

# FEATURES

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SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2009

## Women set to surpass men in American labor force

*A deep and prolonged recession in the US may change not only household budgets and habits; it may also challenge longstanding gender roles*

BY CATHERINE RAMPPELL  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

With the recession on the brink of becoming the longest in the postwar era, a milestone may be at hand: Women are poised to surpass men on the nation's payrolls, taking the majority for the first time in US history.

The reason has less to do with gender equality than with where the ax is falling.

The proportion of women who are working has changed very little since the recession started. But a full 82 percent of the job losses have befallen men, who are heavily represented in distressed industries like manufacturing and construction. Women tend to be employed in areas like education and health care, which are less sensitive to economic ups and downs, and in jobs that allow more time for child care and other domestic work.

"Given how stark and concentrated the job losses are among men, and that women represented a high proportion of the labor force in the beginning of this recession, women are now bearing the burden — or the opportunity, one could say — of being breadwinners," says Heather Boushey, a senior economist at the Center for American Progress.

In the US, economists have predicted before that women would one day dominate the labor force as more ventured outside the home. The number of women entering the work force slowed and even dipped during the boom



Deborah and John Baruch walk their dog in Arlington Heights, Illinois. John Baruch was laid off in January of last year, making his wife the main breadwinner in the family. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

years earlier this decade, though, prompting a debate about whether women truly wanted to be both breadwinners and caregivers.

Should the male-dominated layoffs of the current recession continue — and Friday's jobs report for January may offer more insight — the debate will be moot. A deep and prolonged recession, therefore, may change not only household budgets and habits; it may also challenge longstanding gender roles.

In recessions, the percentage of families supported by women tends to rise slightly, and it is expected to do so when this year's numbers are tallied. As

of November, women held 49.1 percent of jobs in the US, according to nonfarm payroll data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. By another measure, including farm workers and the self-employed, women constituted 47.1 percent of the work force.

Women may be safer in their jobs, but tend to find it harder to support a family. For one thing, they work fewer overall hours than men. Women are much more likely to be in part-time jobs without health insurance or, for that matter, unemployment insurance. Even when working in full-time jobs, women earn only 80 percent of their male counterparts' income,

according to the government data. "A lot of jobs that men have lost in fields like manufacturing were good union jobs with great health care plans," says Christine Owens, executive director of the National Employment Law Project. "The jobs women have — and are supporting their families with — are not necessarily as good."

Nasreen Mohammed, for example, works five days a week, 51 weeks a year, without sick days or health benefits.

She runs a small day care business out of her home in Milpitas, California, and recently expanded her services to include after-school care. The business brings in about

US\$30,000 annually, she says, far less than the US\$150,000 her husband earned in the marketing and sales job he lost over a year ago. "It's peanuts," she says.

She switched from being a full-time homemaker to a full-time businesswoman when her husband was laid off previously. She said she unexpectedly discovered that she loves her job, even if it is demanding.

Still, her husband, Javed, says he and their three children — who are in third grade, junior college and law school — worry about her health, and hope things can "return to the old days."

"In terms of the financial benefit from her work, we all benefit," he

says. "But in terms of getting my wife's attention, from the youngest daughter to our oldest, we can't wait for the day that my job is secure and she doesn't have to do day care anymore."

American women like Mohammed find themselves at the head of once-separate spheres: work and household. While women appear to be sole breadwinners in greater numbers, they are likely to have the most responsibilities at home.

On average, employed women devote much more time to child care and housework than employed men do, according to an analysis of recent data from the Labor Department's American Time Use Survey by two economists, Alan B. Krueger and Andreas Mueller.

When women are unemployed and looking for a job, the time they spend daily taking care of children nearly doubles. Unemployed men's child care duties, by contrast, are virtually identical to those of their working counterparts, and they instead spend more time sleeping, watching TV and looking for a job, along with other domestic activities.

Many of the unemployed men interviewed say they have tried to help out with cooking, veterinarian appointments and other chores, but they have not had time to do more because job-hunting consumes their days.

"The main priority is finding a job and putting in the time to do that," says John Baruch, in Arlington Heights, Illinois, who estimates he spends 35 to 45 hours a week looking for work since being laid off in January 2008.

The Mohammads say things are not as stressful for them as they were the last time that Mohammed lost his job. He has been helping out with the cooking and with paperwork for his wife's business, and she says she works to prop up family morale.

"Things are not happy in the house if I blame him all the time, so I don't do any of that anymore," Nasreen Mohammed says. "I know he is doing his best."

### [ ENVIRONMENT ]

## 'Bioprospecting' strains goals of Antarctic Treaty

*Companies are getting more interested in research into Antarctica, which has yielded patents helping everything from medicines to ice cream production*

BY ALISTER DOYLE  
REUTERS, ROTHERA BASE, ANTARCTICA



A seal swims by icebergs off the British Antarctic Survey's Rothera base. PHOTO: REUTERS

Fifty years into a treaty demanding all scientific findings on Antarctica be freely shared, governments are trying to end a dispute over a surge in company patents on life in the continent.

An increasing number of companies developing new products through biological discovery or "bioprospecting" are trying to file patents on Antarctic organisms or molecules for items from cosmetics to medicines, putting new strains on the treaty.

"Biology is going through a revolution ... it's a tricky situation," Jose Retamales, head of the Chilean Antarctic Institute, said of the lack of clear rules for prospecting for animals and plants on the continent.

Parties to the 1959 Antarctic Treaty plan to debate issues including bioprospecting at an annual meeting commemorating "50 years of peace and science" in the US city of Baltimore from April 6 to April 17. They have agreed to submit suggestions by Feb. 20.

"We need to find out if it is a problem and if so, what is the problem," said Johannes Huber, head of the Antarctic Treaty Secretariat in Buenos Aires. Governments "have not found a consensus," he added.

The treaty setting the continent aside for peace and science was originally intended to defuse bigger conflicts over territorial claims during the Cold War, Retamales said.

"The world has changed. Now we are talking about different things — things you do not even see." The treaty forbids mining but permits other commercial uses of Antarctica. Bioprospecting is allowed, unless it has military goals.



Moss grows on the Antarctic Peninsula's Merger peak. PHOTO: REUTERS

Retamales and several other experts said a desire by companies for patents — securing them exclusive commercial rights — was often hard to square with goals of openness and shared science laid out in the 47-nation treaty.

The treaty says: "Scientific observations and results from Antarctica shall be exchanged and made freely available." All plans for scientific programs should be exchanged in advance to ensure efficiency and economy, it adds.

Products derived from Antarctica include dietary supplements, anti-freeze proteins, anti-cancer drugs, enzymes and cosmetic creams. Advances in genetic technologies make Antarctic "bioprospecting" easier.

### FACE CREAM

"Using genetic resources means very often that you are having an economic activity for a company," said Yves Frenot, deputy head of the French Polar Institute. "That is difficult to reconcile with ... the Antarctic Treaty."

"More and more companies are looking to Antarctica," said Sam Johnston, a senior research fellow at the UN University's Institute of Advanced Studies.

"We expect this trend to

accelerate," he said. Antarctic organisms have evolved attractive characteristics for industry, such as conserving energy and surviving in a deep freeze.

Dozens of companies including consumer products groups Procter and Gamble and Unilever, French cosmetics group Clarins and Danish drugmaker Novo Nordisk are in a UNU database of almost 200 "bioprospecting" bodies.

Clarins, for instance, uses an algae — *Durvillea antarctica* — in a face cream, the database says. Unilever has a patent based on an anti-freeze protein in a bacteria found in an Antarctic lake that may help keep ice cream smooth.

Johnston said there were similar trends of more research into organisms found in the high seas and on the deep seabed, despite uncertainties about rights outside national waters. In Antarctica, all territorial claims are on hold under the treaty.

Coastal regions of Antarctica, like that around the British Rothera research station on the Antarctic Peninsula, teem with life, from penguins and whales to lichens and microbes.

"Our view is that we can't patent organisms themselves but we can have patents on

processes discovered in Antarctic organisms," said Pete Convey, a Rothera station biologist.

Frenot said doubts about the treaty should not block a cancer treatment, for instance, found in an Antarctic creature or plant and patented after costly research by a company. "It would be a pity not to use such resources, but there are no rules. We have to invent those rules," he said.

Part of the attraction of Antarctica is that it separated from South America ago and life has evolved with few outside influences.

### EXOTIC FORMS

"You'd have to go to Mars or perhaps another planet" to find species so different from those elsewhere in the world, said Retamales. Uncharted lakes beneath Antarctica's ice sheets, such as Vostok Lake that Russia hopes to drill into, may contain even more exotic life forms.

Much current research involves studying cells, for instance of microbes found by a government scientific agency and later grown in a corporate laboratory far from the Antarctic. "That means there are few expeditions that might harm the environment."

Johnston said there were worries — but no evidence — that corporate involvement might make researchers delay publication of key scientific findings until patent applications were filed.

He said one idea was to tax profits from Antarctic-based products and plough cash back into Antarctic science, with special help for poor countries. The US and Japan seemed most reluctant to impose rules that would limit corporate access, he said.