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Preface: Women and Work: Where Are We, Where Did We Come From, and Where Are We Going?

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The obstacles faced by today's women in the workplace bear out the truth in the old adage that history repeats itself. The maternal wall, the ideal worker, and the ideal homemaker beliefs are current iterations of the century-old tendency to mark women as suited for the home and men as suited for the workplace (Albee & Perry, 1998; Coltrane, 1996; Mintz, 2000). The belief that the sexes are vastly different—with different needs, values, and abilities—has been a hallmark throughout the history of both women and men in both the workplace and the home (Ferree, 1990; Williams, 2000). Generally speaking, these beliefs have been detrimental to all concerned (Barnett & Rivers, 2004).

The obstacles faced by today's women in the workplace confirm the adage that history repeats itself. The maternal wall, the ideal worker, and the ideal homemaker beliefs are current iterations of the century-old tendency to mark women as suited for the home and men as suited for the workplace (Albee & Perry, 1998; Coltrane, 1996; Mintz, 2000). The belief that the sexes are vastly different—with different needs, values, and abilities—has been a hallmark throughout the history of women and men in the workplace and the home (Ferree, 1990; Williams, 2000). Generally, these beliefs have been detrimental to all concerned (Barnett & Rivers, 2004). Because of the thrust of this issue, my focus will be on women and the workplace.

Myths about gender differences are internalized and thereby shape behavior not only directly but also indirectly through the expectation that others will penalize behaviors that violate gendered expectations (Glick & Fiske, 1999). For example, women may feel guilty about working long hours or traveling for work because to do so violates the expectation that their families must come first (Steil, 2000).

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Even without such feelings, they may refuse prized opportunities, concerned that colleagues will view them as derelict in their *maternal* responsibilities. Similarly, men may hesitate to take family leave because to do so would be tantamount to failing to fulfill their provider role (Hyde, Essex, Clark, Klein, & Janis, 1996) or because colleagues and supervisors might see them as inadequately committed to work—a major violation of the breadwinner prescription of the male role (Coltrane, 1996).

Although the specific gender-difference beliefs and the specific workplace penalties associated with them have changed, the pattern remains the same (Steil, 2000). Workplace inequities are *explained* by women's inherent limitations, with organizational and legal barriers to women's advancement routinely ignored (Albee & Perry, 1998). However, recent trends offer hope that the structure underlying these beliefs may finally be eroding, thus ending their seemingly ceaseless reincarnations. In the remainder of this article, I present an overview of the history of these myths during the past century, a discussion of the current situation, and some thoughts about the future.

History

Historically, women have been seen as the weaker sex, needing protection from the cruelties of the outside world, whereas men have been seen as stronger, more able, and better suited to the rigors of the workplace (Albee & Perry, 1998; Ferree, 1990). Belief in these strikingly different stereotypes enabled employers to refuse to hire single women of "marriageable age," to fire women when they married (after all, their job was to take care of the family while their husband's job was to financially provide), and to refuse to hire married women (Kessler-Harris, 2001). In 1900, roughly 40 percent of single women were employed versus only five percent of married women (Preston, 2003). This 35 percent gap persisted for many years. Goldin (1992), in a study of women college graduates in the twentieth century, concluded that those graduating between 1900 and 1920 had to make "a distinct choice between family and career" (p. 10–11).

These beliefs kept men out of the home also. It was widely thought that men's inherent nature ill-suited them to the domestic world (Chodorow, 1974). Men's special talents matched the requirements of the workplace, where they were expected to devote their full energies. To fulfill the provider role, married men often worked inordinately long hours, forgoing any real relationship with their children and relegating their wives to full-time parenting (Mintz, 2000).

A particularly striking and well-documented example of the conflict between family and career is found in the history of women in teaching (Weiler, 1997). Although teaching was one of the few career options open to educated women in the early 1900s, it was definitely not a family-friendly occupation. In fact, teaching was one of the most restrictive careers in terms of excluding married women (but

not married men; Padmanabhan, 2000). Thus, the problem of the marriage wall preceded the current problem of the maternal wall. In a study of Radcliffe graduates of the classes of 1900 to 1930, the vast majority of those entering the labor market became teachers. And teaching was,

> precisely the occupation that, in the first half of the twentieth century, most prevented college-educated women from combining family responsibilities with a career. In this period, school systems instituted formal bars against the employment and retention of married women. Consequently, few women combined marriage and career, did so only for short periods of time and did so only later in life. (Preston, 2003, p. 351)

Bans on married female teachers remained in many communities until the late1950s (Preston, 2003). Even after marriage bans were lifted, pregnancy bans remained until the late 1960s (Preston, personal communication, December 1, 2003). Teachers, as soon as they announced their pregnancies, were expected to put down their lesson plans, say goodbye to their pupils, and leave the school. They were not given leave—they were simply dismissed. This history exemplifies the cost to women (and society) of highly gendered beliefs.

Such bans and the gender-difference myths that justified them were contested during World War II, when shortages of civilian male labor led to loosening restrictions on female labor (Kossoudj & Dresser, 1992). When the soldiers went to the front, single and married women, with or without children, were recruited for "heavy work," previously thought suitable only for manly men (Albee & Perry, 1998). Rosie the Riveter was born and glorified. Among married Radcliffe graduates with and without children, some in the class of 1920 "found an opportunity to return to teaching during World War II when male teachers entered the armed services" (Preston, in press, p. 260).

After the war, women were pushed out of the factories to make room for the returning soldiers, and the myth of the uniquely caring, nurturant mother took hold (Kossoudj & Dresser, 1992). According to this version of the gender-difference myth, only mothers have the special innate abilities needed to promote children's healthy development. Needless to say, this myth permitted employers to fire pregnant women. It also kept many women from seeking employment when their children were young (Williams, 2000).

A dramatic example of the extent to which these gender-difference myths were institutionalized can be seen in the fact that as late as 1961, the Supreme Court ruled that it was constitutional to exclude women from jury duty unless they explicitly wrote to request inclusion, on the grounds that their family roles took precedence, even for unmarried or childless women (McDonagh, 1996):

> Despite the enlightened emancipation of women from the restrictions and protections of bygone years, and their entry into many parts of community life formerly considered to be reserved to men, woman is still regarded as the center of home and family life. We cannot say that it is constitutionally impermissible for a state acting in pursuit of the general welfare to conclude that a woman should be relieved from the civic duty of jury service. (Hoyt v. Florida, 1961, pp. 61–62)

This ruling was not overturned until 1975 (Taylor v. Louisiana).

In the 1970s, external pressures, this time emanating from the economy, drove a stake into the myth of the uniquely nurturant mother. As men's wages began to stagnate and the family wage became a thing of the past, more and more women streamed into the workplace, entering fields previously thought fit only for men (Coltrane, 1996; Steil, 2000). The most dramatic increase in women's labor force participation was among women with very young children (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2003). Strikingly, by 2000, the gap in labor force participation between single and married women dropped from 35 percent to only eight percent (Goldin, 1992; Heymann, 2000). With the spectacular increase in women's labor force participation came a related surge in dual-earner couples (Gilbert & Rader, 2001).

Current Situation

Insight into the current situation can be gained by examining certain demographic and attitudinal trends for women and men. Changes in women's educational and professional attainments are chipping away at traditional notions of appropriate female roles and further undermining myths of extreme gender differences (Gilbert & Rader, 2001; Steil, 2000). More women than men now receive bachelor's and master's degrees, and women are fast approaching parity with men with doctor's degrees (Caplow, Hicks, & Wattenberg, 2001). Women now comprise roughly half of the incoming classes in law and medicine and about one-third of first-year MBA students (Catalyst, University of Michigan Business School & Center for the Education of Women, 2000), and 45 percent of the incoming class at MIT (personal communication, November 14, 2003).

In addition, with the lengthening life span and sharply decreased fertility, a woman's child-bearing and child-rearing years are confined to an ever smaller proportion of life, and activities outside the home take up a larger proportion of a woman's life. With 40 percent of wives in dual-earner couples earning salaries equal to or larger than their husbands' (Bond, Thompson, Galinsky, & Prottas, 2003; Freeman, 2000) and with women functioning as the economic mainstay of most single-parent families (Fields & Casper, 2001), any penalties incurred because of outdated ideas about women's inherent drives or interests unfairly affect millions of children.

Coincident with this increase in women's labor force participation is an increase in men's participation in family work, i.e., household tasks and child care (Coltrane, 1996). Between 1977 and 2002, full-time employed men significantly increased their time in household and child care tasks, whereas women's time in these tasks remained the same or decreased (Bond et al., 2003). The gap between women's and men's time spent on household tasks on non-workdays decreased from 3.0 hours to 1.0, and the gap on workdays narrowed from 2.5 hours to 1.0 (Bond et al., 2003). For child care tasks, the non-workday gap decreased from 2.1

to 1.9 hours, and the workday gap decreased from 1.4 to 0.8 hours. One effect of these changes is that in 2002, children in dual-earner families spent more time with parents than they did in 1977 (Bond et al., 2003). And men are not just "putting in" more time; they are actually performing well in these historically maternal roles. Several studies suggest that men with primary child care responsibility are indistinguishable from mothers in nurturing abilities (Coltrane, 1996; Risman, 1998). Although women are more likely than men to disrupt their careers to handle child care responsibilities, men are just as likely as women to take time from work for elder care (Bond et al., 2003).

Attitudes are shifting also. Most men and women today endorse gender-role attitudes supporting women's expanded social roles (Steil, 2000). A new consensus is developing—one reflecting increasingly egalitarian gender-role beliefs (Gilbert & Rader, 2001). For example, in a study of high-school seniors' gender-role attitudes, the percentage of males and females endorsing "traditional" (i.e., role-segregated) attitudes declined 17 percent between 1980 and 1997 (Cornell Employment and Family Careers Institute, 1999). A similar trend was reported among college freshmen: Between 1970 and 1995, men's and women's attitudes became more egalitarian, with men's attitudes showing more dramatic change (Twenge, 1997). In a 2000 survey, for the first time, more men between the ages of 21 and 39 endorsed the importance of work schedules allowing for more family time (82%) than those who endorsed such traditionally male values as challenging work (74%), job security (58%), high salary (46%), or high job prestige (27%; Radcliffe Public Policy Center, 2000). Surprisingly, almost as many men as women (82% vs. 86%) endorsed the importance of family-friendly work schedules. In a sample of 300 full-time employed dual-earner couples, although wives were more likely than husbands to be egalitarian, in 42.3 percent of the couples, the husband was either more egalitarian than or as egalitarian as his wife (James, Barnett, & Brennan, 1998). Lastly, the most recent National Study of the Changing Workforce (Bond et al., 2003) revealed a 32 percent decline in traditional gender-role attitudes among men over the previous 25 years: 42 percent of men surveyed in 2002 felt that women's *appropriate* role was to tend the home and children while men earned money, down from 74 percent of male respondents in 1977 (Bond et al., 2003). Taken together, these studies suggest widespread and growing acceptance of egalitarian social roles for women and men.

In the face of all these changes, why do women employees still face obstacles to advancement? The answer has to do, at least in part, with a new version of the gender-difference myth. Now that women have demonstrated that they have the ability and the motivation to achieve at work (Barnett et al., 1998; Stroh & Brett, 1996), we are led to believe that women have lower status jobs because they choose them. And women who have attained power are being asked whether they even want it (Sellers, 2003). According to Harvard's evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker (2002), occupational segregation is a natural reflection of men's

and women's different genetic endowments: In his words, "Women, on average, are more likely to choose administrative support jobs that offer lower pay in air-conditioned offices. Men are greater risk takers, and that is reflected in their career paths even when qualifications are held constant" (p. 356).

Interestingly, this new version of the old gender-difference myth emerged just as several studies suggest weakening support for older views of appropriate gender roles. This new iteration of the myth of great, deep-rooted gender differences in nurturing and achieving is reinforced by a seemingly endless stream of trade books and magazine articles suggesting women don't want power and that women who achieve high status in the workplace drop out (Belkin, 2003; Sellers, 2003). As long as these myths continue to thrive and be reinvented, women will be penalized in the workplace and men will be penalized in the home.

The Future

If men's workplace behavior changes in accordance with their changing gender-role attitudes, more men will take time away from work for family reasons and therefore experience a wage penalty. Recent data suggest that although men's absence from work for family reasons may be protected by policies, it is generally less acceptable and more subject to sanctions (i.e., short- and long-term wage penalties) than women's (Huang, 2004). Indeed, it appears that absences of any kind are met with greater penalties to men's than to women's wages: ". . .[T]he wage gap between men who have absences and men who do not is greater than the wage gap between women who have job absences and women who do not" (Huang, 2004, p. 24). Although more research is needed, men in dual-earner couples who have children may experience a "fatherhood" penalty (Stroh & Brett, 1996). If this penalty proves to be real, it will further fuel workplace reform. More men will join women in railing against the deleterious effects of gender-difference myths and may force a rethinking of the bases of these hopelessly simplistic and outdated ideas. If women continue to provide substantial income to their families, they will be less tolerant of the motherhood gap.

The way out of the gender-difference trap is to realize that both men and women have nurturing and achieving capacities and ambitions that they want to exercise, and neither sex has unique abilities suitable for only one of these two major life arenas (Coltrane, 1996; Gilbert & Rader, 2001). With these realizations, barriers will fall. The maternal wall, the ideal worker, and the ideal homemaker cannot persist against the strong protests of real working men and women unwilling to have their lives so adversely affected.

Finally, there is a growing intolerance of unscientific and outdated gender-difference-based obstacles to women's workplace advancement. The combination of notable shifts in men's attitudes toward men's and women's appropriate work and family roles, the growing awareness of the inequities faced by women in the

workplace, and the increasingly active role of lawyers in pushing for legal reforms to prevent the most egregious forms of gender discrimination may eventually break the pattern of gender myths being destroyed only to be resurrected in slightly different form (Williams, 2000, 2002). This, as we have seen, has been the history of women in the workplace for over a century.

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