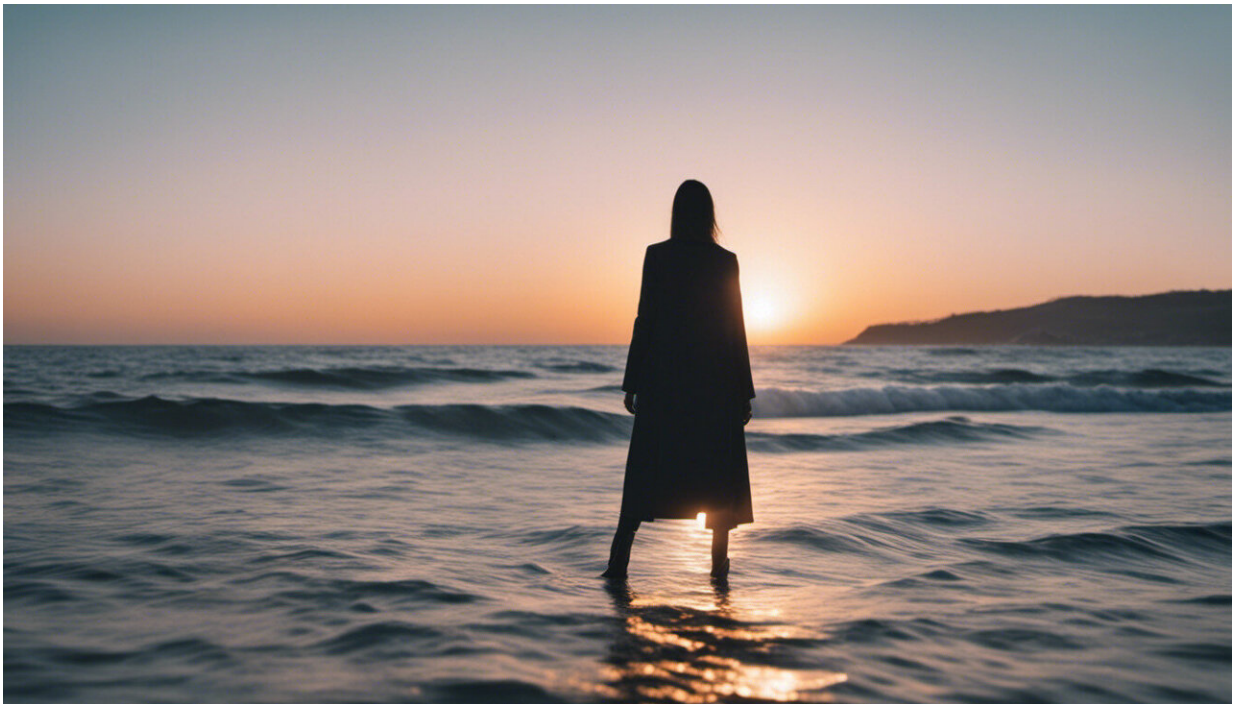


Women with greatest need may face more obstacles to full-time work

April 18 2016, by Kristie Auman-Bauer



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In the last half of the 20th century we've witnessed a seismic shift in women's employment, but paid work is a limited resource, and not all women have equal access to it, according to a Penn State researcher.

Sarah Damaske, assistant professor of labor and employment relations

and sociology, along with her colleague, Adrienne Frech, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Akron, discovered that more than 90 percent of women from their 20s into their 40s [work](#) outside the home, with more than 60 percent working at least 40 hours a week through their 20s and 30s. "Despite more women being in the paid workforce, women's employment continues to be uneven and interrupted. We wanted to find out why," Damaske said.

Previous research has focused on the relationship between work and health and reasons why women's workforce participation varies, such as time spent caring for children. Damaske wanted to explore the idea of women needing to work, and what led them to their work pathways.

She and Frech looked at women's employment data in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a survey of more than 12,000 late baby boomers born between 1957 and 1964 that collected data until 2010. They were able to identify significant differences in women's work pathways across adulthood.

"We discovered six different pathways, ranging from working over 40 hours a week outside the home to unpaid labor," reported Damaske. "We also found that these pathways were influenced by work–family conflict, race and ethnic backgrounds, family formations, early socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages and other factors. We don't know of any other research that comprehensively examines how these factors affect women's work over time."

According to Damaske, women from more privileged backgrounds had greater access to full-time work pathways. "Women with the greatest financial needs may also face the greatest barriers to continuous full-time work."

The researchers discovered that approximately one-third of all employed

women are employed part time, and that many of these are working-class or working poor, and women of color.

"We found that the cumulative effect of being disadvantaged in a number of areas may restrict poorer women's opportunities to engage in full-time, steady work. When you add in major life events such as childbearing, those with fewer resources face greater obstacles to remaining steadily employed," Damaske said.

Surprisingly, being married did not seem to lead women to follow uniform work pathways. Women who stayed at home were more likely to be married, but Damaske and Frech also found that women who were married to spouses working long hours were more likely to work more than 40 hours a week themselves. "We theorize that the women and their spouses shared similar backgrounds and education levels which made them more likely to be employed full time, and perhaps similar work pathways created an environment of marital harmony," said Damaske.

Conversely, those who held traditional gender beliefs and aspired to raise a family were more likely to stay at home than to work outside the home or balance work and family. Additionally, women who were unemployed at age 25 and looking for work were more likely to remain outside the paid labor market in later years, suggesting that women with low levels of labor force attachment were discouraged by poor employment prospects early in life.

"Our study provides evidence that women's work pathways are a product of both their resources and a changing social environment," Damaske concluded. "Privileged [women](#) seemed to be able to move in and out of the workforce easily, while those who were less privileged had a harder time reentering full- or part-time employment."

Damaske and Frech plan to replicate the study, this time focusing on

men. "It will be interesting to examine their work and health relationships, and to explore unemployment patterns and see how they compare across class and gender," Damaske said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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