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Are Women Now Half the Labor Force? The Truth about Women and Equal Participation in the Labor Force

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For more than a year the news media have been tracking the moment when women might become half the labor force. In spring 2009, it was said it might happen in the next few months, by summer it was said maybe it would happen in the fall. By one measure, women's share of employment reached a high of 49.96 percent in October 2009; still 113,000 fewer women than men were counted on payrolls that month, and as of March 2010 the gap has grown to about 360,000 workers. Although still a statistically significant difference, a gap that small is nevertheless close to equality, especially when total payroll employment in the United States is measured at nearly 130,000,000.

Is something new happening? Are women half the labor force? 'Yes,' 'No,' and 'Not Really.' 'Yes,' because the current recession, which began in December 2007, has caused heavier job losses among men than women and has therefore increased women's share of *paid employment*. This difference between women's and men's employment opportunities is a recent development that may put women over the 50 percent mark for the first time, certainly an event, were it to happen, that would have symbolic importance in emphasizing the importance of women's role in the economy. 'No,' because women have been increasing their share of employment and of the labor force in the United States for a very long time. Since the mid-1980s, women have been 45 percent or more of the labor force—women have been approaching equality for two decades so there's nothing really new here (in fact the growth in their share of the labor force slowed in the 1990s compared with earlier decades). And 'not really' because the data series cited above, in which women have *almost* reached 50 percent, leaves out about 15.7 million workers, namely the unemployed and self-employed (usually considered part of the labor force), and these groups are disproportionately male.

There are two major data series used to measure employment: the payroll data which is a survey of employers, known as the Current Employment Statistics (CES) program, and the household survey known as the Current Population Survey (CPS). Both generate monthly employment numbers, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports data from both series. The household survey is smaller (about 60,000 households) and is used to measure unemployment and to provide demographic characteristics of workers and the unemployed (age, race, gender, etc.). The payroll survey is larger (surveying about 410,000 worksites) and is considered much more

reliable for measuring month-to-month changes in employment by industry; as a payroll survey it excludes the unemployed and gender is the only demographic information about workers collected from employers. This series of data is known as the “women workers data series.” Both surveys exclude those serving in the military.¹ The payroll survey excludes the self-employed, unpaid family workers, domestic workers, and farm workers.² A worker holding several jobs during the same week will be counted only once in the household survey but several times in the payroll survey.

Table 1 illustrates how federal statistics conceptualize the labor force relative to the population. All the numbers in this chart come from the CPS, except the first one, which is from the payroll survey. The CPS estimates about 9 million more employed people than does the CES (because the CPS includes the self-employed, domestic and farm workers, and unpaid family workers, all of whom are not counted by the payroll survey of the CES).

Table 1. Number of Employed and Unemployed Persons Aged 16 and Older, March 2010 (Seasonally Adjusted)

Employed Persons* (CES)	129,750,000*	Civilian Labor Force (CPS) 153,910,000	Civilian Non-Institutional Population (CPS) 237,159,000
Employed Persons (CPS)	138,905,000		
Unemployed Persons (CPS)	15,005,000		
Persons not in Labor Force (CPS)	83,249,000		

Note: All data are from the Current Population Survey, except for the figure marked by an * (it is from the Current Employment Statistics survey). Note that the CES is not limited by age. Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010b.

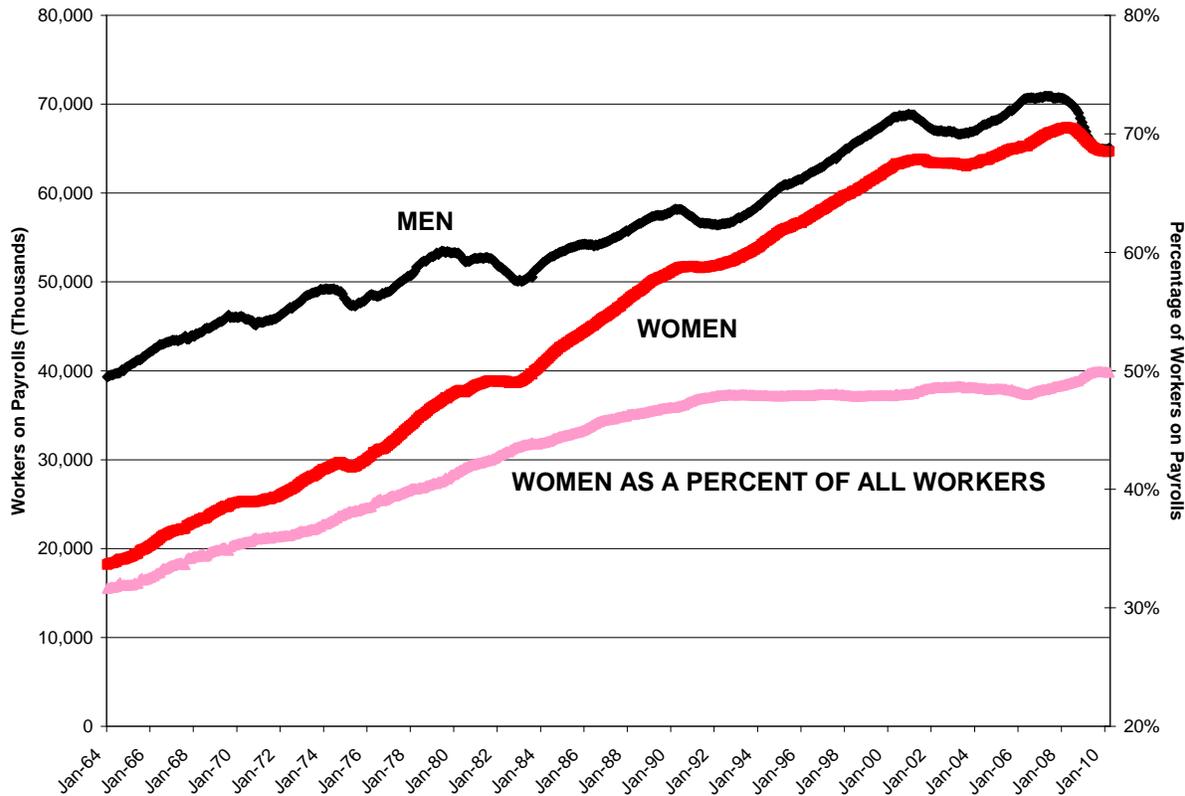
Figure 1 shows the number of women and men counted on payrolls each month since the inception of the women workers data series in 1964 on the left axis and women as a percent of total employment on the right axis. Women as a share of payroll employment grew from 31.6 percent in January 1964 to 49.9 percent in March 2010. Payrolls show growth for most years for both women and men; in recessionary periods employment typically fell for men, but less so for women. Compared with earlier recessions, the current recession is characterized by dramatic drops in employment for both men and women, but it is men’s much steeper fall that is creating women’s near parity in the employment count. Men have experienced 68.8 percent of the jobs lost from payrolls, because much of the slowdown has occurred in traditionally male fields such

¹ As of September 30, 2009 women accounted for 14.3 percent of active duty service members. Their representation ranges from 6.4 percent in the Marine Corps to 19.5 percent of the Air Force. (Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Inc. 2010).

² The self-employed and farm workers are disproportionately male. In 2009 men were 76.4 percent of agricultural workers and 61.4 percent of non-agricultural self-employed workers. (Calculations based on US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010c).

as manufacturing and construction while a few traditionally female fields such as health and education have shown job growth or minimal job loss.

Figure 1: Women and Men on Payrolls, CES Data (Seasonally Adjusted), 1964-2010



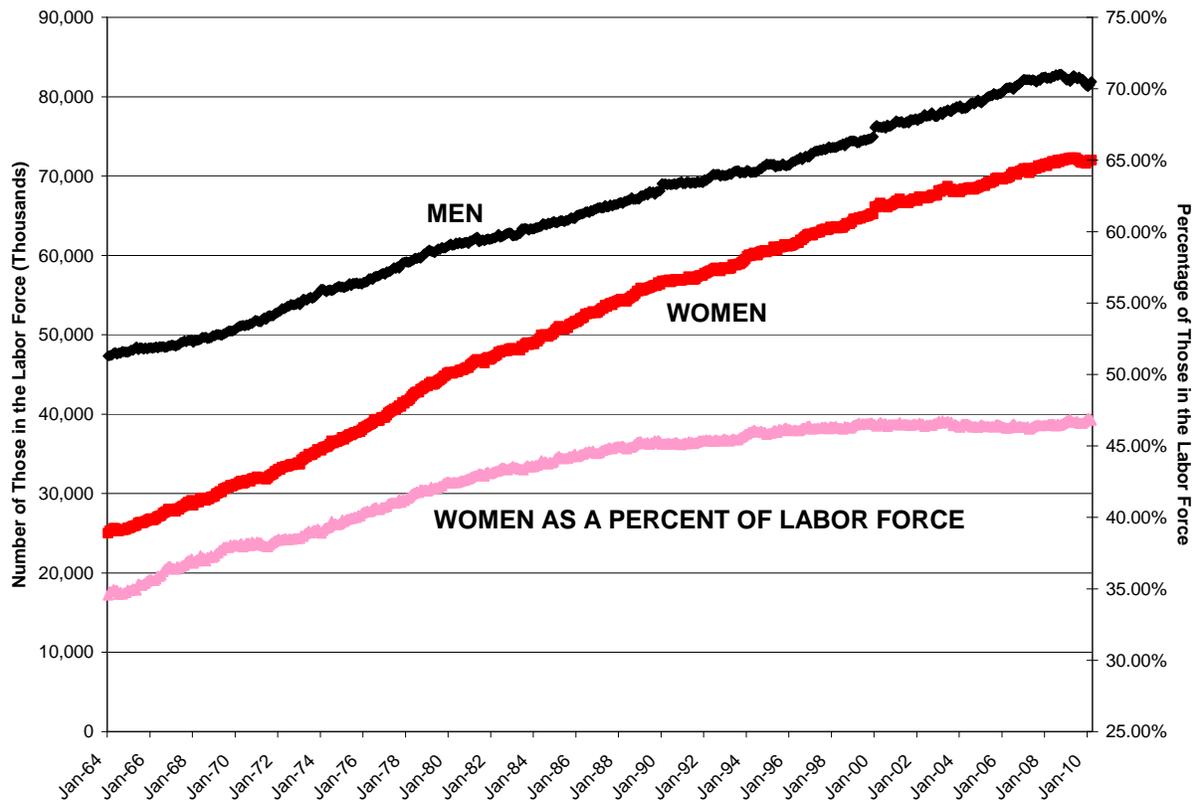
Source: US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010a

As Figure 1 shows, the number of women on payrolls is approaching the 50 percent mark, but women’s gains on this indicator of access to employment do not support the claim that women have achieved equality in the labor force. Women have been more than 45 percent of workers on payrolls for the last 24 years. In the years since women became 45 percent of workers on payrolls, the share of women on payrolls stalled, except for its increase during the current recession. As can be seen in Figure 1, women’s employment relative to men’s grew fairly consistently until 1990. Since 1990, employment growth for women and men has moved at about the same pace. It is only the more rapid decline of men’s employment than women’s in the current recession that causes women’s share to approach near equality at almost 50.0 percent. This phenomenon is expected to be temporary, since as the economy recovers and employment grows, men’s employment is likely to rebound more than women’s.

Figure 2 shows, on the left axis, the numbers of women and men in the labor force also from 1964 through 2010 and the share of women of the total labor force on the right axis. In January

1964, women were 34.56 percent of the labor force and by March 2010, they were 46.86 percent of the labor force.

Figure 2: Women and Men in the Labor Force, CPS Data (Seasonally Adjusted), 1964-2010



Source: US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010c

As Figure 2 shows, the gap between women and men as a percentage of the labor force has also been closing since 1964, but women have not made as much progress in closing the gap using this indicator of employment. In this data set, women have been more than 45 percent of workers in the labor force for the last 22 years. And, while the gap between women and men in the labor force has been closing for the whole time period shown, the rate of that progress also seems to have stalled in recent years, just as in Figure 1. In this data series, which includes the self-employed and the unemployed, the gap between men and women in the labor force has remained at approximately 7 percentage points for the past decade.

Table 2 compares data from the CPS and CES on the growth of women's share of the labor force and payroll employment, respectively. The largest percentage point increase in women's share of the labor force occurred in the 1960s (+5.20 percentage points) followed by the 1970s (+4.42 percentage points). Together the change in these two decades is over half the change for the entire sixty year period shown. In the most recent 20 years, women's share of the labor force has grown by less than two percentage points (+1.71). Women's share of nonfarm workers on

payrolls grew fastest in the 1970s (+5.82 percentage points) and 1980s (+5.61 percentage points). In the six years of payroll data available from the 1960's (January 1964-December 1969), women's share of the workforce also grew rapidly (+3.67 percentage points), for a total of 15.1 percentage points across 25 years. Again, women's growth as a share of employment has leveled off in the most recent 20 years with a 3 percentage point increase between January 1990 and December 2009. The growth in women's share in both the 1980s and 2000s is larger in the CES than the CPS series because it excludes unemployment – in both the 1980s and 2000s men's employment was especially hard hit by recessions.

Table 2. Growth in Women's Share of Workers in the Labor Force and on Payrolls (Seasonally Adjusted), 1950-2010

Years	Labor Force (CPS) Percentage Point Increase	Payrolls (CES) Percentage Point Increase
Jan 1950-Dec 1959	3.71	NA
Jan 1960-Dec 1969*	5.20	3.67
Jan 1970-Dec 1979	4.42	5.82
Jan 1980-Dec 1989	2.79	5.61
Jan 1990-Dec 1999	1.41	1.01
Jan 2000-Dec 2009	0.30	1.97

Note: * CES data for number of women on payrolls is available only from January 1964. Data shown are for January 1964-December 1969.
Source: US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010a; 2010c

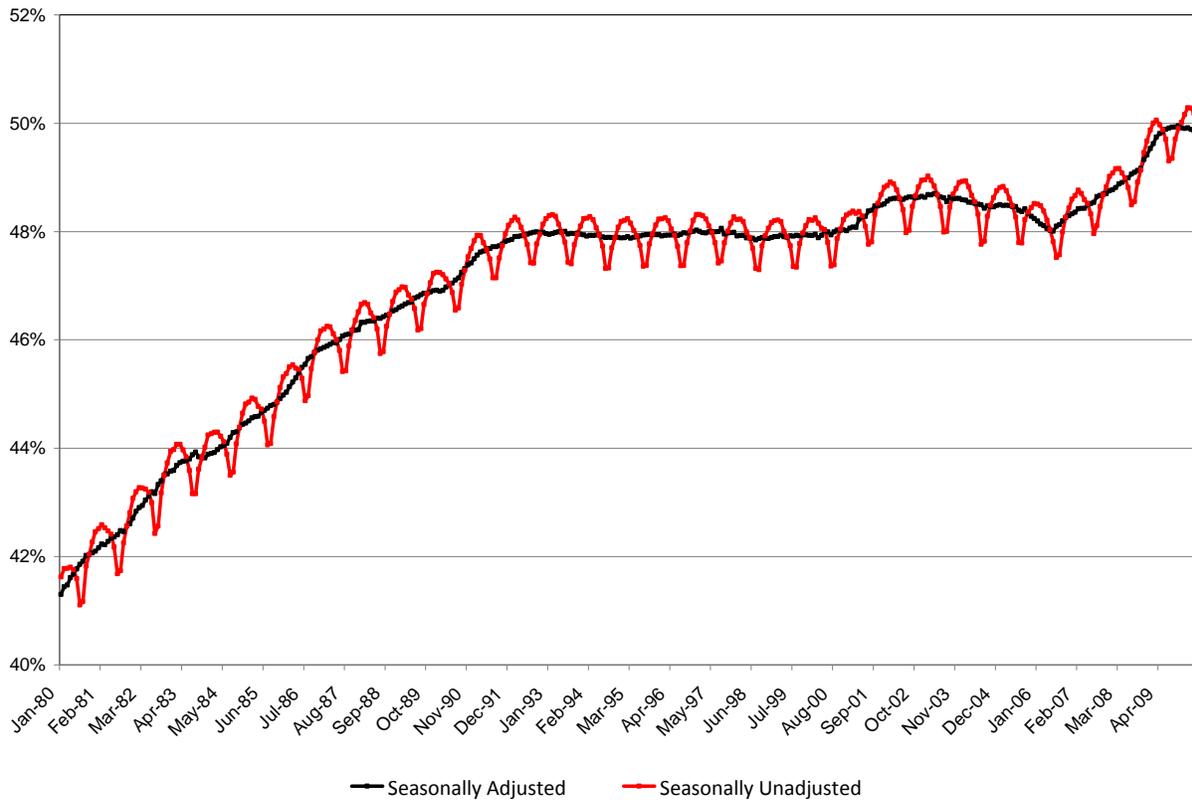
Seasonal Data

There is one data series where women *have* crossed the 50 percent mark, several times: the seasonally unadjusted payroll (CES) series. The Bureau of Labor Statistics provides the payroll data as both seasonally adjusted and seasonally unadjusted. The seasonally adjusted data are usually considered to give the more accurate picture of employment trends in the United States for most purposes. The adjustment procedure is based on sophisticated statistical models that take account of seasonal employment variation within industries, but also accounts for the number of weeks in each pair of months and differences between months in the number of holidays and paid work days.

Once the data are adjusted for the seasonal fluctuations in the level of the employment, women have been approaching the 50 percent line, but they have not crossed it. Figure 3 illustrates the seasonal variation in employment levels (the squiggly line) measured by the number of women and men on payrolls in the establishment data collected by the CES since January 1980, coupled with the seasonally adjusted data (the smoother line). Again, women's proportion of the workforce grew rapidly during the 1980s, but much more slowly during the 1990s. There is a small hump in the curve following the 2001 recession where women lost fewer jobs than men, but the

trend was largely reversed in the recovery that ended in December 2007. Since then, women have been growing as a proportion of the workforce as men lost more jobs in this recession than women. While the seasonally adjusted line approached the 50 percent line, it did not cross it, and in the last several months this series shows women's employment share declining slightly. The seasonally unadjusted series generally peaks in the winter months and reaches its nadir in the summer months; in this series, women's share first breached the 50 percent line in Spring 2009, declined, and has again risen. Allowing for seasonal variability in employment patterns, women are currently slightly more than half the nonfarm work force on payrolls (at 50.18 percent).

Figure 3. Women as a Percentage of Workers on Payrolls, Seasonally Adjusted and Not Seasonally Adjusted. January 1980-March 2010.



Source: US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010a

Table 3 looks at the adjusted and unadjusted series in more detail from January 2009 up to the present (March 2010). Women are a smaller proportion of the employed population during the summer months. It seems likely that this is the effect of employment patterns for different industries dominated by women and men. For example while many educators may not be counted on payrolls during these months, they are also high employment seasons for fields dominated by men, such as construction. Allowing for seasonal variation in the data, women were more than half of workers on payroll in the revised data for February, March, and November as well as December 2009 and in the preliminary estimates for January and February 2010. Women held 43,000 more jobs than men in March 2009 on a seasonally unadjusted basis. In February 2010 this gap is substantially wider at 753,000 jobs. During the summer months of

2009, men held more jobs than women by a larger margin – 1.8 million in July and 1.7 million in August before Fall when men began falling from payrolls and women were added.

In the seasonally adjusted series, women’s share of employment reached a high water mark of 49.96 percent of nonfarm workers on employer payrolls in October 2009, but their share has receded slightly since then. There were 113,000 more men than women on seasonally adjusted payrolls in October 2009 down from 1,249,000 more men than women after the recession’s first year in January 2009. Since October 2009 the number of both women and men on payrolls has continued to decline, but women are losing slightly more jobs so that men’s numerical majority has grown. Since October 2009 women have lost 65,000 jobs compared with men’s gain of 182,000 jobs so that men hold 360,000 more jobs on payrolls than women as of March 2010.

The unadjusted series first hit 50.00 percent in February 2009 and 50.05 percent in March 2009 before seasonal fluctuations in employment patterns shifted, with women losing jobs and men gaining jobs in the summer months. Men’s number of jobs peaked in June 2009 (66,155,000), but it is in July 2009 that women’s number of jobs is at its lowest (64,078,000) and men held 1,815,000 more jobs than women. In the most recent months of the seasonally unadjusted series, women have held more than 50 percent of jobs on payrolls since November 2009. At that time, 45,000 more women than men were reported on nonfarm payrolls; by February 2010 the gap had widened to 753,000 jobs or 50.29 percent of jobs favoring women – the largest relative and absolute female advantage recorded in this data series.

Table 3. Women and Men on Payrolls, January 2009-February 2010

	Seasonally Adjusted CES Data				Seasonally Unadjusted CES Data			
	Women (Thousands)	Men (Thousands)	Percent Women	Men – Women	Women (Thousands)	Men (Thousands)	Percent Women	Men – Women
Jan 2009	66,150	67,399	49.53%	1,249	65,611	65,944	49.87%	333
Feb 2009	65,913	66,910	49.62%	997	65,660	65,654	50.00%	- 6
Mar 2009	65,696	66,374	49.74%	678	65,659	65,516	50.05%	- 43
Apr 2009	65,521	66,021	49.81%	500	65,657	65,732	49.97%	75
May 2009	65,375	65,780	49.85%	405	65,682	66,007	49.88%	325
Jun 2009	65,168	65,472	49.88%	304	65,370	66,155	49.70%	785
July 2009	65,032	65,262	49.91%	230	64,078	65,893	49.30%	1,815
Aug 2009	64,943	65,139	49.92%	196	64,094	65,777	49.35%	1,683
Sep 2009	64,838	65,019	49.93%	181	64,741	65,502	49.71%	761
Oct 2009	64,760	64,873	49.96%	113	65,315	65,574	49.90%	259
Nov 2009	64,736	64,961	49.91%	225	65,507	65,462	50.02%	- 45
Dec 2009	64,666	64,922	49.90%	256	65,435	65,103	50.16%	- 32
Jan 2010	64,671	64,891	49.92%	220	64,175	63,431	50.29%	- 744
Feb 2010	64,636	64,890	49.90%	254	64,416	63,663	50.29%	- 753
Mar 2010	64,695	65,055	49.86%	360	64,699	64,227	50.18%	- 472

Source: US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010a

Conclusion

As the economy recovers and with the anticipated increase in men’s employment in the summer months, women’s share of payroll employment is expected to again fall below 50 percent in the

seasonally unadjusted data. In the seasonally adjusted data, if the economy recovery is consistent, it is likely that October 2009, with women's share at 49.96 percent, will remain a high water mark that will not be seen again for several years.

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