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

| Chapter
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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.

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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.

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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

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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-

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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).

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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

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Editor information

Editors and Affiliations

**Department of Management College of Business Administration,
University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa, USA**

Mary L. Connerley

**Department of Management and Marketing School of Management, Rhode
Island College, Providence, Rhode Island, USA**

Jiyun Wu

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