

# Gender segregation in jobs is not rooted in early family planning

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Despite decades of efforts to banish the idea of "jobs for men"—construction worker, firefighter, mechanic—and "jobs for women"—teacher, flight attendant, registered nurse—almost 69 percent of workers are in occupations that are dominated by one gender or the other, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Why does gender segregation in jobs persist?

In a new study, Rice social scientist Erin Cech dispels one popular explanation: that [women](#) choose more "flexible" (female-dominated) career fields that better accommodate their plans to raise children, while men choose "provider-friendly" (male-dominated) career fields that maximize their earning power to support their families. Called the "family plans thesis," this idea is embedded in several economic, sociological and socio-psychological explanations of occupational gender segregation.

"Proponents of this perspective see segregation as the outcome of men's and women's deliberate, economically rational decision-making to make the best use of their educational investments in light of their family plans," said Cech, an assistant professor of sociology.

For the study, which will be published in the journal *Gender & Society*, Cech interviewed 100 students enrolled in a variety of majors at three universities. She found that for the majority of men (61 percent) and women (52 percent), their plans to have a family did not play any part in

their choice of a major or career field.

"For many students, such plans are seen as distant in time from their immediate career decisions," she said. "Only a quarter of men (and a handful of women) discuss a planned-provider role as a partial motive in their occupational choices, and only seven women (13 percent) and one man (2 percent) describe choosing occupational paths in part to accommodate planned caregiving responsibilities." Even those who did seem to act in accordance with the family-plans thesis didn't contribute more extensively to gender segregation than their peers, she said.

"Respondents who plan to play a provider role are not more likely to be enrolled in men-dominated academic majors, while students who anticipate a caregiving role are not more likely to be enrolled in women-dominated majors."

The findings highlight the theoretical problem of mistaking broader labor-market processes as the intended result of men's and women's preferences, absent any cultural and structural constraints on such preferences, Cech said.

"The family plans thesis, in other words, seems to explain away occupational segregation as the result of individualistic, free choices," she said. "Ironically the family plans thesis itself may help reproduce occupational segregation by impacting how parents encourage their children, how teachers advise students and how employers think about employees.

"By reinforcing the family plans thesis without careful examination of its assumptions, scholars risk contributing to gender segregation by lending legitimacy to popular assumptions that blame women for 'preferring' lower-paid, lower-status occupations because such fields are presumed to accommodate women's desired caregiving roles."

The students Cech interviewed—56 women and 44 men—were enrolled at Stanford University (35 students), the University of Houston (30 students) and Montana State University (35 students). Twenty-five percent were African-American, 14 percent Hispanic, 14 percent Asian or Asian-American, 53 percent white and 11 percent another race or ethnicity. Twenty percent (11 women, 9 men) were married or in long-term partnerships, but none had children. Eight students identified as nonheterosexual. Students were enrolled in a variety of college majors, with half in STEM—science, technology, engineering and math-related—fields. Forty-nine women (88 percent) and 40 men (91 percent) expected to have children in the future. The remainder of respondents planned to remain childless.

Cech asked students questions about why they chose their major, what they planned to do after graduation and the variety of factors they considered when making those decisions. She also asked them whether they planned to have a family and whether their thoughts about a family influenced their major or postgraduation career choice in any way.

Depending on their answers, the [students](#) were categorized in the study in one of three ways: as "accommodating a caregiver role" if they mentioned considerations of caregiving responsibilities in making college and career decisions, as "accommodating a provider role" if they cited considerations of wanting a provider-friendly occupation, or as "not accommodating any role."

Of those who said their plans to have a family did not play a role in the career decision-making, a quarter (31 percent of men and 18 percent of women) said that their career decisions stemmed from a "me first, family later" perspective. Other respondents said that their careers would dictate the composition of their families, not the other way around.

Five women, but no men, noted that they expect it will be difficult to

balance work and caregiving demands, but believe they can "have both," are "not too worried" and expressed confidence that they can "manage to balance them once they get to that stage."

Ten men factored a planned-provider role into their career decisions to some extent. Seven women said that they make career decisions in part by considering fields that will allow them to provide for the family financially.

Thirteen women and three men said that they selected particular occupations in part because they believe that such jobs will provide the flexibility and career structures they desire to balance work with planned caregiving responsibilities.

Only one student—a woman at Montana State—gave flexibility as the "most important" consideration in her career decisions.

"Of course, gendered division of work and family responsibilities among heterosexual couples remains commonplace," Cech said. "These results point to the need to understand how people who have not deliberately incorporated family plans into their early career decisions wind up down the line in circumstances that largely reproduce previous generations' gendered division of labor—especially with women shouldering the majority of caregiving responsibilities."

Beyond that, Cech said, employers should take note of these findings. If the majority of young women and men who plan to have families expect to "work it out" when those caregiving responsibilities emerge rather than deliberately accommodating family plans, she said, employers must work harder to institute flexibility policies and re-entry programs that will retain talented workers.

**More information:** The study, "Mechanism or Myth? Family Plans

and the Reproduction of Occupational Gender Segregation," is online at [gas.sagepub.com/content/early/ ... 43215608798.abstract](https://gas.sagepub.com/content/early/.../43215608798.abstract)

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