do a type of work they enjoy? Equal pay for work of equal value holds out the hope of higher earnings in the future in some of the traditionally female occupations.

It may also be time to focus more of our attention on conditions in which large numbers of women are employed, regardless of the degree of female concentration in those occupations. How will these occupations be affected by free trade, or by trade restrictions and barriers? How are they affected by general economic measures used to stimulate the economy, control inflation, or reduce a government's budget deficit?

If occupational segregation is to be the reality for women for the foreseeable future, perhaps more attention needs to be devoted to both those general economic conditions and organization-specific policies that effect those occupations in which large numbers of women work. Does an organization truly have an equal opportunity program if, while it is slowly moving small numbers of women into managerial and professional positions, it is also, through the adoption of technology, eliminating or downgrading a large number of its clerical positions? What do we mean by equal employment opportunities?

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