

Plus Ça Change . . .

Women's Top Employment Concerns during the Great Recession

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This study sought to capture the challenges facing working women in the wake of the late-2000s recession; we also studied whether and how these challenges varied by race and leadership status. Drawing on qualitative data from 4,388 women employed in 2010 across Michigan (one of the most economically depressed states), we inductively analyzed accounts of the “biggest challenge facing working women.” We found that at a time when the workforce was reeling from major economic change, women’s occupational difficulties remained largely unchanged. Their top five employment concerns mirrored decades past: work-life imbalance, pay inequity, gender discrimination, childcare, and the glass ceiling. Emphases varied somewhat by race and leadership, but overall, women’s chief concerns cut across these boundaries. We provide an abundance of quotes to bring life to these perspectives, letting the voices of working women be heard. Our findings suggest that the global economic crisis failed to outstrip challenges that working women have confronted for years. We conclude with a call for broad change to better support women (and men) in the workforce—during and after the Great Recession.

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The global economic crisis that began in 2007, also known as the *Great Recession* (or late-2000s recession), affected broad swaths of the U.S. workforce. During this Great Recession, the numbers of layoffs, pay freezes and cuts, and failed job searches were staggering. Americans had not experienced such high rates of unemployment and under employment in more than 70 years. Thousands of businesses collapsed, while others (e.g., automobile manufacturers) borrowed billions of dollars from the government in attempts to rebuild.

Although the prevailing national discourse focused on layoffs and unemployment, these issues affected the jobs of men more than women. The industries hardest hit were heavily male (e.g., construction, manufacturing; Kochhar, 2011; Salam, 2009). More than 70% of jobs lost were lost by men (Kochhar). As a result, men in 2010 constituted a minority of the American workforce for the first time in history (e.g., Mulligan, 2010; Rampell, 2010; Rosin, 2010). This Great Recession was therefore dubbed a “he-cession” (Salam, 2009) and “mancession” (Rampell, 2009). While the nation was preoccupied with (men’s) unemployment, what was on the minds of the women still in the labor force?

Historically, American working women’s primary occupational concerns have been topics such as the work-family interface, pay and promotion equality, and discrimination (e.g., Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009; Cleveland, Stockdale, & Murphy, 2000; Powell & Graves, 2003; Yoder, 2007). These issues have transcended sociodemographic divides, affecting women of all ethnic backgrounds, all regions of the nation, and all types and levels of employment. This is nothing new: As far back as the 1960s and 1970s, when women’s workforce participation exploded, such concerns were flagged as key barriers to their career success and satisfaction (e.g., Farmer, 1976; Harmon, 1970, 1977; for a historical summary see Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996). The disadvantages facing working women have accompanying stereotypes, rooted in power divides between men and women (Fiske & Stevens, 1993). Did these long-standing priorities become overshadowed by the economic events of the late 2000s?

To date, few articles about the Great Recession have appeared in the scientific literature, and essentially none has addressed working women’s experiences during this unique time. We conducted a PsycINFO search of peer-reviewed articles published between 2008 and 2012, matching each of the keywords “economy,” “recession,” and “financial crisis” with “gender” or “women.” This search yielded 17 papers from psychology, business, and women’s studies journals. Only two articles addressed the role of gender in the Great Recession, theorizing impending changes in family structure and finances (Atwood, 2012; Fraad, 2011). Others pertained to the “global economy” or “emerging economies” (Larner & Molloy, 2009; Naser, Mohammed, & Nuseibeh, 2009). Thus, the present article opens a new conversation about American working women’s perspectives during the Great Recession. Did concerns about balancing work and family, while battling

discrimination, give way to anxieties about job security, layoffs, and underemployment? Such questions deserve empirical analysis.

The Current Project

Our project focused on women employed *in Michigan*, one of the most economically depressed states during the recession. Michigan workers faced some of the greatest financial hardships in the nation, with 18% job loss from 2000 to 2009 (compared with the national 0.7% average; Scorsone & Zin, 2010); a 13.4% unemployment rate in 2009 (Michigan Department of Technology, Management, and Budget [MDTMB], 2012); and income declines that positioned it 37th nationally in per capita income (Scorsone & Zin, 2010). Two of the “Big Three” automakers, key players in the state’s economy and employment, filed for bankruptcy in 2009, creating detrimental domino effects (GM Goes Bust, 2009; Isidore, 2009). Detroit, Michigan’s largest city, endured especially poor fiscal health, with deficits surging to \$330 million in 2008–2009 (Scorsone, 2010) and unemployment reaching nearly 25% in 2009 (MDTMB, 2012). Given that “Michigan was at the heart of the economic [recession]” (Scorsone & Zin, 2010, p. 12), one may anticipate that the economy would loom large on the minds of Michigan working women.

To test this possibility, we investigated female Michigianians’ greatest job concerns in the year 2010. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER, 2010), the Great Recession ended in June 2009. At this point, broad indicators of economic activity (e.g., Gross Domestic Product) began to rise. However, as of September 2010, the same experts “did not conclude that economic conditions since [June 2009] have been favorable or that the economy has returned to operating at normal capacity” (NBER, 2010, p. 1). Moreover, hardships such as high unemployment persisted (e.g., Gross, 2009; Isidore, 2010). According to an April 2011 Gallup poll, 55% of Americans still believed that the United States was in a “recession” or “depression” (Morgan, 2011). It is therefore reasonable that our study took place in 2010.

We also investigated whether women’s top employment concerns varied as a function of *race* and *leadership status*. Racial disparities in employment have long-standing roots. The last 50 years have witnessed significant change, but race-based differences in workplace treatment and opportunities remain (Acker, 2006). For instance, African American and Latina women still hold fewer managerial and professional positions and earn lower average wages, compared to White and Asian female employees (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010, 2011). Based on selective incivility theory, women of color are also more likely to encounter insidious workplace mistreatment (Cortina, 2008; Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2012). This is consistent with perspectives on intersectionality, which emphasize that the confluence of one’s various social roles and identities shapes meaning making, (dis)advantage, and power (e.g., Cole, 2009; Shields, 2008). An intersectional

analysis considers multiple social identities simultaneously (e.g., gender, race, and class), rather than focusing on any single identity in isolation. In this spirit, we analyzed perceived employment challenges by not only female gender, but also specific racial group membership. We tentatively expected that working women of color, particularly African Americans and Latinas, may emphasize such unique challenges as discrimination, the glass ceiling, and wage inequality.

Differences are also apt to emerge in women's perceived challenges based on their leadership status. Formal leaders (e.g., executives, managers) face significant responsibility, including managing and motivating employees, overseeing tight budgets, and developing long-term visions, all of which can pose serious consequences if met with unsuccessful results (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012; Occupational Information Network, 2013). As a result, leaders often work long hours and face continual pressure to succeed. For women leaders, these job demands may compound the challenge of balancing work and personal life (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007). At the same time, women leaders often earn higher wages than other working women, reducing financial stress. Women leaders may also have fewer worries about the glass ceiling, given prior promotions and successes. However, women remain a small minority in organizational upper echelons, despite being equally represented in managerial and midtier positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Powell & Graves, 2003). Women leaders may actually be *more* cognizant of obstacles to women's advancement in organizations, due to their firsthand experiences with this process. We investigate these possibilities in the current study.

Summary of Research Questions

This study draws on qualitative data to address the following research questions:

What were the greatest challenges concerning working women in the wake of the Great Recession? Did those challenges vary by race or leadership status; if so, how?

Method

Procedures and Participants

We began our study by contacting more than 50 organizations in Michigan, including hospitals, chambers of commerce, and women's professional associations. Groups notified their members about our project ("a study of women's work lives") via emails, meetings, social media, and word of mouth. We also displayed study posters throughout the community, distributed cards with study information at local events, and published a press release. All advertisements directed women

to a secure survey website created by our research team for the purpose of this study.

On our website, working women were given more information about our study and invited to participate in a brief “snapshot” survey, 2–3 minutes in length. Nearly all participants (99.99%) completed the survey during the second quarter of 2010. Participants were informed that this study would further knowledge of women's work experiences; moreover, they could later learn about our findings on the website. We determined participant eligibility via the first two survey questions about gender and number of hours employed per week. People who did not identify as female or were not currently employed were routed to the end of the survey and thanked for their time. $N = 4,776$ women met inclusion criteria and completed the full survey.

Participants described their ethnicities/races by selecting any descriptors (based on U.S. Census Bureau categories) that applied to them: American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black/African American, Caucasian/White, Hispanic/Latina, Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander, or “Other (please describe).” Eighty one percent of participants identified as White ($n = 3,873$), 5.9% as African American ($n = 281$), 4.2% as Asian ($n = 199$), and 1.7% as Latina ($n = 83$); 2.2% ($n = 105$) selected more than one ethnicity. Less than 1% of participants identified with the other race options, and 3.2% ($n = 153$) did not provide race information.

We also asked whether participants held “leadership positions” at their jobs. More than 2% ($n = 107$) identified as “Owner (i.e., you personally own over 50% of controlling interest in your company),” 1.3% ($n = 64$) as Senior Executive, 2.5% ($n = 121$) as Executive, and 16% ($n = 772$) as Manager (3.7%, $n = 176$, missing). More than 11% ($n = 536$) of respondents indicated their leader position as “Other (please describe).”¹ We created a binomial “leader” variable, scored 1 (formal leadership position; $n = 1,066$) or 0 (no formal leadership position; $n = 3,534$).

Participants worked an average of 41.7 hours ($SD = 8.7$ hours) per week. They worked in a diverse span of 18 industries, including education, healthcare, technology, accounting, academic research, and biotechnology. Their organizations ranged in size, with 81% of women working in companies with 200 or more employees (7.9% missing or unsure, $n = 375$).

Participants completed at least five additional items. Most relevant to the current study was an open-ended question: “What do you see as the biggest challenge facing working women?” We explicitly asked about challenges facing women so that respondents did not provide secondary accounts of salient media topics or males' common concerns.

¹ The first author determined whether each leader description constituted formal leadership. Fifteen percent were coded as formal leadership roles (e.g., Director); the rest were coded as not being formal leadership roles, because descriptions either were missing, were unclear (e.g., “Coordinator”), or appeared not to be formal leadership (e.g., “Staff”).

Analytic Procedure

To identify patterns across responses, we adopted an inductive approach common in qualitative research. Informed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000, 2006), our methods moved from collection of open-ended data to identification of themes in those data to systematic coding of themes. We allowed themes, in other words, to “emerge” from the data (rather than imposing preconceived categories). We treated women’s accounts (i.e., their own words describing “the biggest challenge facing working women”) as a rich source of insight into their experience.

Two subject matter experts (who at the time were advanced doctoral students, including the first author) developed a coding scheme to categorize participants’ accounts of the “biggest challenge facing working women.” Each expert independently read several hundred responses and developed categories to capture topics of discourse. The experts consolidated their codes and had multiple discussions about them, making refinements until they agreed on a coding scheme that was clear and consistent with project goals (see Table 1).

The subject matter experts trained two research assistants (RAs) on the coding rubric, detailing the meaning of each code. After coding a random selection of responses, the RAs met with the experts to discuss and resolve discrepancies. Training continued until the experts were confident in the RAs’ coding ability. When coding the same random subset of 20 responses as the first author, the RAs’ interrater reliability was excellent ($\kappa = .86$) (Boyatzis, 1998). Once trained, each RA coded half the dataset. Many respondents listed more than one issue, so the RAs assigned up to three codes per participant. The RAs met with the experts weekly, alerting them to unusual or ambiguous responses. At the end of the process, codes were available for $n = 4,388$ participants (388 participants either did not answer the focal question or provided responses that could not be coded as a “challenge,” e.g., “depends on the line of work”).

Results

Table 1 presents the proportion and descending frequency of comments receiving each code. Here, we present quotes to illustrate (and bring alive) the top five most frequent codes.

Working Women’s Top Five Employment Concerns

#1 Concern: Work-life balance. Participants’ most frequent “biggest challenge facing working women” by far was adequately attending to both their work and personal lives ($n = 2,891$; 65.9%): “*Work/life balance; I’m a single parent and trying to make everyone happy—my job, my daughter, and also carve a little time*”

Table 1. Coding Scheme of Working Women's Perceived "Biggest Challenge" (in 2010), Ranked in Descending Order of Frequency

Coding Category	Description	Participant Quotes Exemplifying Category	Valid% (N = 4,388)
TOP FIVE CHALLENGES			
Work-life balance	These responses highlight challenges balancing work with some aspect of personal life (e.g., partner, children, parents, household, leisure, and exercise). It includes time management, inflexible schedules, and social pressures to "succeed at everything."	<i>Balancing the pressures of being an excellent mother and wife, along with being an excellent high performing employee who takes opportunities for upward career mobility. Very tough.</i>	65.9%
Wage inequality	Women could be explicitly aware of or suspect national or global gender pay gaps and be concerned about their societal implications. This category includes gender inequality via perceptions and behavior. These women encountered or are concerned about women's lack of respect or recognition; beliefs that women are less capable, trustworthy, knowledgeable, or credible than men; other gender stereotypes; and negotiation of feminine and masculine characteristics to maximize one's image. Inequalities could be rooted in workgroup, organizational, or societal cultures.	<i>In many areas of expertise, a woman is still paid less than a man for the same job, with the same education and same amount of experience. Getting the same respect and opportunities in the workforce.</i>	17.0%
Discriminatory attitudes and treatment based on gender		<i>Females in general and traditional female characteristics being viewed as weak, incapable, and inferior. Gender roles that require women to make choices about work and family that result in them being viewed as uncommitted or unreliable.</i>	15.5%
Childcare	Childcare consists of challenges finding and securing care for children. This includes affordable daycare, safe care, convenient childcare hours, care when children are sick, and responsibility for picking up or dropping off children at school or daycare. Driving children to after-school activities also fits this category.	<i>Juggling work with the schedules of busy children who are still in school. Their extra curricular activities, appointments, school events, sick, homework and studies, connecting with children, making sure they have proper meals, etc., etc., etc.</i>	6.38%
Glass ceiling	This code includes gender-based barriers to advancement. These barriers include unequal consideration for promotion, slower advancement, and fewer opportunities that facilitate advancement. Exclusion from informal men's networks also fits this category.	<i>I think the major issue involves women in supervisory positions. I believe that it is more likely a female will be passed over for a promotion than a male.</i>	6.36%

Continued

Table 1. Continued

Coding Category	Description	Participant Quotes Exemplifying Category	Valid% (N = 4,388)
CHALLENGES DESCRIBED BY LESS THAN 5% OF WOMEN			
Other	These comments do not fit the other categories (e.g., lack of confidence, deficient health care, or education challenges).		
Economy	This code includes any mention of the economy or recession. Respondents may be concerned about topics such as job layoffs, job hunting, promotions, or pay freezes due to the economy.	<i>Staying abreast of technology and having excellent customer service skills.</i>	3.1%
Financial obligations	This code involves one's financial stability when no mention of the economy or recession is present. It encompasses concerns that exist regardless of the economy (e.g., retirement savings).	<i>The poor economy, especially in Michigan, which so far has translated into fewer job/career opportunities.</i>	2.6%
Other working women	If women discuss organizational stressors or barriers due to other working women, they are assigned this code. Pertinent topics are competition and mistreatment between women and lack of mentoring or support from other women.	<i>Enough money to pay bills. Making enough money to not only live on presently, but to retire on.</i>	2.1%
Aging and health	Challenges in this category address biological changes in health, weight, or most commonly, age. Women may notice age-related changes in their cognition, physical abilities, health, or treatment at work.	<i>Women tend to criticize each other and gossip more than men. This behavior leads to negative attitudes about women in general. In nursing, there is a saying about older nurses eating their young. Changes in health condition as we age. Not tolerated well where I work. As an older woman, I think respect for older people in general is one of the challenges facing women.</i>	1.5%
Stress and burnout	This category is assigned to discussions of job stress and burnout.	<i>Stress management. Burnout.</i>	0.8%
No challenges	This code pertains to statements that working women no longer face challenges or that their challenges are the same as men.	<i>I honestly do not think that women have any more of a challenge than men do in the working world.</i>	0.5%
Race	These responses discuss the intersection of race and gender in women's work experiences, mentioning compounded challenges that women of color face (e.g., treatment and advancement).	<i>Upward mobility opportunities as well as the intersection of race and gender. White women and women of color vary in positions of power.</i>	0.3%
Workplace politics	This code involves negative interpersonal relationships not specific to gender or race (e.g., favoritism, cliques, and gossip).	<i>Employment seems more like a gauge of popularity rather than a gauge of skills and education.</i>	0.2%

out for myself—is stressful.” This category meant work-family balance for most respondents, who made statements such as: “*The balancing act—being a primary parent and a full-time worker. How to feel that anything gets adequate attention (children, work, home, etc).*” Some participants suggested that this “balancing act” becomes especially complicated in the context of “professional” employment:

“Balancing work and home life is the biggest challenge. It’s difficult to commit 100% to both, particularly when working full-time. In addition, with many professional jobs, there is work outside of the normal time at ‘work’ which cuts into family time. Women still tend to be the primary caregivers in 2 parent homes and this can be very stressful at times.”

Other respondents discussed balancing work with broader aspects of their personal lives (“*Balancing work with other concerns (e.g., health, caretaking, personal development, leisure, volunteer work, and civic involvement)*”), including finding time for themselves: “*Work life balance, in particular finding time to take care of yourself after you take care of everyone else*”; “*To be able to balance work, family and still have time to take care of yourself. Presently, I do not have time to exercise . . .*”; and “*I feel like I’m taking care of everything except me.*”

Many work-life comments contained undertones of inequality between men and women:

“In order to succeed in today’s workforce you need to devote quite a bit of time to your job and that is tough when you have a family. It’s easier for men; my husband can stay late whenever he wants and does not seem to have the same demands at home. However, my job is more demanding than his.”

Other comments include “*Women with families have to work harder in the home than their partners and their work there is taken for granted. Women are tired*”; and “*I continue to see how home and family obligations fall disproportionately on the women, even when they have spouses at home.*” Not all participants blamed partners for this inequality, pointing instead to the broader culture: “*Cultural expectations for women’s work in the home have not been sufficiently adjusted to compensate for our contributions to the work force.*”

Across work-life balance discussions, feelings of guilt or dissatisfaction about not performing ideally in each domain emerged: “*Balancing demands of work and home; the guilt that results from being so divided between these demands and feeling like you cannot give 100% in both areas at the same time*”; “*Work/life balance: feelings of guilt (when I spend time with my family, I feel guilty about all the work that needs to be done; when I’m working, I feel guilty about not spending time with my family)*”; and “*I do not believe that there is ever anything like balance, but we have to figure out how to be happy with what we’ve accomplished in both places.*”

#2 Concern: Wage inequality. Working women’s second most cited challenge was pay inequities compared to male colleagues ($n = 747$; 17%): “*Getting the*

value & recognition for our contribution to the workforce. Let us face it, women do not get paid as much as men. Women get a typical man's job and the pay and status go down,” and *“.77 on the dollar; we do not make as much as men even when we are doing the same job.”* One woman explained:

“Equity in pay for equal or better work. This is still very discouraging. I am an executive where salaries are openly published and it is maddening to see the disparities. I have had to ask to be at least equitably compensated on more than one occasion—it always gets addressed but should I really have to ask?”

Some respondents tied pay disparities to the work-life balance pressures noted above:

“Salary parity: as more men are doing the family things typically associated with the ‘mommy track’, their salaries are not falling. So now the men have pressure to do it all AND they actually are getting it all.”

“Earning equitable pay is the biggest challenge I see facing working women. Whether because we do not effectively self-advocate and negotiate or whether our work is systematically devalued, we continue to earn less than men. This contributes to our struggles to balance work and personal realms and support ourselves and our families.”

#3 Concern: Gender discrimination in attitudes and treatment. The third biggest issue women discussed was gender discrimination in attitudes and actions ($n = 679$, 15.5%). This category encompassed various topics, especially disparate treatment of women: *“Equality in treatment amongst peers. Administrative tasks are still assigned to women. Opportunities/projects that would improve one’s ability to advance still go to men before women”*; *“Being treated differently by co-workers & bosses due to conscious, or especially unconscious, bias”*; and *“Men still get all the perks and when they do something wrong, it is over looked.”*

Women also commented on differential experiences of rudeness: *“Working women probably are experiencing more incivility and verbal abuse from superiors and colleagues. The threat to women’s emotional and mental health is significant because women tend to personalize a lot more than men”*; and *“Male doctors talking down to the working nurses.”* Related issues of respect and perceived competence also emerged: *“Not taking a woman’s opinion or comment seriously”*; and *“Constantly having to prove yourself and overcome preconceptions that women aren’t really competent in technical or other challenging fields.”*

Some women noted subtler forms of discriminatory treatment: *“The subtle ways in which women’s work/contributions are undervalued or unrecognized”*; and *“Being ‘heard’ and ‘visible’ in the same way that men in the workplace are.”* Participants sometimes commented that blatant misogyny had declined, but covert biases persisted, unchallenged, and unchecked:

“Sexism that takes less blatant forms. Many people recognize and discourage sexism when it is obvious, such as directly stating ‘women are not competent enough for this job’ or ‘women are not critical thinkers’, but so many people don’t recognize sexism in the form

of women being under-represented at conferences and meetings, or women being gently steered away from the sciences and into 'compassionate' fields of work."

Some participants commented on differential treatment arising from a conflict between their work and gender roles: "*Conflict between characteristics needed to advance that are seen as inappropriate or undesirable in women (assertiveness seen as aggression, etc.)*." Additional examples of this theme included:

"I am constantly faced with a particularly insidious kind of sexism. While on the surface, academics are generally open-minded and liberal, the most successful of us are virile, with masculinized methods of communication. Women who emphasize their femininity, or operate in traditionally feminized ways (talking about emotions, avoiding conflict) are faulted for it. It's hard because it's unquantifiable, but it is quite obviously present to me."

"I have found it is difficult to keep my femininity and be respected as a professional. I enjoy laughing, smiling and have a nurturing side, but in the workplace, those attributes are disrespected and put me in a class of 'den mother' or 'just a girl.' I have to be better at my job than my male counterparts and if I don't possess the typical male behaviors—aggressive, reserved, judgmental—I am passed over for raises and much more."

#4 Concern: Childcare. Working women's fourth challenge was childcare ($n = 280$; 6.38%): "*Finding affordable, reliable, SAFE childcare.*" Participants' primary grievance was the high cost: "*The cost of childcare is the biggest challenge. I pay more for childcare than I do for my mortgage.*" Expensive childcare extended beyond women's wallets and into their careers as well: "*Daycare expenses. It's so expensive that many women choose to stay home instead, ending up behind in their careers compared to men.*"

Childcare challenges also included schedules, ranging from inconvenient day-care times ("*Many childcare pick up times are 5:30pm and this is not convenient for many*") to attending to sick children ("*When your kids are small, you're the one taking care of them when they're sick*") to managing school-age children's activities ("*The ability for single women with children to take care of them when they are sick, have vacation days from school, doctor appointments, after-school activities and sports. It would be impossible for me to work full time as a widow*"). This influenced women's career development: "*Daycare schedule when you are trying to go to school; sometimes, the schedule is not as flexible as it should be to continue your education.*"

Similar to work-family, women noted a gender imbalance in childcare responsibilities:

"The expectation that women will be the primary provider of childcare/family care. No one asks the men I work with how they manage a career and family. When both spouses work in similar positions, the vast majority of the time it is the mother who takes the children to day care/school, to the pediatricians' appointments, picks them up in the afternoon and stays home with them when they are sick."

Women with grown—and without—children noted the burdens too: “*Childcare, as a large number of women are single parents. Childcare today is much more expensive than when I was supporting my daughter.*” The childcare challenge is compounded for women in poverty:

“Childcare—and I say this even though I don’t have children. The inability to get good, affordable and reliable childcare hampers too many women’s ability to hold a job and provide for their families. I think this is especially true of poor single mothers trying to hold hourly minimum wage jobs with inflexible employers.”

#5 Concern: Glass ceiling. Working women’s fifth top concern was the presence of an impermeable “glass ceiling” blocking women’s career progression into higher positions ($n = 279$, 6.36%). Various issues emerged, from job ladders to job responsibilities to specific industries: “*The ability to continue to grow professionally, including promotions, increased pay and responsibilities, and avoiding being put on a “mommy” track*”; and “*The glass ceiling, especially in high-tech, engineering, computer software areas.*” Respondents discussed various barriers to advancement, including lack of resources:

“Working women face significant challenges in connecting to resources—in the form of best practices for career advancement, news of job openings, securing a [woman] business leader to act as a mentor, and in cultivating advocates within senior management of their employing firms. Many of these resources are sources of timely and accurate information that will help them to manage their careers.”

Women also commented on the persistence of “old boys’ clubs” and exclusively male settings as barriers to advancement: “*Inadvertent exclusion of women from the, mainly male, social networks that determine power in most organizations. Blatant, deliberate exclusion can be fought. Unconscious exclusion is more insidious.*” One woman said:

“Breaking into the ‘boys club’. I am often left out of breakfast meetings with my boss and coworkers. While I don’t think that they intentionally think ‘Let’s not invite her’, I don’t think it ever occurs to them to include me even though everyone who goes (except for my boss) are my peers. Shop talk goes on at these meetings and it’s an opportunity for those who attend to get to know each other and the boss on a more relaxed, social level.”

Women also discussed the *lack* of a glass ceiling—and ease of promotion—for men in traditionally female fields. One woman illustrated this “glass escalator effect” (Williams, 1992):

“The ‘glass elevator’ for men in a field with very few men. I work in a department with 50 women and 3 men and I see the men move up and get more praise. Most women work harder and do more but get less praise and reward.”

Some women attributed promotion inequality to traditional gender roles: “*Good-girl upbringing interferes with asking for promotions, raises, etc.*”; and

"It is hard to advance as a woman. I think often you are viewed in a negative manner if you are ambitious."

Concerns Raised by Less than 5% of Women

Beyond the top five concerns detailed above, participants raised an array of other issues (in descending frequency): "other" (heterogeneous topics), the economy, financial obligations, other working women, aging and health, stress and burnout, no challenges, race, and workplace politics. These concerns emerged at very low frequencies (0.2%–3.1%).

The economy. Only 2.6% of women ($n = 114$) discussed the current economy. Their primary economic concern was limited pay and opportunities: *"In the state of Michigan, just finding a job that pays enough to pay the bills. I see benefits eroding, and this hits entry level staff, mainly women, the hardest."* Others saw the economy as constraining their choices:

At this time in our economical circumstance, I feel the biggest challenge working women face is the decision between staying at home to raise a family or working. I feel it's harder to do both these days, as low-income families are becoming more common and mothers need to work at least part-time to contribute to the annual income.

A few women noted that the recession harmed workplace climate: *"With the current fiscal issues facing the state, it's become far more competitive and cut throat. People are determined to keep their jobs and will walk over others to do so. For women, it means times are even tougher than usual. Women are more easily trivialized."*

Also notable is what was not prominent. Only 16 women (less than .05% of respondents) emphasized "keeping" jobs, fear of layoffs, or job security.

Financial obligations. About 2% of women ($n = 92$) noted the "biggest challenge" to be financial, without explicitly mentioning the economy. For instance, *"trying to make ends meet with one income, especially being a single parent"* and *"a secure retirement."* These pecuniary issues, while probably aggravated by the recession, exist regardless of economic state.

Differences by Race

We grouped most women into one of four ethnic categories: African American, Asian American, Latina, and White. Other participants (excluding $n = 153$ missing) constituted a fifth, "Other Ethnic Minority" group, which included women who identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or an ethnicity not listed. We could not examine each of these

Table 2. Working Women's Perceived "Biggest Challenge" (in 2010) by Race

Category	African American (n = 268)	Asian American (n = 174)	Latina (n = 78)	White (n = 3,680)	Other Ethnic Minority (n = 174)
Work-life balance	59.7%	74.7%	65.4%	65.8%	68.4%
Wage inequality	20.5%	5.7%	20.5%	17.4%	13.2%
Discriminatory attitudes and treatment based on gender	14.6%	16.1%	10.3%	15.6%	15.5%
Childcare	7.1%	4%	11.5%	6.2%	9.2%
Glass ceiling	11.2%	5.7%	10.3%	6.0%	6.9%
Economy	0.7%	1.1%	2.6%	2.9%	1.7%
Financial obligations	3.7%	0.6%	3.8%	2%	2.9%
Other	4.1%	3.4%	2.6%	2.8%	5.7%
Race	3%	1.1%	0%	<0.01%	1.1%
Other working women	0.7%	2.3%	1.3%	1.4%	2.9%
Aging and health	1.9%	0%	1.3%	1%	4%
Stress and burnout	0.4%	0.6%	0%	0.9%	1.1%
Workplace politics	1.1%	0%	0%	0.1%	0.6%
None	0%	0.6%	0%	0.6%	0.6%

Note: Percentages are within race.

groups individually due to low cell sizes, so we opted to combine them, rather than exclude these women's responses.

White, Asian American, African American, Latina, and Other Ethnic Minority participants significantly differed in their occupational concerns (see Table 2), $\chi^2(52, N = 4,374) = 115.2, p < .001$. While *work-life balance* was the biggest issue for all women, it was especially salient for Asian women. *Wage inequality* was the second greatest concern for all women (especially African American women and Latinas), except Asian women, for whom it was less critical. Asian American women were more concerned with *gender discrimination in treatment and attitudes*. Latinas were more concerned about access to high-quality, affordable *childcare*. Proportionally more African American women and Latinas highlighted *glass ceiling* barriers and *financial* concerns. These findings support our expectations that occupational concerns would vary by race, particularly for African Americans and Latinas. Despite these differences, women's top five "biggest challenges" (*work-life balance*, *wage inequality*, *gender discrimination*, *childcare*, and *the glass ceiling*) did not differ by race, speaking to their prevalence.

African American women most often discussed the role of *race* in their job experiences, followed by Asian American women and respondents in the Other Ethnic Minority category. "*Lack of respect for the diversity of women in the workforce (e.g., if you are an African American female, then there are even more challenges as opposed to being a Caucasian female in the workforce).*" When women discussed race and gender intersectionality, many emphasized its role in advancement: "*Getting equal access to the higher paying jobs; it's double the*

Table 3. Working Women's Perceived "Biggest Challenge" (in 2010) by Leader Status

Category	Women holding no formal leader position (n = 3,331)	Women holding formal leader position (n = 1,025)
Work-life balance	64.6%	69.9%
Wage inequality	17.1%	17.1%
Discriminatory attitudes and treatment based on gender	15.5%	15.4%
Childcare	6.7%	5.4%
Glass ceiling	6.2%	6.8%
Other	3%	3.4%
Economy	2.5%	2.9%
Financial obligations	2.5%	0.9%
Other working women	1.7%	1%
Aging and health	1.1%	1.4%
Stress and burnout	0.8%	1%
None	0.7%	0.2%
Race	0.3%	0.4%
Workplace politics	0.2%	0.2%

Note: Percentages are within status.

challenge if you are an African American woman!"; and "Color Barriers; the glass ceiling for blacks still exists."

Differences by Leadership Status

Women's concerns differed marginally by leadership status (see Table 3); $\chi^2(13, N = 4,356) = 21.9, p = .056$. Those in formal leadership positions were more likely to view *work-life balance* and the *glass ceiling* as "biggest challenges." These women felt pressed for time at home and work and saw obstacles to advancement. Women outside of leadership were more likely to mention *childcare* and *financial concerns*; this could be due to their lower incomes, lower occupational statuses, younger ages, and younger children than women leaders. Most striking, however, are similarities rather than differences between leadership statuses.

Discussion

Since the 2007 economic downturn, employment policy analysts have concentrated on job loss, layoffs, and (in Michigan) the autoindustry. These topics, however, pertain to the work lives of men more than women. Mirroring decades past, employed women grappled with other challenges: work-life balance, pay inequity, gender discrimination, childcare, and the glass ceiling. With this article, we bring those issues to the forefront of the employment conversation, letting the voices of women be heard. Here, we review key findings and underscore the need

for reforms to better support working women (and men) in the wake of the Great Recession.

Working Women's "Big Five"

Michigan working women's top five employment concerns cut across boundaries of race and status (leadership). Although specific emphases within the top five varied, the same set of challenges came up time and again. Our findings speak to the prevalent and persistent nature of these problems; regardless of racial identity or formal authority, women highlighted similar, historic barriers to their occupational success and satisfaction. These problems have impeded women's career development since at least as far back as the 1960s, if not earlier (e.g., Farmer, 1976; Harmon, 1970, 1977). *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?*²

It is interesting that "the recession" (or "the economy") did not rank among women's top occupational concerns. Likewise, few women expressed worries about "unemployment" or "job loss" (this is logical given that all respondents were employed, but issues such as "job insecurity" rarely arose either). We do not conclude, however, that women emerged unscathed from the late-2000s fiscal crisis. Instead, it appears that this crisis failed to outstrip challenges women have confronted for years: striking balance between work and home life; finding quality, affordable childcare; and fighting discrimination in their jobs, promotions, and paychecks.

If anything, the recession likely aggravated these classic burdens for many working women. For example, some organizations coped with financial woes by scaling back wages, reducing benefits, or downsizing their workforce (e.g., Cooper, 2012; Freed, 2012). In the face of budget shortfalls, government agencies slashed public childcare provisions and supports for poor families (e.g., Ryan, 2011). For thousands of workers, employment became more precarious and more precious. In all likelihood, this situation made it even harder for women to demand compensation and promotion on par with men, afford quality childcare, and achieve balance between work and life. Our point is *not* that the Great Recession is unimportant to women. The recession, however, should not desensitize us to other pressing problems in women's work lives.

#1 Challenge in Women's Work Lives

For two thirds of respondents, work-life (im)balance was *the* greatest problem facing working women in 2010. A related concern was securing satisfactory, safe, affordable, and reliable childcare. The stresses inherent in these struggles are hardly good for children or families, much less for women. Organizations suffer

² "The more things change, the more they stay the same?"

as well, losing out on valuable female talent. To accommodate the reality that a majority of American women—including mothers—participate in the paid labor force, change is needed in organizational structures and policies, public priorities and subsidies, and household divisions of labor.

American organizations have been structured around the notion of the “ideal worker” (e.g., Williams, 2000, 2008). The “ideal worker” is someone who works full time and never reduces hours or takes leave for family reasons. She or (more often) he has no distractions from parenting, tending to sick partners/parents, or other caregiving. The employee is available to work at any location or hour, including at a moment's notice. However, if that person is the primary caretaker of young children, aging parents, or ailing partners, it becomes virtually impossible to meet the “ideal worker” standard. Work/family conflict comes to define the lives of these not-so-ideal workers, who are often women.

For employees to balance work and life commitments—and thrive while doing so—reforms are needed in both firm and family. Changes in the world of *work* might come faster than transformations in the *family* sphere though. Experts have identified a host of workplace policies to improve work-family balance. For example, “flex” policies afford flexibility in work timing (“flextime”) and location (“flexplace”). When employees have greater control managing work and home responsibilities, they can better attend to both domains, minimizing stress (e.g., Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright, & Neuman, 1999; Thomas & Ganster, 1995). Policies that allow *and encourage* men to contribute to the family (e.g., paid paternity leave) reduce women's burden to manage all things home and hearth. Men, women, children, and even organizations profit (Feldman, Sussman, & Zigler, 2004; Grover & Crooker, 1995; Kotsadam & Finseraas, 2011). A third innovation, increasingly embraced by universities and national laboratories, is “dependent care travel” assistance. Defraying caregiving costs incurred by professional travel, these funds enable career-advancing trips that might not otherwise be possible, especially for women (e.g., Center for WorkLife Law, 2013; Sabbatini & Crosby, 2009; Williams, 2000). These policies should ease work/family conflicts for *all* employees, both female and male.

Women's other “Big Five” concerns related to unfair disadvantages in pay, promotion, and treatment. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and related reforms (e.g., Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978) made strides in proscribing *blatant* gender discrimination. An important next step is to reduce *subtle* discriminatory conduct, which followed working women into the 21st century. This conduct entails “insidious workplace behavior,” assuming stealthy, seemingly benign, and entirely legal forms (Edwards & Greenberg, 2010). The ambiguity inherent in subtle gender discrimination makes it difficult to recognize and report, and “small” isolated acts may not seem severe enough to warrant intervention (Cortina, 2008).

Innovative solutions are needed to rid organizations of contemporary gender discrimination and to make “work” a truly respectful and equitable space. One

remedy for gender *pay* discrimination lies in the economic doctrine of comparable worth (e.g., Acker, 2010; England, 1992). The notion of “equal pay for equal work” resonates broadly across America, but comparable worth policies push that envelope farther, mandating equal pay for work that is different *but comparable*. The basic idea is that disparate job titles (e.g., food service worker vs. delivery truck driver) should receive the same wage when they require similar levels of education, experience, skill, risk, and responsibility. Although comparable worth programs remain hotly debated, they have gained traction in some parts of the United States—especially at the state level. We hope the future brings similar novel solutions to problems of gender bias in the American workplace.

Limitations and Conclusion

As with any research, this study has its limitations. The women who participated in our online survey constituted a “snapshot” of Michigan working women, not a representative sample. We made concerted efforts to reach women of diverse backgrounds, but poor women, women in blue-collar employment, and others without easy Internet access were likely underrepresented. Readers should also keep in mind that *current employment* was an inclusion criterion in this study, so our results do not speak to the perspectives of unemployed women.

Our survey also contained limited content. We intentionally kept it extremely brief to maximize sample recruitment. This strategy proved highly successful, with more than 4,000 working women participating, but we could not include many rich and relevant topics. There is no way to know, for instance, whether women’s occupational concerns varied by age, motherhood, or education level. Also, social class and income level likely affect their job challenges. For instance, working poor women face difficulties that are largely unknown to women executives (e.g., the need to juggle multiple jobs, absence of childcare during overnight shift work). These are just a few possibilities, but they are deeply interesting and deserving of future research.

Also, participants reported what they saw as the “biggest challenge facing working women”—not “the country” or “the economy.” As noted, the slumping economy may have amplified the long-standing challenges that women cited. Economic events at the macrolevel likely compounded women’s struggles at the micro level of everyday life. Some participants made these links clear in their comments: “*With the current fiscal issues facing the state, it’s become far more competitive and cut throat. People are determined to keep their jobs and will walk over others to do so. For women, it means times are even tougher than usual. Women are more easily trivialized.*”

Finally, our prompt did not specifically direct women to report challenges from their own personal work lives. However, as our quotes illustrate, most women provided firsthand accounts rather than impersonal reflections; this pattern is

consistent with research demonstrating heightened recall of personally-meaningful information (Westmacott & Moscovitch, 2003).

This study reminds us not to lose sight of women's distinct perspectives on organizational life. Work-family balance, pay inequity, and gender discrimination have troubled women since they first entered the labor force; these problems do not dissipate when the economy falters. A global financial crisis hardly "trumps" these challenges—if anything, it exacerbates them. Now more than ever, we must address the issues that have historically plagued America's working women.

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