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DATA BRIEF

LABOR FORCE SNAPSHOT: WOMEN IN THE U.S. LABOR FORCE

QUICK BRIEF

METRICS AND DEFINITIONS

This snapshot describes the role of women in the U.S. labor force, both historically and in the present day. Shortly after World War II, women accounted for less than one-third of the labor force; however, factors such as technological changes, shifting societal norms, and expanded access to higher education have served to dramatically increase the role of female workers in the U.S. workforce since then. Today, the female labor force participation rate stands at nearly 60% and women account for about 47% of the employed population. Given this dramatic transformation, an objective understanding of the role of women in the labor force is critically important for employers, policymakers, and the population at large.

This snapshot will provide this understanding using a variety of metrics that describe the labor force contributions of women. Key terms that will appear in this snapshot include:

Civilian noninstitutional population: The population ages 16 and older, excluding active-duty military members and people living in institutions or facilities, such as correctional institutions or residential medical care facilities. All of the findings discussed in this brief are based on data covering this population or a subset of this population (e.g., the civilian labor force).

Civilian labor force: The civilian noninstitutional population ages 16 and older who are either working or actively looking for work.

Labor force participation rate: The share of people in the civilian noninstitutional population ages 16 and older who are in the labor force.

Prime working age: The population of people ages 25 to 54 years old. A person or group of people in this age range may be described as being of "prime age" (e.g., prime-age women).

Employment share: The share of employed people in a given population that fall into a category of interest. For example, in this snapshot, we will discuss the share of employed people who are women, both overall and in particular subgroups (e.g., major occupational groups).

Female-to-male median weekly earnings ratio (gender wage gap): The ratio of female full-time wage/salary workers' median weekly earnings to male full-time wage/salary workers' median weekly earnings. The ratio may refer to the overall female-to-male median earnings ratio or the ratio for a specific subgroup of interest (e.g., a major occupational group).

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Women are vital to the U.S. workforce and account for 47.2% of the overall employed population.

WORKER

Women are well represented across a variety of industries, including over 75% of employment in health care and social assistance.

WORK

Despite women making up nearly half of the employed population, they continue to be underrepresented in senior management roles.

WORKPLACE

Labor Force Snapshot: OLDER PEOPLE IN THE U.S. LABOR FORCE

UNDERLYING DATA

The analyses presented in this snapshot were almost entirely completed using Current Population Survey (CPS) data,[1] though we relied on a variety of underlying sources for these data. Our analysis of historical trends uses data series that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) regularly publishes based on its CPS data. Some of these series were retrieved from Federal Reserve Economic Data (FRED), an online data repository maintained by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. However, in two cases, data series were retrieved directly from the data tables or repositories on the BLS website. In addition, some of our analyses were completed using public-use CPS microdata downloaded from IPUMS CPS, a social/economic data curation, archiving, and dissemination program within the University of Minnesota's Institute for Research and Data Innovation. The captions that appear under the figures throughout the brief provide additional information on the specific data sources used for each key finding.

KEY FINDINGS OVERVIEW

1. Female labor force participation grew rapidly during the latter half of the 20th century.

2. Female representation in the employed population increased substantially in the latter half of the 20th century, but has changed very little in the 21st century.

3. Women account for over 75% of employment in three major occupational groups.

4. Women account for over 50% of employment in five major industries.

5. Despite dropping more severely during the initial phase of the pandemic, the relative recovery of labor force participation of prime-age women has surpassed that of their male counterparts.

6. After growing substantially between 1979 and the early 2010s, the female-to-male median weekly earnings ratio has been relatively stable for the last decade.

7. In 2024, there was no major occupational group in which the median weekly earnings of full-time, wage/salary women exceeded those of men.

8. In many occupational groups, the representation of women among supervisors of first-line workers was significantly lower than what was observed among first-line workers.

9. The representation of women falls as management positions become increasingly more senior.

[1] The CPS is a long-running monthly survey of U.S. households that is jointly run by the U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. It is used to calculate a wide variety of labor market metrics that are closely tracked (e.g., the unemployment rate).

FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION GREW RAPIDLY DURING THE LATTER HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY.

Labor Force Participation Rate by Gender, January 1948-February 2025

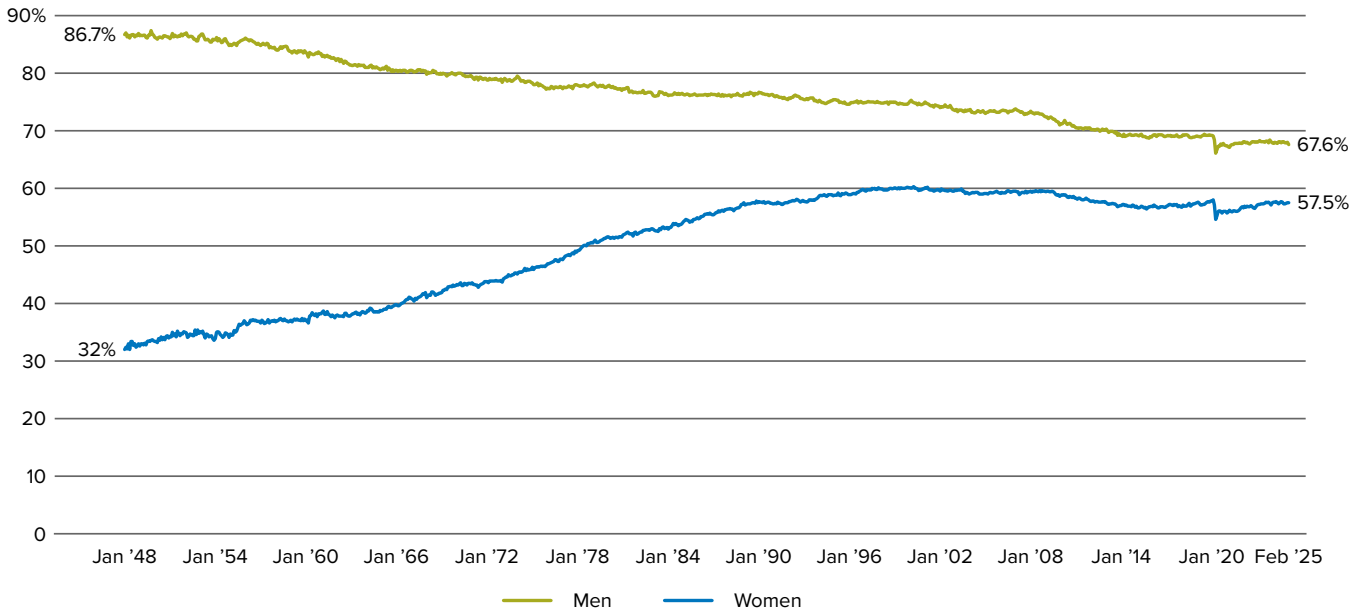

FIGURE 1

Source: January 1948-February 2025 CPS data series downloaded from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Data is seasonally adjusted.

Figure 1 plots the female and male labor force participation rates from January 1948 through February 2025. Labor force participation among women began to increase steadily after World War II and climbed especially rapidly from the 1960s through the 1980s. Around the turn of the century, nearly three-fifths of women were labor force participants. In stark contrast, male labor force participation fell consistently throughout the latter half of the 20th century.

Since the turn of the 21st century, both female and male labor force participation rates have fallen gradually. Though there are numerous reasons for this, including disruption from a number of significant economic shocks (e.g., the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic), the primary reason has been long-run demographic change driven by population aging. In short, as an increasingly large fraction of the U.S. population shifts into older age groups that have lower labor force participation, this shift is projected to continue putting downward pressure on the labor force participation rates of both genders. Specifically, the latest version of the BLS Employment Projections forecasts that the overall male and female labor force participation rates will fall to 65.6% and 56.9%, respectively, by 2033. In that year, women are projected to account for about 47.6% of the labor force, a 0.5-percentage-point increase relative to average female representation in 2024.

Although a complex set of factors has been responsible for the rise of female labor force participation over time, some drivers stand out as being especially important. For example, a significant shift in social and cultural norms in the latter half of the 20th century significantly reduced barriers to female labor force participation.[2] In addition, expanded access to higher education has enabled women to compete in parts of the labor force that had previously been dominated by men.[3]

Takeaways

- Female labor force participation grew rapidly during the latter half of the 20th century, peaking at 60.3% in April 2000.
- In contrast, male labor force participation fell steadily in the latter half of the 20th century.
- Both female and male labor force participation rates have fallen gradually in the 21st century, largely due to population aging.
- Changing societal norms and expanded access to higher education played a large role in growing female labor force participation during the latter half of the 20th century.

[2] Cavalcanti, T., & Tavares, J. (2016). The output cost of gender discrimination: A model-based macroeconomics estimate. *The Economic Journal*, 126(590), 109-134. doi.org/10.1111/ecoj.12303
[3] Yellen, J. (2020, May). *The history of women's work and wages and how it has created success for us all.* The Brookings Institution. www.brookings.edu/articles/the-history-of-womens-work-and-wages-and-how-it-has-created-success-for-us-all/

FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN THE EMPLOYED POPULATION INCREASED SUBSTANTIALLY IN THE LATTER HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY, BUT HAS CHANGED VERY LITTLE IN THE 21ST CENTURY.

Employment Share of Women, January 1948-February 2025

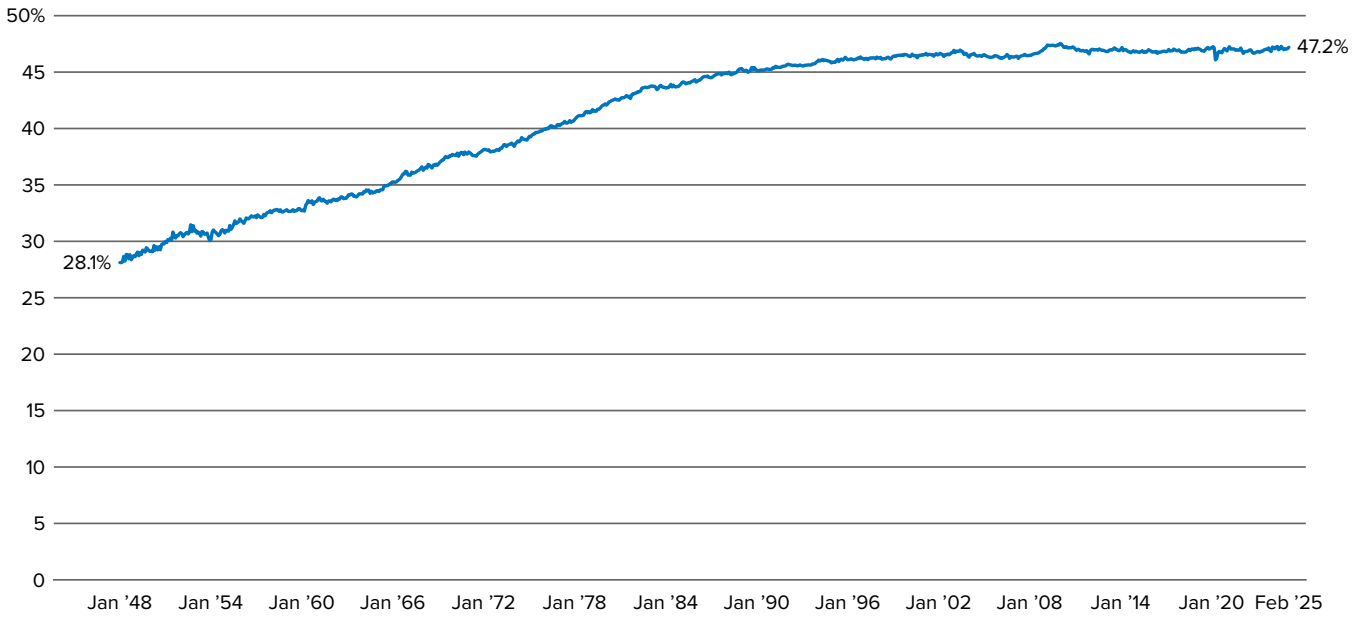

FIGURE 2

Source: January 1948-February 2025 CPS data series downloaded from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Data is seasonally adjusted.

Figure 2 plots female representation in the employed population (i.e., the fraction of the employed population that is female) from January 1948 through February 2025. As one would expect, the trend observed here largely mirrors that of female labor force participation. In particular, female representation in the employed population grew rapidly in the latter half of the 20th century, from just over 28% in January 1948 to 46.4% in January 2000. However, in the 21st century, this value has reliably remained between 46% and 47.5%. As of February 2025, women accounted for 47.2% of the employed population.

Takeaways

- The share of women in the employed population increased from 28.1% in January 1948 to 47.2% in February 2025.
- Almost all of this increase occurred in the latter half of the 20th century. Since January 2000, female representation in the employed population has consistently been between 46% and 47.5%.

WOMEN ACCOUNT FOR OVER 75% OF EMPLOYMENT IN THREE MAJOR OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS.

Average Employment Share of Women by Major Occupational Group, 2024

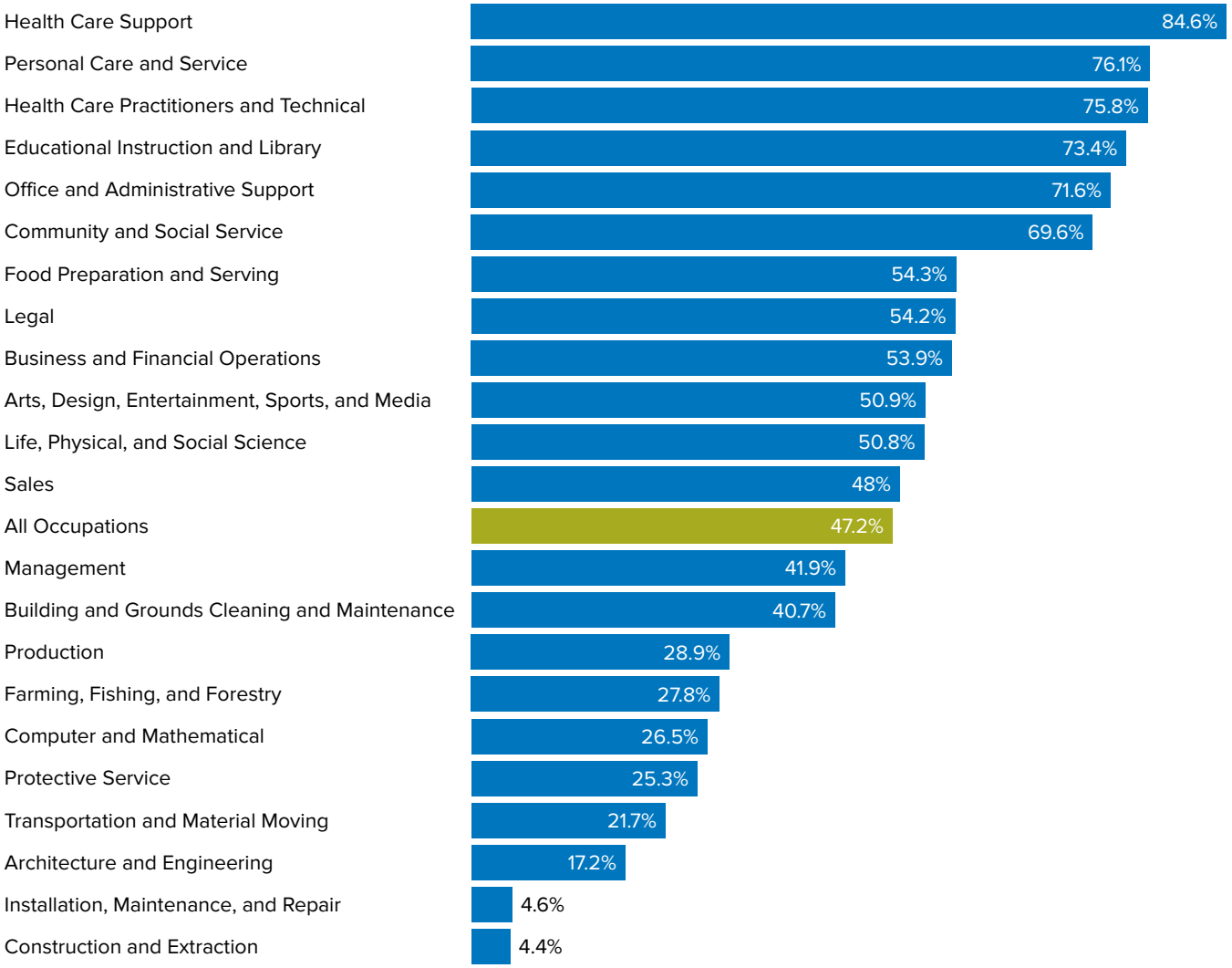

FIGURE 3

Source: Average values based on January 2024-December 2024 CPS basic monthly extract data downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

Women represent around 47% of all employed workers in the U.S. workforce, but representation varies significantly across major occupational groups. Figure 3 reports the average employment share of women, both overall and in each of the 22 major civilian occupational groups of the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system. There was very large variation in average female representation in employment across these groups, from a low of 4.4% in construction and extraction occupations to a high of 84.6% in health care support occupations.

On average in 2024, women accounted for over two-thirds of employment in six major occupational groups, including more than 75% in the health care support, personal care and service, and health care practitioners and technical occupational groups. On the opposite end of the spectrum, female representation was extremely low in the construction and extraction and installation, maintenance, and repair groups. Furthermore, women accounted for fewer than one-third of employment in six additional groups.

Some of the patterns observed in Figure 3 reinforce common stereotypes about women in the workforce. For example, female workers play a dominant role in health care, but are quite rare in occupations characterized by manual labor and certain science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. However, it should be noted that, although female representation in most occupational groups has been quite stable in recent years, there is some evidence that women are making gains in groups that have traditionally been dominated by men. For example, average female representation rose by about 3.7 percentage points in the farming, fishing, and forestry group between 2020 and 2024. During the same period, female representation also ticked up in groups such as legal (+2.3 percentage points), protective service (+1.7 percentage points), and management (+1.5 percentage points). In any case, one broad conclusion we can take away from these findings is that female workers are critically important across many occupational groups that span a diverse array of skill sets.

Takeaways

- On average in 2024, women accounted for 47.2% of the employed population.
- Female representation in employment varied dramatically across occupational groups in 2024, from a low of 4.4% (construction and extraction occupations) to a high of 84.6% (health care support occupations).
- On average in 2024, women represented over 75% of employment in three major occupational groups and less than 5% of employment in two groups.
- Despite this variation, women are well represented in occupational groups with highly disparate skill sets.

WOMEN ACCOUNT FOR OVER 50% OF EMPLOYMENT IN FIVE MAJOR INDUSTRIES.

Average Employment Share of Women by Major Industry, 2024

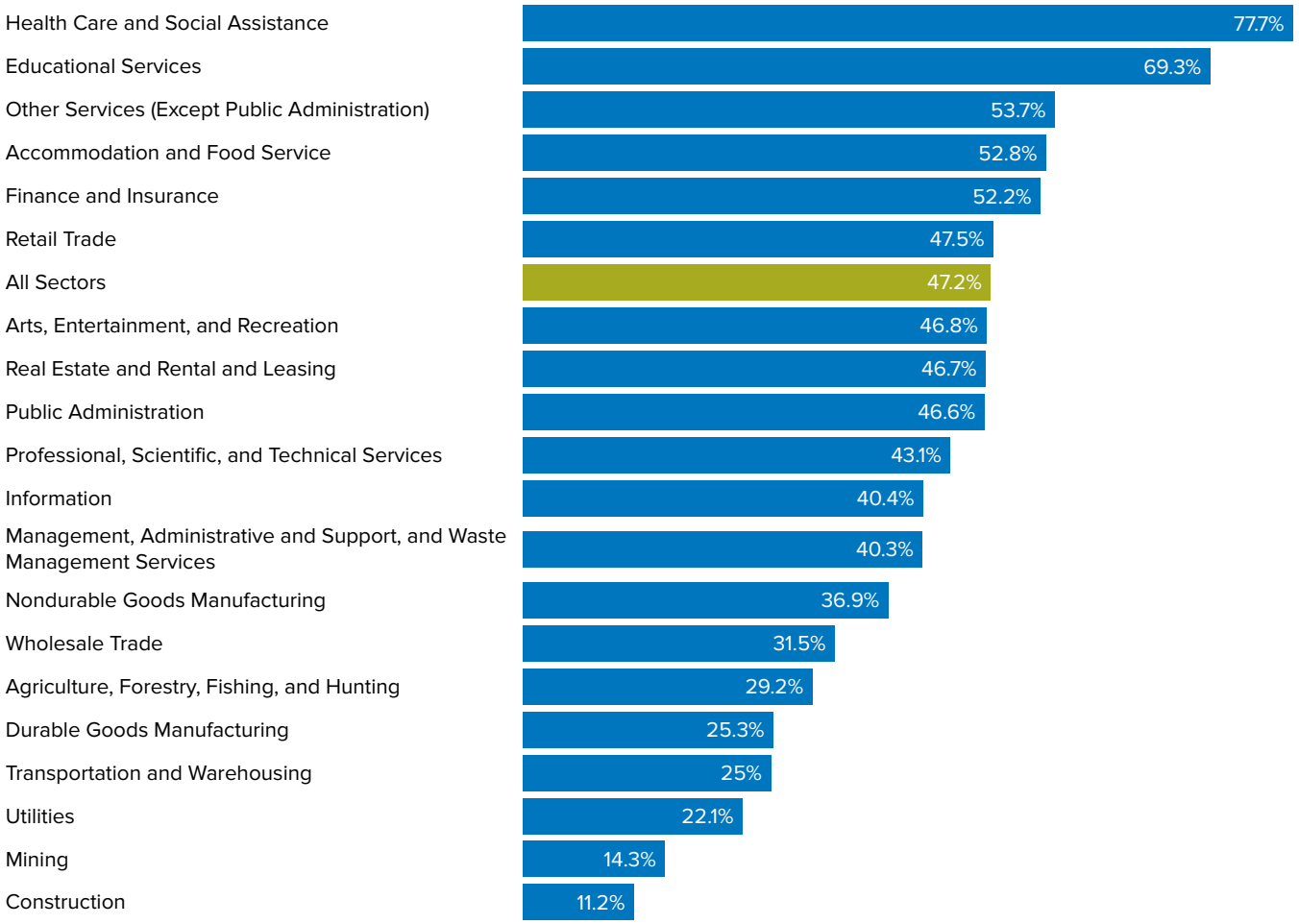

FIGURE 4

Source: Average values based on January 2024-December 2024 CPS basic monthly extract data downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

Figure 4 reports the average employment share of women across 20 major industries in 2024. As was the case when examining occupational groups, we see significant variation in female representation across major industries, from a high of 77.7% (health care and social assistance) to a low of 11.2% (construction). Similarly, on average in 2024, women accounted for over one-half of employment in five major industries and less than one-third in seven. Despite this variation, Figure 4 reinforces the conclusion that women are critically important across a wide range of industries producing highly disparate goods and services.

Takeaways

- On average in 2024, women accounted for 47.2% of employed workers.
- Female representation in employment varied dramatically across major industries in 2024, from a low of 11.2% (construction) to a high of 77.7% (health care and social assistance).
- On average in 2024, women accounted for more than 50% of employment in five major industries and less than one-third of employment in seven.
- Despite this variation, women are well represented across a range of industries producing a wide variety of goods and services.

DESPITE DROPPING MORE SEVERELY DURING THE INITIAL PHASE OF THE PANDEMIC, THE RELATIVE RECOVERY OF LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION OF PRIME-AGE WOMEN HAS SURPASSED THAT OF THEIR MALE COUNTERPARTS.

Prime Working Age Labor Force Participation Rate Index by Gender, February 2020-February 2025

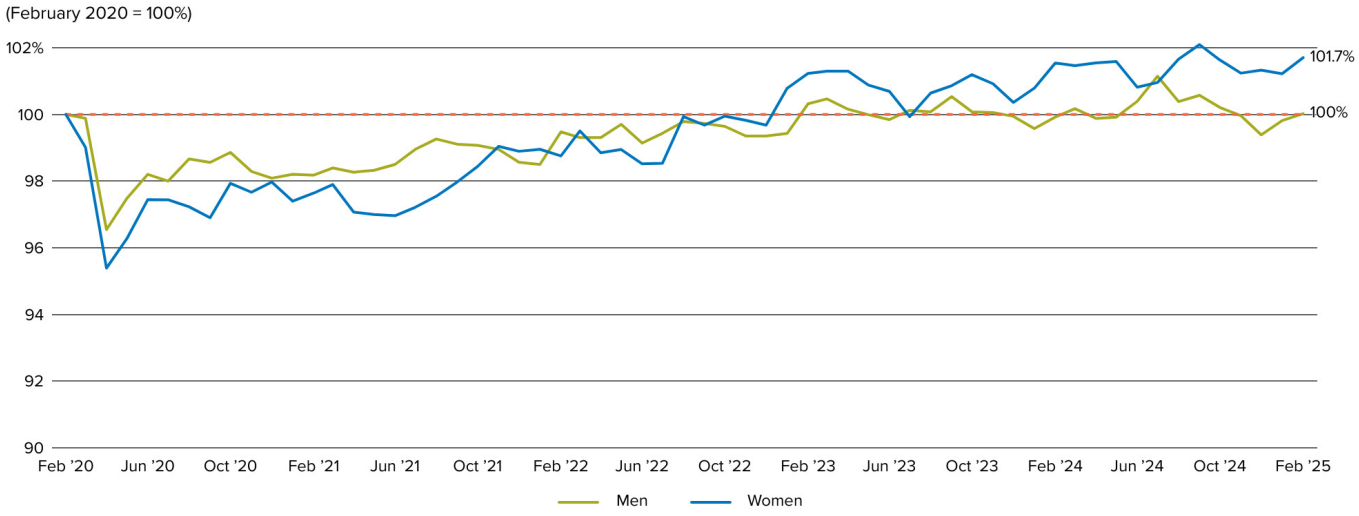

FIGURE 5

Source: February 2020-February 2025 CPS basic monthly extract data downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

One dominant narrative throughout the COVID-19 pandemic was that the labor force participation of certain populations was disproportionately harmed, generating negative outcomes for workers and employers alike. One such group was women, especially prime-age women (due to their comparatively high labor force participation and dominant role in activities such as caregiving).[4] To examine this issue, Figure 5 plots indices capturing the labor force participation of prime-age women and men as a percentage of their values in February 2020. For example, in February 2025, male labor force participation stood at 100% of its February 2020 value.

These indices reveal that the labor force participation of prime-age women did, in fact, fall more in the initial phase of the pandemic than it did for men. Furthermore, the labor force participation rate of prime-age women remained comparatively suppressed for much of 2021. However, prime-age female labor force participation first returned to its February 2020 level in late 2022 and has consistently been above that level since 2023. In contrast, prime-age male labor force participation did not return to its February 2020 level until early 2023 and has not consistently risen above that level in recent years.

Takeaways

- As of February 2025, the prime-age female labor force participation rate stood at 101.7% of its value relative to February 2020.
- Despite dropping more severely during the initial phase of the pandemic, the relative recovery of labor force participation among prime-age women has surpassed that of their male counterparts.

[4] Lim, K., & Zabek, M. (2021). Women's labor force exits during COVID-19: Differences by motherhood, race, and ethnicity. *Finance and Economics Discussion Series,* 2021(066), 1-39. www.federalreserve.gov/econres/feds/files/2021067r1pap.pdf

AFTER GROWING SUBSTANTIALLY BETWEEN 1979 AND THE EARLY 2010S, THE FEMALE-TO-MALE MEDIAN WEEKLY EARNINGS RATIO HAS BEEN RELATIVELY STABLE FOR THE LAST DECADE.

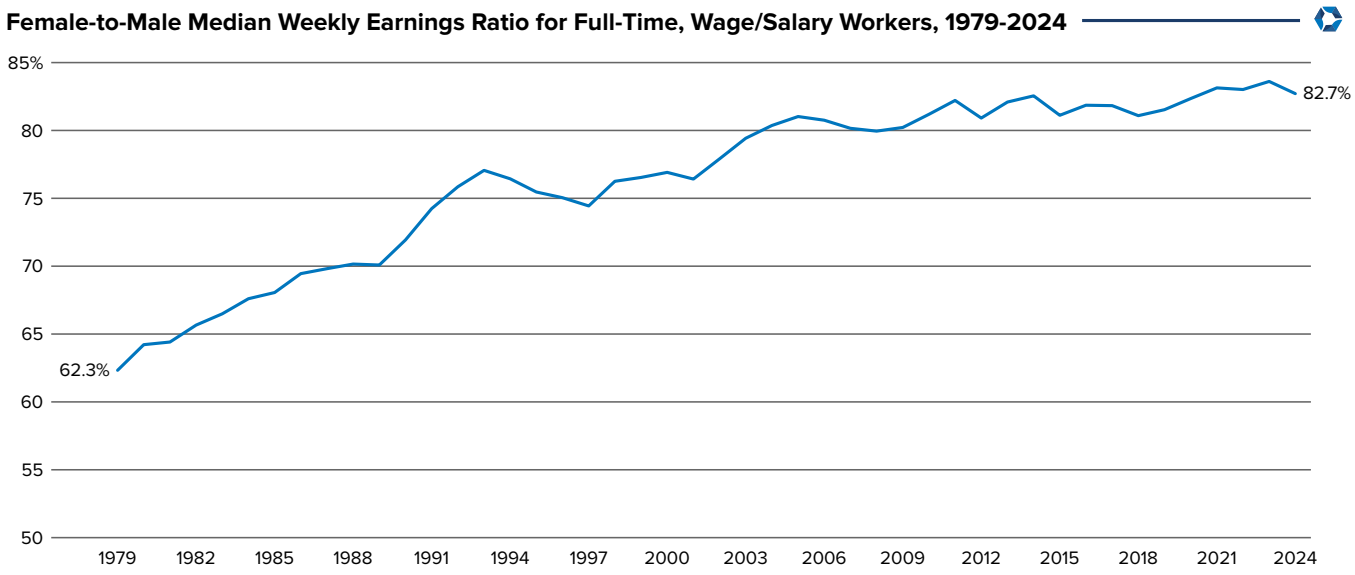

FIGURE 6

Source: 1979-2024 BLS CPS median usual weekly earnings for employed full-time, wage and salary workers data series. Measure represents the ratio of median weekly earnings for female full-time wage/salary workers to median weekly earnings for male full-time wage/salary workers. Data is not seasonally adjusted.

Figure 6 plots the female-to-male median weekly earnings ratio for full-time wage/salary workers from 1979 through 2024, a common measurement of the gender wage gap. This ratio stood at just 62.3% in 1979 but rose rapidly throughout the 1980s. After hovering around 76% for much of the 1990s, the ratio began rising again in the early 2000s. Evidence of further growth has been more limited in recent years, with the ratio's value hovering between 81% and 83% in most years.

Although the underlying factors driving the trends observed in Figure 6 are complex, research on the subject has highlighted some especially important issues.[5] For example, women have historically been concentrated in relatively low-paying occupations and industries, been more likely to work part time, and had lower labor force attachment (and thus lower wage gains stemming from experience and tenure), all of which have served to depress female earnings relative to their male counterparts.[6] However, in recent decades, the gap has closed notably because some of these issues have become less pronounced. In particular, rapid growth in educational attainment (especially higher education) has helped working women move into a wide variety of higher-paying occupations.

[5] Blau, F. D., & Kahn, L. M. (2017). The gender wage gap: Extent, trends, and explanations. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 55(3), 789-865. doi.org/10.1257/jel.20160995

[6] Glynn, S. (2018). *Gender wage inequality report.* Equitable Growth. https://equitablegrowth.org/research-paper/gender-wage-inequality

Takeaways

- In 2024, the female-to-male median weekly earnings ratio for full-time wage/salary workers was 82.7%, meaning that the median full-time wage/salary female worker earned about 82.7 cents for every dollar earned by her median male counterpart.
- Although this ratio has risen significantly for extended parts of the last 45 years, it has mostly held steady in the 81% to 83% range in recent years.
- Many factors contribute to the gender wage gap, including the relative concentration of women in relatively low-paying occupations and industries.

IN 2024, THERE WAS NO MAJOR OCCUPATIONAL GROUP IN WHICH THE MEDIAN WEEKLY EARNINGS OF FULL-TIME, WAGE/SALARY WOMEN EXCEEDED THOSE OF MEN.

Female-to-Male Median Weekly Earnings Ratio by Major Occupational Group, 2024

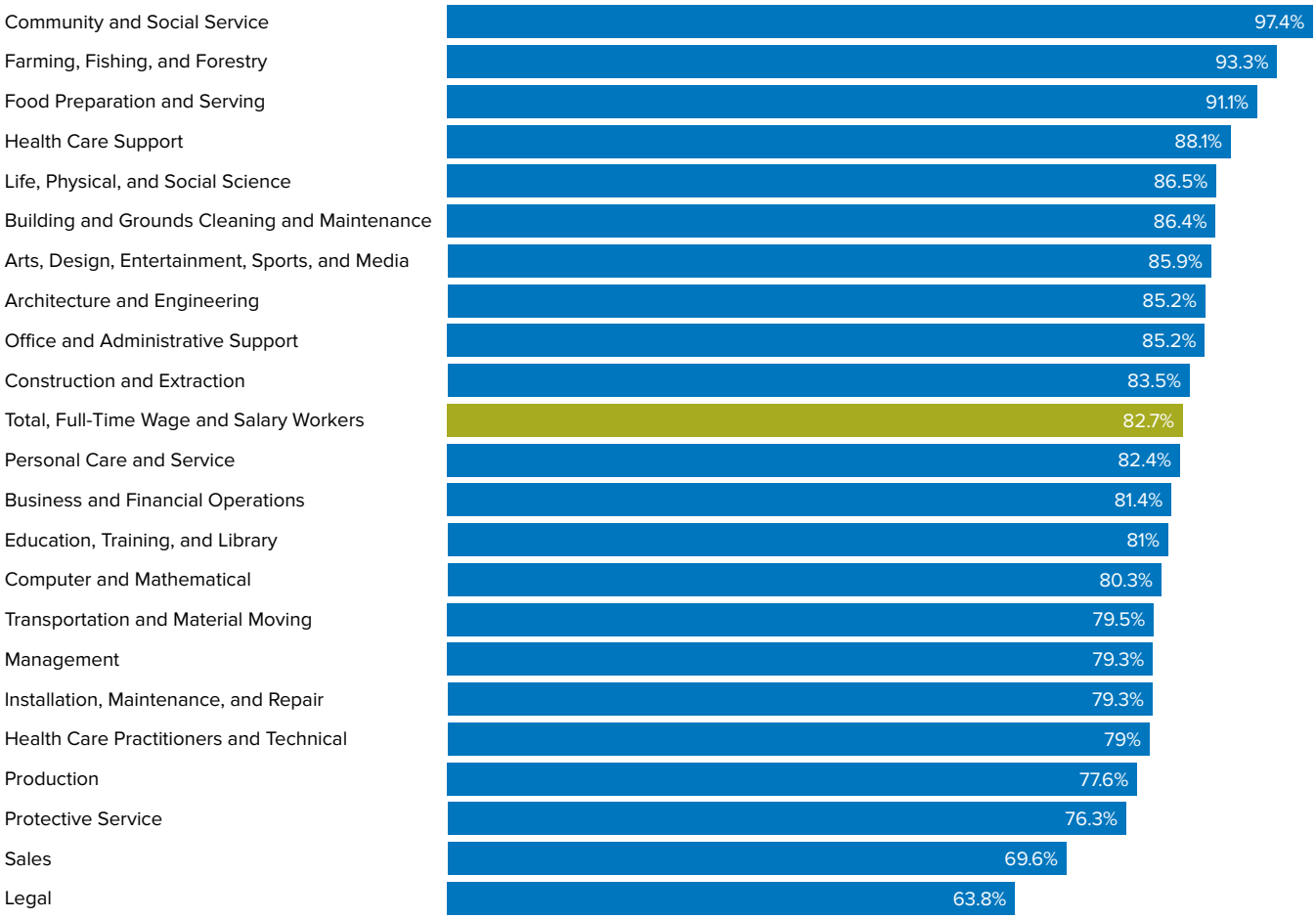

FIGURE 7

Source: 2024 BLS Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Table 39.

Figure 7 shows that the ratio of female to male earnings for full-time wage/salary workers varies significantly across major occupational groups, from a low of 63.8% in legal occupations to a high of 97.4% in the community and social service group. The factors driving this variation are complex, but one major issue is that earnings can vary significantly across individual occupations within the same occupational group and women continue to be concentrated in lower-paying occupations in many cases.

A deeper dive into the legal occupational group provides a good illustration of this issue: In 2024, there were a total of 1.434 million workers in this group, including 821,000 women and 613,000 men. Within legal occupations, nearly three-quarters of men (460,000) were employed as lawyers, the highest earning occupation within this group. Although women accounted for more than 50% of overall employment in this group, less than half were employed as lawyers, with the remainder being employed in significantly lower-paying legal support roles such as paralegals and legal assistants. Although this difference in distribution across occupations within the legal group explains much of the observed gender pay gap, it is also worth noting that women are often paid less than their male counterparts within the same individual occupation. For example, in 2024, the median weekly earnings for full-time wage/salary female lawyers ($2,296) were about 80.4% of the median weekly earnings of their male counterparts ($2,857).

Takeaways

- In 2024, there was significant variation in the female-to-male earnings ratio across occupational groups, from a low of 63.8% in the legal group to a high of 97.4% in the community and social service group.
- In 2024, there was no major occupational group in which the median weekly earnings of full-time, wage/salary women exceeded those of men.
- Although the main driver of the female-to-male wage gap is due to the higher concentration of women in lower-paying roles, pay gaps continue to persist across individual occupations.

IN MANY OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS, THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AMONG SUPERVISORS OF FIRST-LINE WORKERS WAS SIGNIFICANTLY LOWER THAN WHAT WAS OBSERVED AMONG FIRST-LINE WORKERS.

Average Representation of Women in First-Line Worker vs. First-Line Supervisor Roles, 2024

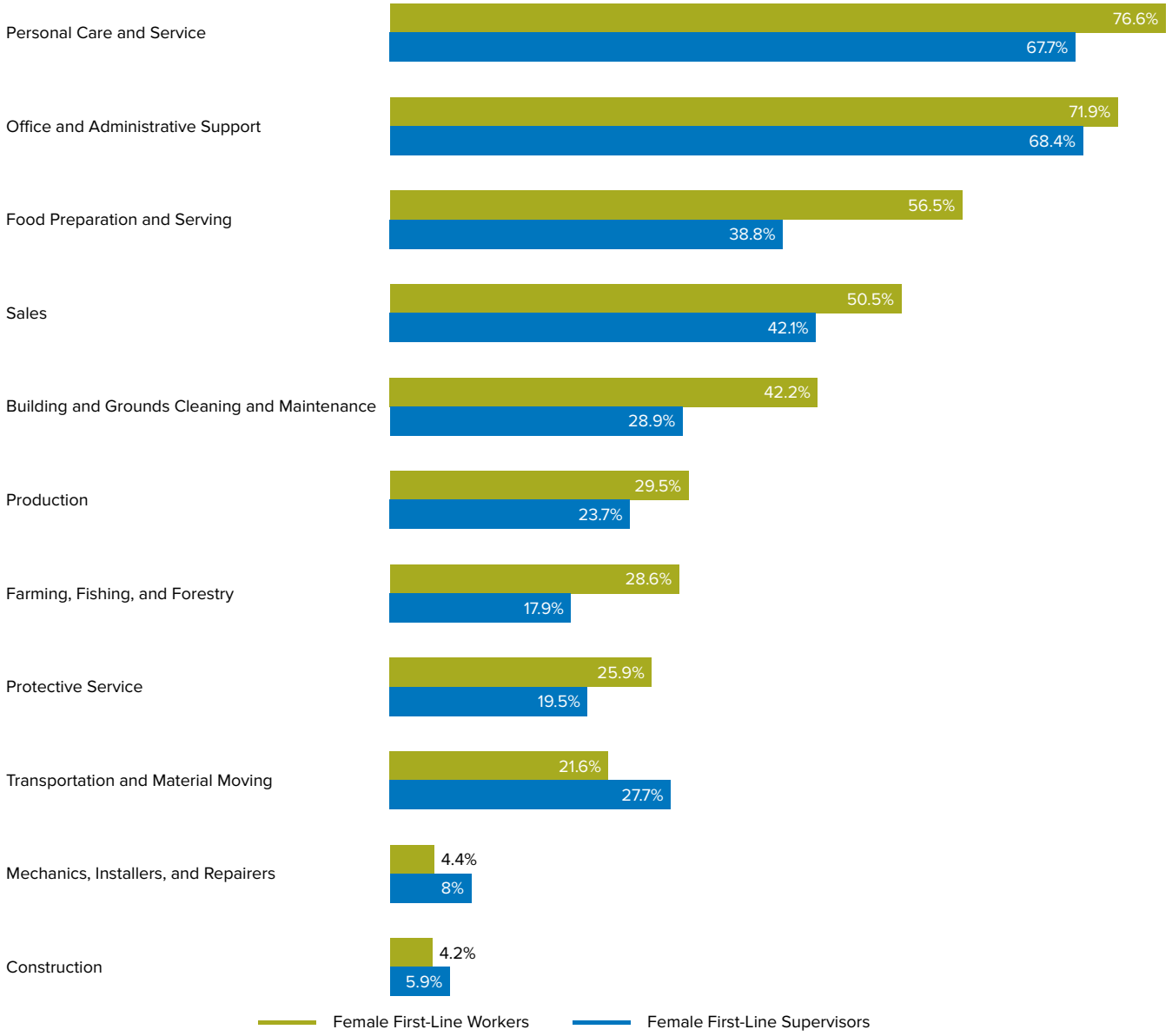

FIGURE 8

Source: Average values based on January 2024-December 2024 CPS basic monthly extract data downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

In addition to pay disparities across gender, there has long been evidence that female representation falls in roles that have progressively higher levels of leadership and authority, perhaps reflecting barriers in promotion that disproportionately impact women.[7] We use two different approaches to examine this issue. First, we rely on the fact that 11 of the 22 major civilian occupational groups in the SOC system have an occupational coding structure that divides workers into two groups: first-line workers and supervisors of first-line workers. This structure often (though not exclusively) exists in blue-collar occupational groups and reflects the fact that there are many occupational groups in which a relatively low-level supervisory role is common (e.g., a foreman at a construction site). By comparing the representation of women in first-line working roles versus first-line supervisory roles, we can obtain evidence of barriers to promotion in these specific contexts.

The findings reported in Figure 8 generally show that female representation often falls in the move from first-line workers to supervisors of first-line workers. In fact, we find that the share of workers who are female in first-line occupations exceeds the share of workers who are female in first-line supervisory occupations in eight of 11 major occupational groups. The gap in representation is often very large; for example, women account for about 28.6% of first-line workers in the farming, fishing, and forestry group, but only 17.9% of supervisors of first-line workers in the same group. This disparity even extends to occupational groups in which women account for the vast majority of employment; for example, women represent 76.6% of first-line workers in the personal care and service group, but only 67.7% of supervisors of first-line workers in the same group.

Takeaways

- On average in 2024, the female share of first-line workers exceeded the female share of supervisors of first-line workers in eight out of 11 occupational groups that have this structure.
- This supports the conclusion that barriers to leadership positions exist for women at relatively low levels of authority.

[7] Costs, T. M. (2023). *Women in the workforce: Underrepresentation in management positions persists, and the gender pay gap varies by industry and demographics.* U.S. Government Accountability Office. www.gao.gov/assets/820/818151.pdf

FEMALE REPRESENTATION FALLS AS MANAGEMENT POSITIONS BECOME INCREASINGLY MORE SENIOR.

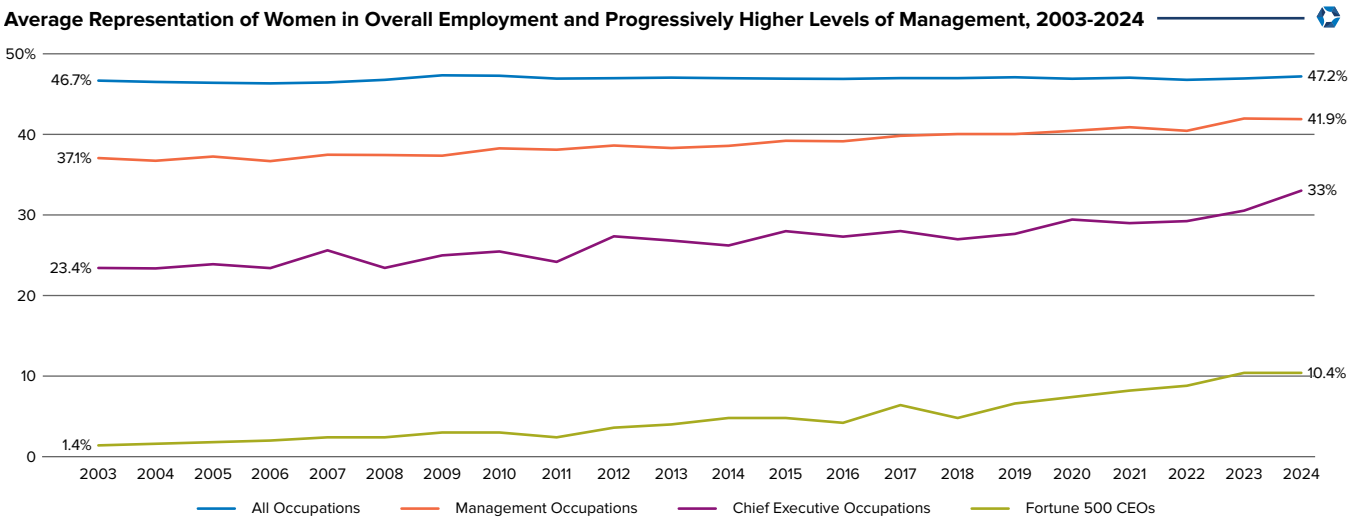

FIGURE 9

Source: 2003-2024 CPS basic monthly extract data downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). The share of female Fortune 500 CEOs was calculated using historic data from the Fortune 500 list from Catalyst. Data is not seasonally adjusted.

Figure 9 completes our analysis by plotting the average female share of employment from 2003 through 2024, both overall and at progressively higher levels of management. These levels of management include the major occupational group "Management" (SOC code 11-0000), as well as the detailed SOC occupation "Chief Executives" (SOC code 11-1011). Importantly, this occupation does not refer specifically to CEOs; rather, it refers to a broader class of top-level managers. The highest level of management included in the figure is Fortune 500 CEOs, which is included to capture female representation in the most prestigious executive-level positions available.

The results reported in Figure 9 are consistent with two broad conclusions: First, female representation tends to fall with progressively higher levels of management authority. In particular, the representation of women in management occupations was always lower than overall female representation in the employed population, the representation of women in chief executive occupations was always lower than female representation in management occupations, and the representation of women among Fortune 500 CEOs was always lower than female representation in chief executive occupations. Put simply, as we proceed from overall employment to increasingly higher levels of management, female representation falls.

Second, female representation in management roles has been improving over time, especially at higher levels. For example, while female representation in overall employment stayed nearly flat between 2003 and 2024, female representation in management occupations and chief executive occupations rose steadily. Furthermore, the representation of women among Fortune 500 CEOs went from 1.4% in 2003 to 10.4% in 2024.

Takeaways

- Female representation tends to fall with progressively higher levels of management authority.
- Female representation in more senior management roles remains low, especially at the highest level.
- Female representation in management roles has improved over time, especially at more senior levels.

CONCLUSION

Since the middle of the 20th century, women have made huge strides in the world of work, including a significant rise in labor force participation, a corresponding rise in employment representation, and notable wage gains relative to their male counterparts. In the present day, working women are critical in a wide variety of contexts and for an enormous range of goods and services.

Despite this transformation, the data also reveal that female representation remains low in certain parts of the labor force, including some occupational groups that have always been male-dominated, as well as many leadership roles (especially the most senior levels of management). Furthermore, women continue to lag behind men in terms of earnings, including overall, within every major occupational group, and even within many individual occupations. Given the ongoing labor shortage and the challenges it creates, maximizing the role of women in the U.S. labor force and reducing barriers to success will likely be a major focus for employers and policymakers for the foreseeable future.

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U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau. Labor force statistics from the Current Population Survey (CPS), Median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by detailed occupation and sex. Data retrieved from BLS Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey-Table 39, www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat39.htm

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LITERATURE

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