

Movement toward gender equality has slowed in some areas, stalled in others, new five-decade study finds

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Women have made progress in earning college degrees as well as in pay and in occupations once largely dominated by men since 1970—but the pace of gains in many areas linked to professional advancement has slowed in recent decades and stalled in others, finds a new five-decade analysis.

"Substantial progress has been made toward gender equality since 1970 on employment and earnings as well as in [women](#)'s access to certain fields of study and professions," explains Paula England, a professor of sociology at New York University and the study's senior author.

"However, movement toward gender equality has slowed down, and in some cases, stalled completely."

The study, "Progress toward gender equality in the United States has slowed or stalled," appears in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* and also found that movement toward gender equity, which accelerated in the 1970s and 1980s, slowed or stopped beginning in the 1990s.

"Early changes were like picking the low-hanging fruit—the most obvious barriers came down and plenty of women jumped at the new opportunities," notes England. "Further progress will require deeper cultural and institutional change."

The analysis, which was co-authored by NYU doctoral candidates Andrew Levine and Emma Mishel, examined data for the years 1970 through 2018 from the U.S. government's Current Population Surveys and American Community Surveys, as well as from the National Center

for Education Statistics. Among the NYU research team's findings were the following:

- Women's employment (women aged 25 to 54) rose steadily from 1970 to 2000, moving from 48 percent employed in 1970 to 75 percent employed in 2000. In subsequent years, it declined, plateaued, and then declined more in the Great Recession (2008-2010), reaching a bottom of 69 percent, before rebounding to 73 percent in 2018.
- Men's median hourly earnings (in constant 2018 dollars) were approximately \$27-28/hour in the 1970s, then fell to below \$23/hour by the mid-1990s. Since then, the median went up in the late 1990s, declined during the Great Recession, and rebounded some since. But it has always been between \$22 and \$25/hour since the mid-1990s. During this same period (1970-2017), women's median earnings have always been lower than men's. In the 1970s, they were stable at about \$17/hour. They began to rise in the early 1980s and continued to do so for the rest of the decade; median earnings also rose in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Since then, they have been fairly flat at about \$20/hour.
- The ratio of women's to men's median hourly earnings was fairly stable at approximately .60 in the 1970s, then increased dramatically in the 1980s to .74. The ratio has shown a net rise in each decade since 1990, but at a much slower rate than was observed in the 1980s. By 2018, women earned 83 percent of what men did at the median earnings level. In percentage points, the rise in the past three decades (1990 to 2018) was less than it was in the single decade of the 1980s.
- For baccalaureate degrees, 76 percent as many women as men got undergraduate diplomas in 1970-71; by 2015-16, women were outpacing men, with 34 percent more women than men getting bachelor's degrees. Similarly, only 13 percent as many

women as men received doctoral degrees in 1970-71; in 2015-16, 18 percent more women than men were getting doctorates.

However, despite educational gains, occupations still show notable levels of segregation—meaning that some occupations are mostly men while others are mostly women. But, such segregation has declined in recent decades. To gauge this, the researchers examined different women's and men's distributions across occupations, dividing all jobs into approximately 70 categories. Among occupations in the analyses were managers, engineers, natural scientists, K-12 teachers, retail sales workers, secretaries, police, firefighters, and farmers.

The researchers calculated the index of dissimilarity for the occupational categories, an index in which 0 signifies no segregation and 1 constitutes total segregation. The researchers' analysis showed that segregation of occupations has fallen steadily since 1970, moving from .60 to .42. However, it moved much faster in the 1970s and 1980s than it has since 1990: segregation dropped by .12 in the 20-year period after 1970, but by a much smaller .05 in the quarter of a century after 1990.

For fields requiring a college degree, occupational segregation results in part from women and men getting degrees in different fields. To assess how much the segregation of fields have study has changed, England and colleagues looked at national data from the National Center for Education Statistics that classify the fields in which people get degrees into 17 broad categories, including biology, business, journalism, computer science, education, engineering, English, psychology, social sciences, and arts.

The type of baccalaureate degrees men and women got reveals persistent, though declining, segregation. For undergraduate degrees, the segregation index has dropped from .47 in 1970 to .33 in 2015, but the drop was not continuous—segregation declined until it reached .28 in

1998 and has come up again slightly since. For doctoral degrees, the index moved from .35 in 1970 to a low of .18 in 1987 and has not gone lower since—in fact, it has risen slightly. Thus, desegregation of both levels of degrees has stalled for 20 or more years.

This enduring [segregation](#) is important because, the researchers note, for the one third of adult Americans who have a baccalaureate degree or more, occupation and earnings are strongly affected by their field of study.

"The slowdown on some indicators and stall on others suggests that further progress requires substantial institutional and cultural change," concludes England. "Progress may require increases in men's participation in household and [care work](#), government-funded child care, and adoption by employers of policies that reduce gender bias and help both men and women combine jobs with family care responsibilities."

More information: Paula England et al., "Progress toward gender equality in the United States has slowed or stalled," *PNAS* (2020).

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