

Black Women in the Labor Force

Angela James, Department of Sociology, University of Southern California

Introduction

In the last several decades the labor market experiences have changed dramatically. Although Black women have long been a part of the active labor force, their presence has long been limited to a narrow set of occupations. The range of occupations with significant proportions of Black women has expanded in recent decades. Most significantly, Black women are no longer over-represented in maid, and housekeeper occupations. Black women had been concentrated in these occupations since slavery. Despite this rosy picture of Black women's occupational gains, many Black women remain concentrated in low paying jobs, or locked out of the labor market all together. In this review, I will explore research that relates to various aspects of economic change in the last several decades as they have impacted the labor market experiences of Black women.

The dramatic increase in labor force participation, earnings and occupational upgrading of women is widely noted (Smith and Ward, 1985; Reskin and Roos, 1990; Sokoloff, 1992; Nakano-Glenn, 1992; Norwood, 1982). Many studies have focused on the reduction of wage gaps between various groups during the past thirty years (Cocoran and Parrot, 1992; Bernhart and Morris, 1995). In particular, the reduction of wage gaps between Black women and White women during this period have been touted as an illustration of Black women's economic gains (Blau and Bellar, 1992). And while the economic shifts of the last three decades have been generally favorable to the employment and earnings of women across the board, they have been unfavorable to men, particularly Black men with limited education (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982; Wilson, 1987, 1997). Where Black women should be placed in estimations of the winners and losers of economic restructuring remains murky at best. Black women present an anomalous picture. Although Black women have shared in some of the occupational upgrading and wage increases of all women, they nonetheless remain part of increasingly impoverished families and economically bifurcated communities (Grant, Oliver, and James, 1996; Johnson and Oliver, 1991).

A central finding of the economic restructuring literature is that the process of restructuring has differential effects on various groups of workers. Much of this research has focused on the decline of jobs held by working class men. Research in this area has focused on the impact of deindustrialization on low-skilled working class men (Bluestone & Harrison, 1982; Wilson, 1987). The rapid decline in manufacturing jobs over the last several decades is particularly notable, as this sector previously provided most of the nation's high-wage jobs where the primary requirement was manual skills (Bluestone & Harrison, 1982; Peterson & Roman, 1992). The basic pattern of job loss in durable goods manufacturing is one shared by most urban centers in the nation during this period. These changes have had a dramatic effect on American workers in general, and a particularly

disastrous effect on Black workers. The process of economic restructuring, broadly, and deindustrialization more narrowly, is recognized as having immense economic and social implications.

Despite broader changes in the labor market, many occupations have largely remained segregated by race and/or gender. While broad changes in the economy, as indicated by the industrial shifts cited above, have worked to the disadvantage of Black men, they have often benefited Black and other women in the labor market. Both Black and White women have gained from the growth in the service sector, a key component of economic restructuring. Research at the national level has shown, however, that Black women are more likely to be concentrated in the public sector and in so-called “pink-collar” occupations where gender segregation is high than are white women (Sokoloff, 1992; Reskin & Roos, 1990; Higginbotham, 1992 & 1994). The social relations of economic restructuring provide the lens to understand recent changes in the labor market experiences and prospects of various racial and gender groups.

The work of Reskin & Roos (1990) on labor and job queues can inform our understanding of the changing ethnic/gender composition of occupations and how this is related to Black women’s changing occupational profile. Even as the patterns of job growth in industries are restructured, so are occupations within industries. The restructuring of occupations cannot be disentangled from race and gender changes in occupational distribution (Reskin & Roos, 1990). Hence, Black women’s access to certain occupations (an example of this is Bank managers) cannot be disentangled from the transformation of the occupation, which has often resulted in lower status and remuneration.

The rising demand for women workers in the expanding service sector is fundamental to understanding the labor market trends of Black women (Wilkie 1985; Tienda, Ortiz & Smith, 1987; Sokoloff, 1992; Reskin & Roos, 1990; Higginbotham, 1992 & 1994). The entry of Black women into service sector jobs is the prism through which it is necessary to view the apparent upward occupational and earnings’ mobility of these women. Hence, while not always emphasized in research focused on the impact of restructuring on men, the big story of the 1970-1990 period is not only the decline in the manufacturing sector, but the phenomenal rise of the service sector (Wilkie, 1985; Tienda et. al., 1987). The rising demand for women workers related to the

growing importance of the service sector is fundamental in understanding economic changes of and among Black women (Sokoloff, 1992; Reskin & Roos, 1990; Higginbotham, 1992 & 1994). The entry of Black women into expanding service sector jobs is the prism through which it is necessary to view the apparent upward occupational and earnings’ mobility of these women. Within the service sector, many of the jobs in which Black women are newly located are characterized by the performance of similar duties as domestic service jobs which, in turn, are increasingly held by other women of color (Nakano-Glenn, 1992). In the last several decades the visibility of Black women in high levels of business has increased dramatically (Higginbotham, 1992; 1994). This has significant social, cultural, as well as economic importance. In socio-economic terms,

popular exaltations of the increased visibility of Black women in broad occupational categories such as managerial and professional occupations, belies the reality revealed by a closer inspection (Wilkie, 1985; Higginbotham, 1994).

Black women have benefited from growth in professional service occupations. The increasing proportion of Black women with high levels of education has allowed many of them to take advantage of expanding labor market opportunities in the service sector. At the national level the percentage of Black women in professional occupations doubled between 1960 and 1980 (Sokoloff, 1992; Wilkie, 1985; Glenn). The gains experienced by Black women are only dramatic because of their near complete exclusion from these occupational sectors in the past. Indeed, this fact is illustrative of the difficulty of how to cast the labor market gains of Black women in the post-Civil Rights era: moving up, but how far? Or as Sokoloff (1992) has aptly posed, is the glass half-full or half-empty?

As Collins (1997) points out in a study of the Black middle class, within industries and occupations Blacks are found in racialized jobs with limiting “glass ceilings”. Further, despite apparent gains, service sector occupations remain largely segregated in terms by sex (Bianchi, 1995; Sokoloff, 1992; Reskin & Roos, 1990; Higginbotham, 1994). Many occupations are simultaneously segregated by race (Bianchi, 1995; Sokoloff, 1992; Reskin & Roos, 1990; Higginbotham, 1994). Looking at detailed information regarding Black women’s niches within occupations that are classified as “managerial and professional” reveal that Black women are typically concentrated in health care, education and social services rather than in fortune 500 companies (Collins, 1997)

The single most dramatic change in Black Women’s employment is the move out of domestic work over the past 20 years. In 1970 employment in private households was the top industrial niche of all Black workers and was 92 percent female. The significance of this shift has social, cultural, as well as economic importance. The decline of Black women in personal service occupations is seen by some as evidence

of the declining significance of race as a mitigating factor retarding the social mobility of men and women in the United States. I believe such an interpretation is a too simplistic reading of the changes in that occupation. It bears noting that personal service occupations remain deeply segregated by race/ethnicity, and gender, even as the race/ethnicity of workers in those occupations has changed (Nakano-Glenn, 1992). Furthermore, Black women with low levels of education are increasingly not in the labor force at all, or remain segregated within low paying occupations (Cocoran and Parrot, 1992). Although these jobs may be preferable to domestic work, many of the low wage service jobs into which Black women have entered share major characteristics with domestic service which should temper the extent to which they are viewed as constituting an improvement (Nakano-Glenn, 1992).

There is a full complex of social issues underlying the declining share of Black women employed in personal services. Clearly the educational advances of Black women play an important role in fueling recent occupational change (Sokoloff, 1992; Higginbotham, 1994). Domestic work has not been the only occupation to experience compositional

change during the period in question. This change, however, has a great deal of social as well as economic significance reflecting the fact that domestic service has been an occupational niche for Black women in every decade since slavery. Economic restructuring has not merely created more jobs for women than men, but has also resulted in substantial compositional change within existing occupations. Many of the jobs created and restructured are characterized by race and gender segregation (Sassen, 1984; Reskin & Roos, 1990; Tienda et. al., 1987). The gender segregation of occupations is intertwined with their devaluation. Autonomy, prestige and pay have been restructured out of many of the jobs which Black women now hold. Hence, our view of occupational gains of Black women must be tempered by an understanding of the manner in which jobs themselves have been restructured. The devaluation of work can be conceptualized using the labor queue and job queue framework developed by Reskin and Roos (1990). Ranking women at the bottom of the queue allows employers to view women as unskilled, less productive, and to pay them lower wages. Labor queues are made up of employers' rankings of race/gender groups, while job queues are the employee's ranking of jobs. For example, the restructuring of clerical work occupations and jobs in banking led men to rank it lower on their queue. This change left the occupation open to women as employers had to move down the queue to women to fill these jobs (Reskin & Roos, 1990).

The importance of understanding recent changes in Black women's labor market experiences in concert with changes in the larger economy cannot be overstated. While the range and quality of occupational opportunities for Black women have increased, many Black women remain a part of impoverished families and communities. Understanding this paradox necessitates a broad view of the impact of economic restructuring on various groups of men as well as women in local labor markets.

Reference

Bernhart, Annette, Martina Morris, and Mark Handcock. 1995. "Women's Gains or Men's Losses" A Closer Look at the Shrinking Gender Gap in Earnings. *American Journal of Sociology* 101:302-328.

Bianchi, Susan. 1995. "Changing Economic Roles of Women and Men." Pp.107-154 in *State of the Union: America in the 1990's Vol. One: Economic Trends* New York: Russell Sage.

Blau, Francine and Andrea Beller. 1992. "Black-White Earnings Over the 1970s and 1980s: Gender Differences in Trends." *Review of Economics and Statistics* 74:276-286.

Bluestone, Barry and Bennett Harrison. 1982. *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry*. New York: Basic Books.

Collins, Sharon M. 1997. *Black Corporate Executives: The Making and Breaking of a Black Middle Class*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press

Corcoran, Mary and Sharon Parrott. 1992. "Black Women's Economic Progress." Paper presented at the Social Science Research Council Conference on "The Urban Underclass: Perspectives from the Social Sciences." Ann Arbor Michigan, June 8, 1992.

Grant, David, Melvin L. Oliver and Angela James. 1996. "African Americans: Social and Economic Bifurcation." Pp. 379-409 in *Ethnic Los Angeles* edited by Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr. New York: Russell Sage.

Higginbotham, Elizabeth. 1994. "Black Professional Women: Job Ceilings and Employment Sectors." Pp. 113-131 in Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill (eds) *Women of Color in U.S. Society*: Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

_____. 1992. "Moving Up With Kin and Community: Upward Social Mobility for Black and White Women." *Gender and Society* 6:416-440.

Johnson, James H. Jr. and Melvin L. Oliver. 1991. "Economic Restructuring and Black Male Joblessness in U.S. Metropolitan Areas." *Urban Geography* 12 (6): 542-562.

Nakano Glenn, Evelyn. 1992. "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor." *Signs* 18:1-43.

Norwood, Janet. 1982. "The Female-Male Earnings Gap: A Review of Employment and Earnings Issues." *Bureau of Labor Statistics Report* 673:2.

Peterson, George and Wayne Vroman. 1992. "Urban Labor Markets and Economic Opportunity." Pp. 1-29 in *Urban Labor Markets and Job Opportunity*, edited by G. Peterson and Wayne Vroman. Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute Press.

Reskin, Barbara F. and Patricia A. Roos. 1990. *Job Queues, Gender Queues: Explaining Women's Inroads into Male Occupations*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Sassen, Saskia. 1984. "The New Labor Demand in Global Cities." Pp. 139-171 in *Cities in Transition*, edited by Michael P. Smith. Beverly Hills, Calif.:Sage.

Smith, James and Michael Ward. 1985. "Time-Series Growth in the Female Labor Force." *Journal of Labor Economics* 3:S59-S90.

Sokoloff, Natalie. J. 1992. *Black Women and White Women in the Professions*. New York and London: Routledge

Tienda, Marta, Vilma Ortiz and Shelley Smith. 1987. "Industrial Restructuring, Gender Segregation, and Sex Differences in Earnings." *American Sociological Review* 52 (April):195-210.

Wilkie, Jane Riblett. 1985. "The decline of occupational segregation between Black and White women." *Race and Ethnic Relations* 4:67-89.

Wilson, William Julius. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wilson, William Julius. 1996. *When Work Disappears: The World of the Urban Poor*. New York: Knopf.