Equality at Work Remains Elusive

Rachel Smolkin

BRYN MAWR, PA - Lisa Marchnio sat in an empty math classroom, completing her differential equations and gnawing at a friend about theorems that had been her dreams.

Between complaints about "dead mathematicians" on a foggy April morning, the 21-year-old juniors at this elite women's college pondered their futures in a work force where women remain clustered in lower-paying jobs and often find themselves excluded from top executive positions.

Decades after the women's liberation movement of the 1960s spawned widespread demands for gender equality in the work place, even young women with every advantage wonder if it's likely to arrive any time soon.

"Slowly, over time, it seems like it will happen," Marchnio said. "It has to happen eventually. I hope.

Susanna Jones, a 20-year-old English major, also is "hopeful."

"The opportunities I'm having now, my mother certainly didn't have," she said.

Excluded on suburban Philadelphia's affluent Main Line, Bryn Mawr's campus is tranquil and secure. Its Gothic stone buildings and rows of arcing trees on the campus greens offer temporary shelter to 1,300 young women who must eventually reenter a male-dominated world.

Their plans to go to medical and law school, to pursue careers in architecture or doctoral degrees in math, reflect women's surge into the labor force over the past three decades and forecast considerable advancement during the next three.

Their qualiun highlight the barriers that remain.

The number of highly placed women at top companies and in leadership positions at universities, unions and the military remains startlingly low, suggesting that a critical mass of qualified women is not enough to ensure professional parity.

Without question, young women today enter a work force radically transformed. Thirty-eight years after author Betty Friedan in "The Feminine Mystique" sketched the suburban home as a "comfortable concentration camp," women have burst into new careers.

More women than men now attend college—a trend fueled by larger numbers of African American and Hispanic women going to college than their male peers and by significant numbers of older women returning to school. More women than men also earn master's degrees.

High-school girls are taking advanced math and science classes in greater numbers than a decade ago, narrowing the gender gap documented in the American Association of University Women's landmark 1992 report, "How Schools Shortchange Girls."

Over the past 30 years, the percentage of physicians who are women has tripled and nearly half of entering medical school students are now women. Women also are expected to make up the majority of entering law school students for the first time this fall.

"Women are the emerging majority of the legal profession," said Martha Barrett, president of the American Bar Association. "And in the next 20 years, women could well be the majority of the profession."

JoAnn Heiferman Heise, chief information officer for Johnson & Johnson, is similarly optimistic about the corporate world. She predicts senior management in major corporations will be evenly balanced between men and women in 15 years.

"I really feel that the women who are in middle and senior management now are making such significant contributions that they will be recognized over the next 15 to 20 years," said Heise, currently the only woman on Johnson & Johnson’s executive committee.

Nevertheless, when the optimistic Heise began her career at Chase Manhattan Bank in 1972, she assumed women would achieve higher status more quickly than they have.

The Pipeline Leaks

A recent American Bar Association report, "The Unfinished Agenda: Women and the Legal Profession," documents pervasive inequalities. Women account for almost 30 percent of the profession but only about 15 percent of federal judges and law firm partners. 15 percent of law school deans and general counsel, and 5 percent of managing partners of large firms.

"A widespread assumption is that barriers have been coming down, women have been moving up, and it is only a matter of time before full equality becomes an accomplished fact," the report says. "Such perceptions are hard to square with the facts. Time alone and women's relatively recent admission to the profession cannot explain the extent of sex-based disparities in pay or promotion."

Women in legal practice earn an average $27,000 a year less than men. Surveys of law firms and corporate counsel salaries have found a significant pay gap even among men and women with similar positions and experience.

So while there may be more women in the pipeline heading toward the height of the legal profession, "the pipeline leaks," said Deborah L. Rhode, the report's author and a professor at Stanford School of Law.
A look at corporate America tells a similar story. Only four women are CEOs of Fortune 500 companies: Carleton Fiorina at Hewlett-Packard, Andrea Jung at Avon Products, Marion Sandler of Golden West Financial Corp. and Cinda Hallman of Sphera Corp., a temporary staffing company. The figure is double last year’s total of two.

Women make up 12.5 percent of Fortune 500 corporate officers and only 4.1 percent of top earners, according to Catalyst, a research group that tracks women executives. Catalyst projects that women corporate officers will be underrepresented far into the future, holding only 27 percent of Fortune 500 corporate officer positions by 2020.

Not one of the top 25 media conglomerates is headed by a woman. Women account for only 9 percent of board members and 13 percent of top executives in major media, telecom and e-companies, according to a recent study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

"I thought the numbers were sobering," said Federal Communications Commissioner Susan Nuss. "Initially we figured with those companies founded during the old boys’ network world that the numbers would be worse. But it’s just as bad with the new companies. Instead of the old boys’ network, it’s the new boys’ network.”

In other fields, too, women are scattered through the pipeline but seldom reach the top.

Women increasingly serve as elected local and regional union officers. They hold appointed national staff positions, but few are found among the top elected officers.

They have stormed statewide politics and hold a record 72 seats in Congress — out of 535. But only five of the nation’s 50 governors are women. Women have yet to break into senior congressional leadership positions and rarely have chaired congressional committees.

In the armed services, the advent of an all-volunteer force in 1973 dramatically increased the number of women. But Department of Defense policies still restrict women’s access to combat positions, barring women from central military functions and impeding their advancement.

The wage gap between men and women has narrowed since 1979 but has stagnated in recent years. Full-time working women earn 72 percent as much as full-time working men, on average.

"The wage gap has not been noticeably narrowing over the 1990s, a period of increased employment tenure and work force participation by women," said Vicky Lovell, study director at the Institute for Women’s Policy Research. "That does not bode well for a substantial closing of the wage gap over the next 30 years."

The gap persists in part because most women remain concentrated in jobs traditionally considered "women’s work" and undervalued by society. More than 70 percent of clerical workers, custodians, librarians, child-care workers, nurses and elementary school teachers are women. Nearly 99 percent of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers are women.

"I think the perception is still that dealing with children and teaching children is a woman’s job, which is unfortunate because certainly both sexes are capable.”
suggested Brian McCarthy, a 23-year-old political science major at coeducational Harvard College, which shares the program with Bryn Mawr.

Men in female-dominated jobs also are paid poorly, but they still earn about 20 percent more per hour than women in the same jobs, according to one of the institute's studies. Only 5.5 percent of working men are in female-dominated jobs, compared with more than 55 percent of working women.

Other professions remain a barrier for men. Women make up only 1.1 percent of plumbers, pipefitters and steamfitters and only 1.2 percent of heating, air conditioning and refrigeration mechanics, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. These occupations offer men with high school educations well-paying opportunities that remain largely closed to women.

Kid Care vs. Mr. Big Shot

In college, male students continue to dominate degrees in computer science, the physical sciences and engineering—majors that lead to lucrative jobs at both traditional and high-tech business sectors.

Women earned only 3 percent of the engineering bachelor's degrees in 1976. By 1998, that number had quadrupled, but still was only 17 percent.

"Every more disturbing to me is the trend over the last 10 years. The graphs are fairly flat," said Daniel Daniel, dean of the College of Engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"Engineering is not viewed as a cool profession for young women," Daniel said. "It's easy for a young woman to turn on the television and see a very clear message and signal that the medical profession welcomes them, that the legal profession welcomes them, but there is no such message from the popular media about engineering as a profession for women."

During the past decade, the percentage of women earning computer science degrees actually has dropped, from 37 percent in 1984 to 27 percent in 1998.

"It exacerbates the wage gap if women end up being closed out of high-paying jobs where the company is looking to recruit highly trained workers," said Marcia Grebinger, co-president of the National Women's Law Center, a nonprofit group that tries to advance women's interests. "Engineering and computer science are high on the list of fields that offer jobs with good pay, good benefits and a strong future."

Society's lack of esteem for "women's work" frustrates Bryan Marv's Shannon Jones, who hopes pay in women-dominated jobs will increase.

"Traditional women's position, in terms of nursing, in terms of teaching and child care, are still seriously discriminated against," Jones said.

"People who work at day care spend 40 hours a week raising children who aren't their own, pouring their heart and souls out, and they get paid minimum wage," she said "Meanwhile, Mr. Big Shot on Wall Street is cruising along on his speed boat in the Gattinko, I mean, that makes me sick, but I think there's hope. I'm hopeful that things will change."