

At work, women and people of color still have not broken the glass ceiling

April 29 2019, by Tesa Rigel Hines



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

Did you notice the race of your barista this morning? What about the sex of your mechanic?

I have observed that when I shop, most of the employees look like me. When I go to work, most of my co-workers look different from me.

If my observations about occupational segregation hold across the labor force, women and people of color like myself have yet to break the [glass ceiling](#). So, [I sought evidence](#) of continuing barriers to [equal employment](#) for members of historically marginalized groups.

My new study, presented at the [Midwest Political Science Association Conference on April 5](#), shows that barriers indeed remain.

Evaluating Equal Employment Opportunity

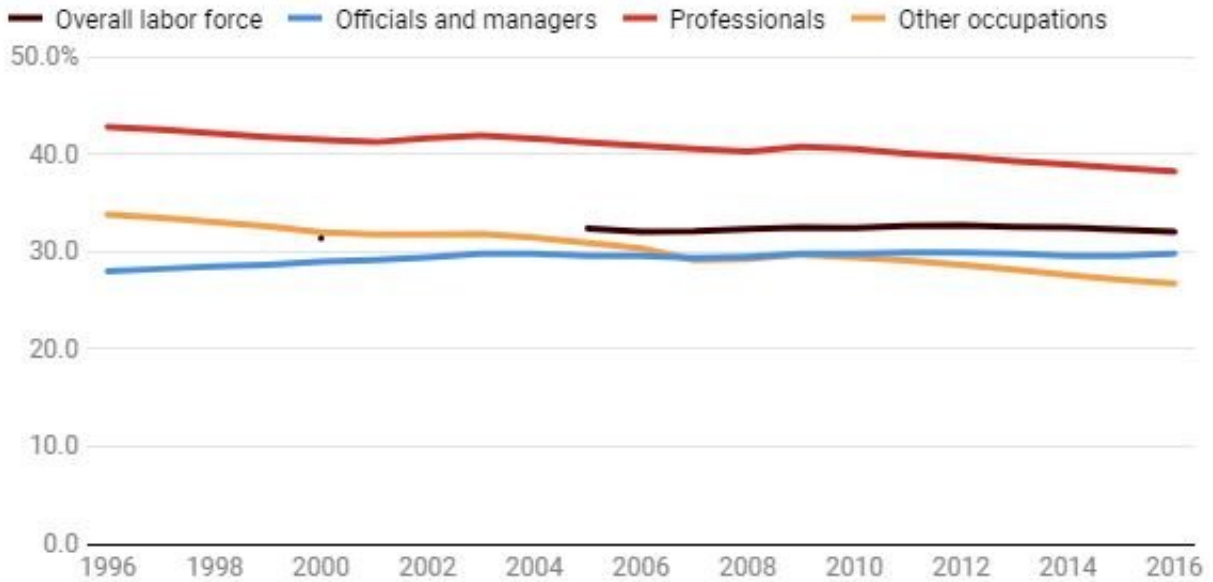
The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission regulates [Title VII of the Civil Rights Act](#). This statute outlaws discrimination, segregation and other employment actions motivated motivated by sex, race, color, religion or national origin.

As part of its regulatory activity, the EEOC requires private employers with more than 100 employees to annually complete the [EEO-1 form](#). This form asks employers to describe the race and sex of all employees, grouped by [a number of occupational categories](#).

I analyzed the high-level occupations of "professionals" – which includes engineers, lawyers, doctors and teachers – and "officials and managers." I grouped all other occupations, such as "craft workers" and "laborers," together, because they occupy lower positions on the career ladder, despite spanning industries.

White women in the workplace

In private American companies with more than 100 employees, the proportion of official and managerial jobs held by white women rose 1.82% between 1996 and 2016.



Credit: The Conversation

My study plotted [demographic trends in these groups](#) from 1996 to 2016. I then compared each demographic group's [representation in the broader labor force](#).

Women's increasing access to high-level positions

[White men](#) have historically and disproportionately held official, managerial and professional occupations.

But, between 1996 and 2016, the proportion of [jobs](#) held by this group declined across all occupations. I believe that some of this is due to the [increasing percentage](#) of people of color in the overall U.S. population.

Trends in white women's employment [representation](#) over the last 20 years suggest that Title VII is having an impact among this group.

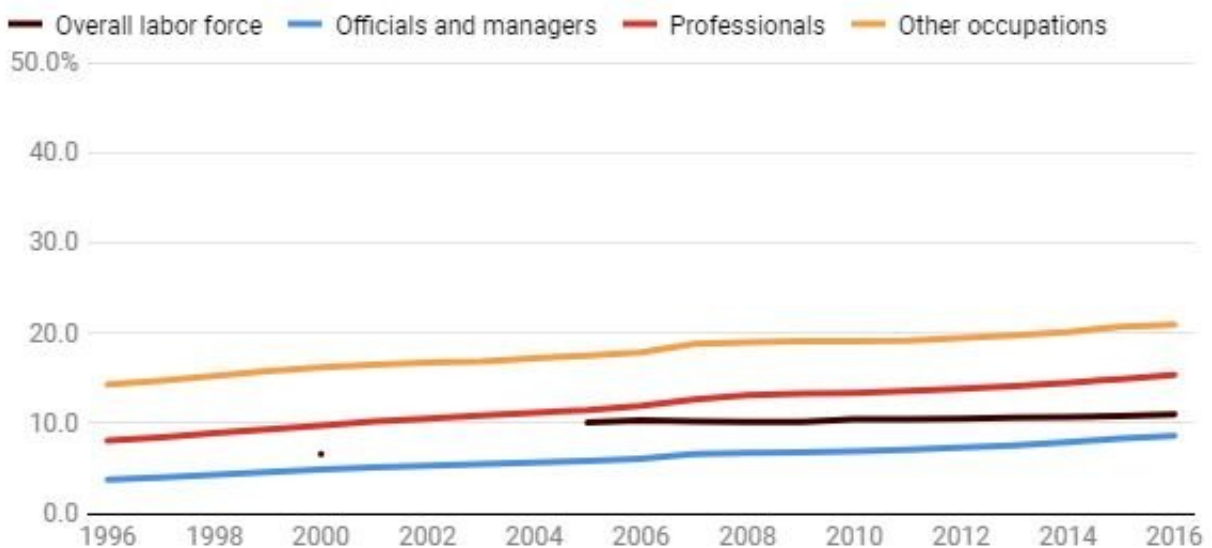
In 2016, white women made up 32% of the U.S. labor force. Although their representation in official and managerial occupations is a bit lower, at 29.8%, their numbers have been increasing.

White women are overrepresented in professional jobs, occupying 38.2% of positions. However, their share of these jobs is declining, possibly because more white women are being promoted to official and managerial roles.

Nonwhite women occupy an [intersectional social position](#), potentially facing unlawful employment barriers based on both their perceived sex and race.

Nonwhite women in the workplace

In 2016, women of color were only 10.94% of the labor force, but held 15.36% of professional occupations. Women of color were 20.89% of the employees in other occupations.



Credit: The Conversation

My study demonstrates that, like white women, [nonwhite women](#) are underrepresented in official and managerial occupations. However, their representation is increasing. In 2016, they were 10.9% of the [labor force](#) , but 8.6% of officers and managers.

Meanwhile, nonwhite women are overrepresented in professional occupations and their representation is increasing. That suggests to me that they are not being promoted from this level as white women are.

Nonwhites work lower-level jobs

In lower-level occupations, like labor and service, nonwhite women are overrepresented, and their representation is increasing. The same is true for nonwhite men.

Because the employer submits the EEO-1, employees who work more than one job may be counted multiple times. My research suggests that workers in the "other" occupational category, including those working for minimum wage, are disproportionately nonwhite, and some are likely holding more than one job.

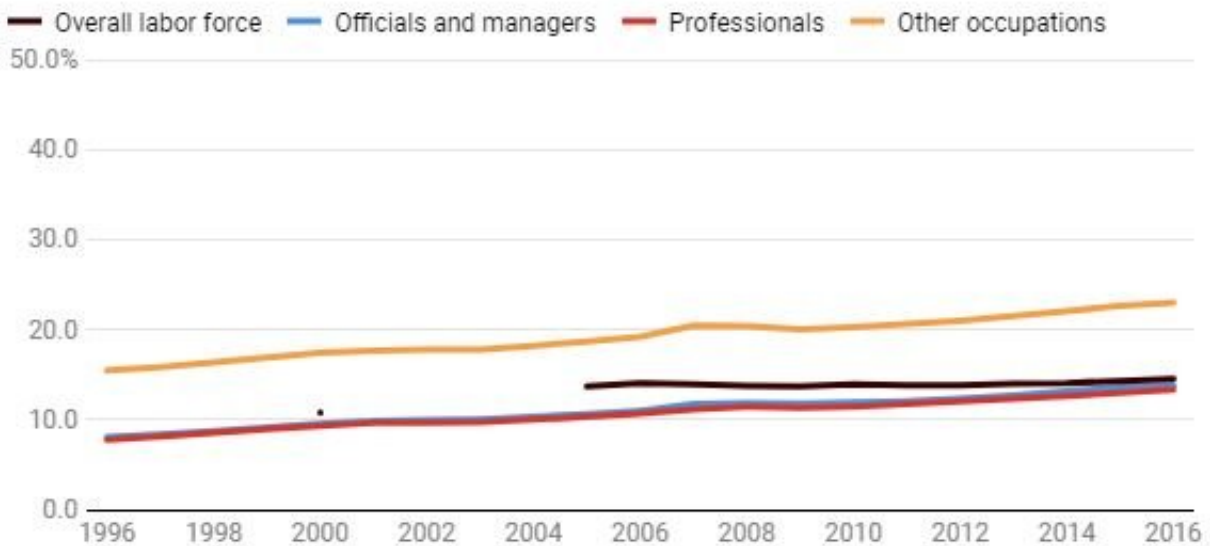
In contrast, nonwhite men are underrepresented in official, managerial and professional positions, though their representation is increasing. That may be evidence of continued discrimination, occupational segregation or other employment barriers based on race.

Presidents' unexpected impact

It is challenging to accurately evaluate [social policy](#), because there are so many factors which contribute to measurable outcomes.

Nonwhite men in the workplace

The representation of men of color across official, managerial and professional occupations in 2016 is below their 14.57% share of the labor force. However, they were 23.0% of the employees in other occupations.



My study looked at a number of variables that could potentially affect demographic representation in the job market, such as the unemployment rate, filed charges of discrimination and public opinion of affirmative action.

Of all the variables that I modeled, the impact of a Democratic president surprised me most.

When a Democrat was president, [white men](#) held a greater proportion of all high-level occupations, while the representation of [white women](#) in these jobs decreased.

During a Democratic presidency, the representation of nonwhite women in professional jobs decreased, as did the representative employment of all nonwhites in the other occupational categories.

[Previous research](#) has found that the president affects the rate of race and sex desegregation in [employment](#). In my study, Democratic presidents had a counterintuitive influence. These results are not likely attributed to presidential policy, but may indicate employer decisions driven by [political backlash against Democrats and affirmative action policy](#).

Pass the hammer

I want to expand this study to include small and government employers, wage differences across sex and race, and educational attainment.

Despite limitations, my study shows that the U.S. has made strides toward breaking the glass ceiling for [women](#). However, racial segregation across lower-level occupations remains a problem. I believe that more intervention is needed there, including the serious consideration of a higher federal minimum wage.

I am discouraged that the glass ceiling remains a solid barrier for nonwhite employees looking to be promoted. As intended in 1964, when Title VII was established, everyone should have the opportunity to succeed on their merit, regardless of identity.

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