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The Well-Being of Working Women in Times of Economic Crisis and Recovery: Insights from the Great Recession

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Chapter

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Abstract

The Great Recession drew new attention to the importance of gender in the U.S. economy. Popular analyses of the recession's impacts emphasized the higher rates of job loss among men than women, leading some to rename the Great Recession the "Great Mancession." With the onset of a weak recovery the "Mancession" gave way to a "Mancovery," where unemployment rates increased for women as they declined for men. Recently, women's employment has increased, but in types of work that give rise to

questions of job quality and the future economic prospects of women workers. This chapter provides a broad overview of the impacts of the Great Recession on the well-being of women workers in the United States, blending discussions of descriptive statistics with influential interpretative narratives of the recession's impacts. Insights from emerging feminist economic analyses of the Great Recession and the well-being of women workers provide a framework for examining the changing positions of women in the recovery and developing questions for future research.

Keywords

[Austerity](#)

[Breadwinners](#)

[Feminist economics](#)

[Great Recession](#)

[Industry/occupational segmentation](#)

[Labor force participation](#)

[Mancession](#)

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Notes

1. For detailed economic histories of women workers in the United States see Kessler-Harris ([1982](#)) and Amott and Matthaei ([1996](#)).
2. The Business Cycle Dating Committee of the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) determines the official reference dates (beginning and end) of business cycles in the

United States. The NBER defines a recession as a “significant decline in economic activity spread across the economy, lasting more than a few months, normally visible in real GDP, real income, employment, industrial production and wholesale-retail sales” (Leamer [2008](#), p. 6).

3. There are different schools of institutional economics; as the term is used here it refers to the “original institutional economics” – the American and European traditions in institutional economics rooted in the works of Thorstein Veblen, Karl Polanyi and Gunnar Myrdal (see Jennings [1993](#) for a detailed discussion).
4. Two important volumes bring together representative research in this area. The first volume, *Women and Recession*, edited by Jill Rubery (originally published in 1988 and reissued in 2011), examines the experiences of women in times of recession in the United States, France, Italy and Britain. The second volume, *Women and Austerity*, edited by Maria Karamessini and Jill Rubery (published in 2013), examines the impacts of the Great Recession and associated austerity policies in United States, across the European Union (EU), and in particular EU nations (Iceland, Britain, Hungary, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and Italy).
5. The officially reported labor force statistics are based on data collected (for the civilian, non-institutional population) by the U.S. Bureau of

Labor Statistics (BLS) in the Current Population Survey (CPS), a monthly survey of about 60,000 households that asks questions about the labor force activities of all individuals 16 years of age and older living in the household. According to the BLS definition, the “labor force” includes all individuals 16 years of age and older who are “employed” (worked for pay or profit during the week of the survey) or “unemployed” (did not have a job but actively sought paid employment during the 4 weeks prior to the week of the survey). (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [2009](#); Blau et al. [2010](#), p. 77; Grown and Tas [2011](#), pp. 167–168).

6. The very rapid increase in female labor force participation rates slowed in the early 1990s and remained roughly constant up to the time of the Great Recession (Blau et al. [2010](#), p. 91). This plateau in female labor force participation rates prompted a debate as to whether or not the United States was experiencing an “opt out revolution,” particularly among highly educated women with children (see Blau et al. [2010](#), pp. 122–123 for an overview of this discussion).
7. This pattern in female and male unemployment rates continued as the U.S. economy entered the Great Recession. In 2007, the average annual female unemployment rate was 4.5 %, very similar to the average annual male rate of 4.7 %. With the onset on the Great Recession (December 2007), male and female unemployment rates

began to diverge, and by December 2008 the male unemployment rate was significantly higher than the female unemployment rate – a pattern that continued throughout the downturn (Blau et al. [2010](#), p. 87).

8. Women's underrepresentation in the top jobs in corporate America has been attributed to the barrier of the "glass ceiling." See Chamberlain [1999](#) for a detailed discussion.
9. Full-time, year- round workers are defined as those who work 35 h or more a week for 50 weeks or more a year (Blau et al. [2010](#), p. 141).
10. During the 1990s, the pace of the increase of women's earnings relative to men's slowed and became more erratic in the 2000s. See Blau et al. [2010](#), p. 141 for a detailed discussion.
11. In these discussions, the term "workforce" was typically used to refer to total employment, as opposed to the labor force, which includes both the employed and unemployed. English et al. ([2010](#)) provide an explanation of the measurement of women's share of the workforce and an analysis of the claims that women were attaining workforce parity with men.
12. *The Economist* magazine also featured this trend very prominently in an issue with "Rosie the Riveter" on the cover, exclaiming "We Did

It!” and raising the question: “What happens when women are over half the workforce?” An accompanying editorial proclaimed that: “At a time when the world is short of causes for celebration, here is a candidate: within the next few months women will cross the 50 % threshold and become the majority of the American workforce” (*The Economist* [2010](#)).

13. “Breadwinner mothers” were defined as single mothers who work and married mothers who earn as much or more than their husbands. “Co-breadwinner mothers” were defined as married mothers whose earnings constituted at least 25 %, but less than 50 %, of the couple’s earnings (Boushey and O’Leary [2009](#), p. 19).
14. According to the BLS definition of unemployment, individuals without jobs must be actively seeking work to be counted as “unemployed.” Individuals who have looked for a job in the recent past but who stopped looking are, therefore, classified as being out of the labor force and not included in the official unemployment statistics. In addition, some individuals may be counted as employed but working fewer hours than they would like. To capture these broader dimensions of labor underutilization, the BLS computes a range of alternative “unemployment” measures from the CPS including different categories of “marginally attached workers” who have given up looking for work and workers employed less than

their preferred hours (Grown and Tas [2011](#), pp. 175–177; Haugen [2009](#)).

15. The BLS categorizes part-time workers who work less than their preferred number of hours due to “economic reasons” (such as weak business conditions or the inability to find a full time job) as “involuntary part-time workers” and those working part-time due to “non-economic reasons” (such as personal or family obligations) as “voluntary part-time workers” (Grown and Tas [2011](#), p. 176; Blau et al. [2010](#), p. 78).
16. Research findings that the duration of unemployment was similar for men and women – and that once unemployed, women did find jobs more quickly than men – suggested that once the heavily male-dominated industries that lost so many jobs in the recession even began to *slow down* their layoffs, gender patterns in employment and unemployment would shift and men’s share of employment would slowly begin to increase (Mulligan [2009b](#)).
17. For example, Albelda reports that a 22 % decline in state and local government revenues between July 2007 and July 2008 created the biggest budget shortfalls on record (Albelda [2013](#), p. 82).
18. The BLS reports monthly, seasonally adjusted, unemployment rates on its website (www.bls.gov).

19. Both the Institute for Women's Policy Research (www.iwpr.org) and the National Women's Law Center (www.nwlc.org) published a series of updates on the trends in women's employment in the recession and recovery.

20. Defining the "government sector" to include federal, state and local government employment, Kochhar reports that from June 2009 to May 2011 women lost 297,000 government sector jobs while men lost 133,000 (Kochhar [2011](#), p. 3).

21. See Luo ([2010](#)) for a brief overview of studies on "the low-wage recovery."

22. Although temporary hiring in a recovery is viewed by many economists as a leading indicator of future permanent hiring, continued high unemployment and growth of the temporary help sector has raised concerns that temporary employment is becoming a permanent feature of the post-Great Recession economy. See for example Nash and Romero ([2011](#)), Rugaber ([2013](#)) and Hatton ([2013](#)).

23. In August 2013, the official labor force participation rate was 63.2 %, the lowest it has been since August 1978 (Hargreaves [2013](#)).

24. Since 2005 women have comprised the

majority of college graduates (Katz and Tanzi [2013](#)) and roughly equal proportions of men and women earn a college degree (Porter [2013](#)). For an interesting overview of the debate regarding the impacts of young women leaving the labor force for education in the Great Recession, see The New York Times Room for Debate: Will Women Get Ahead by Going Back to School? January 11, 2012

<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/01/11/will-women-get-ahead-by-going-back-to-school>.

25. Recent analysis by Hoynes et al. ([2012](#)) provides a very in-depth look at “Who Suffers During Recessions?”

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