

BLACK WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOR FORCE

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INTRODUCTION

Black female labor-force participation has generally been presumed in relevant sociological literature. Though black women's employment has been higher than for other groups of women, not all black women work or pursue careers. Here, the primary goal is to examine occupational aspirations which may affect black female participation in the labor force and their position in the occupational structure.

In 1900, about 41 percent of black women were in the labor force (Stapels 1976, 121). In 1976, 50 percent were in the labor force (U.S. Labor Dept. 1977). Never-married women participated at a lower rate than married women with spouse present, and those with small children had a higher rate of participation than those with no children under age 18. There is a positive relation between years of education and labor-force participation. It is usually assumed that black women work under economic necessity, but we contend that other factors must be recognized, especially when we consider the high rate of participation of women with spouse present and no children under age 18.

DEGREE OF PARTICIPATION

Historically, "...the housewife image and the related sex roles in America do not reflect the reality of the black woman's experience." (King 1975, 119) Ladner (1971) said that black women are caused to assume responsibility for family welfare and sustenance as a result of the need for increased black male labor force, and for job security.

We do not deny these assertions, but we do recognize other factors. For example, 44 percent of all black women are either domestic servants or service workers (Deckard 1975, 80). Thus, 66 percent of those working are in other types of employment. Moreover, where black women fill low positions in the world of work, it is certainly not because they aspire to low positions.

It is said that the black woman "does not want, cannot afford, or is culturally conditioned against the notion of marriage and family to the exclusion of other roles." (Fichter 1966, 429). But today's black female labor-force pattern has evolved from the

women's experience through history. During the period of slavery in the United States, there was no distinction between the labor obligations of black men and women (Davis 1973). Neither has the American housewife model nor the *delicate female* image ever been applied to black women. "Instead of being viewed as too weak to work, black women are most likely thought of as strong and as bearers of heavy burdens." (King 1975, 121)

We must recognize the push of economic need which pushes the black female into the paid labor force, but there are other factors which go beyond economic need. Even when there is no economic necessity for wives to work, black wives are more likely to remain in the labor force than are white wives. Her participation may well be a function of traditional values in regard to women working, plus a desire to move closer to the symbols and substance of the affluent way of life.

VARIABLES

We will examine occupational aspirations and work commitment as dependent variables in relation to other variables. The data source is the National Longitudinal Survey of Labor Market Experience, which provides labor and other demographic data by birth cohorts. We will consider only the young black female cohort, for which the sample was drawn by the Bureau of the Census from the primary sampling units selected for the monthly labor survey conducted between 1964 and 1966. The survey sample was designed to represent the civilian non-institutionalized population of the United States (Center for Human Resource Research 1976a). The data used here are for 1972, with a sample of 1,500 black females.

The independent variables are mother's work experience, education, and occupation, and the individual's attitude to the labor-force participation of wives, perception of marital and career conflict, marital status, and father's occupational and educational aspirations. The dependent variables were 1) level of occupational aspiration, and 2) work commitment.

Marital status was dichotomized in two categories: 1) married with spouse pre-

sent; 2) all others. Many studies of the occupational-choice process of women have considered marital status as a core determinant of whether a woman works, and at what level, and what type of occupation she pursues (Risch & Beymer 1967). Thus, marital status should be an influential factor in occupational aspirations.

Employment status is a measure of the proportion working at the time of interview. Mother's labor-force participation was measured by asking the respondent: "During the past 12 months, about how many weeks did your mother work, either full-time or part-time?" If the response was at least 26 weeks, the mother was treated as employed, and otherwise, as not employed. The Duncan Socioeconomic Index was used to estimate the occupational prestige of mother's and father's occupation.

Educational aspiration was measured by asking the grade in school the respondent would ideally like to complete, ranging from one or more years of high school to 7 years of college. Marital-career conflict measures the respondent's feelings about

the consequences or propriety of combining marriage and a career, measuring the perceived degree of conflict in playing the dual role of worker with that of wife and mother. The instrument was a Likert-scale item. Level of occupational aspiration was measured by asking the respondent what she would like to be doing at age 35. These were the choices: working; don't know; married; keeping a house and raising a family; and other. If she chose working, she was asked what kind of work she preferred. The Duncan Socioeconomic Index was used to code these responses. Work commitment was measured by asking: "If by some chance you were to get enough money to live comfortably without working, do you think you would work anyway?" If they replied affirmatively, they were classed as "work-committed."

RESULTS

Table 1 shows means and standard deviations for all variables. In occupational aspirations, with a mean of 48, this group of women was about midway on the occupational scale which ranges from 1 to 100.

TABLE 1: FACTORS AFFECTING BLACK WOMEN'S WORK COMMITMENT
[Regression (b); Standard error (SE); F ratio (F);
Standardized regression (b*)]

	b	SE b	F	p	b*	Mean	SE m
Employment status	.10	.095	3.1	.10	-.11	.5	.5
Educational aspiration	.01	.013	1.0	ns	.06	13.8	2.2
Attitude to wives' working	.00	.001	.1	ns	.01	6.8	2.2
Marital status	-.09	.093	2.7	.10	-.10	.4	.5
Marital-career conflict	-.03	.007	20.0	.01	-.28	18.8	4.1
Mother's education	.01	.010	.6	ns	.06	8.8	3.2
Mother's occupation	.01	.002	7.3	.01	-.20	22.3	19.7
Mother's employment	.06	.060	.7	ns	.05	.2	.4
Father's occupation	.00	.00	-	ns	-	20.3	16.9

TABLE 2: FACTORS AFFECTING BLACK WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONAL ASPIRATION
[Regression (b); Standard error (SE); F ratio (F);
Standardized regression (b*)]

	b	SE b	F	p	b*
Employment status	1.31	2.09	.4	ns	.03
Educational aspiration	4.1	.50	6.5	.01	.45
Attitude to wives' working	-.07	.49	.2	ns	-.01
Marital status	-3.12	2.11	2.2	ns	-.08
Marital-career conflict	-.59	.27	4.8	.05	-.12
Mother's education	.36	.38	.9	ns	.06
Mother's occupation	.11	.06	3.1	.10	.11

This suggests that few, if any, aspire to low-level occupations, and that relatively few aspire to high-prestige occupations. The average score of .7 on work commitment indicates that the majority of women are committed to the work status. At the time of the interview, the level of participation of the respondents' mothers was low, but the mother's occupation was slightly higher on the prestige scale than the father's occupation. And the mother's level of education was significantly higher than that of the father, by a margin of 2 years. The employment-status score shows that slightly less than half of the respondents were employed at the time of the interview.

Table 1 shows the regression of work commitment on the independent variables. The most significant variables are mother's occupation, marital-career conflict, and employment status. The least effect on work commitment relates to attitude to wives' working and father's occupation.

Table 2 shows a regression of level of occupational aspirations on the independent variables, of which the most important for black women are educational aspiration, marital-career conflict, and mother's occupation. Least influential are attitude to wives' working and mothers' labor-force participation, the variable which carries the component of working for economic need.

CONCLUSIONS

The independent effects of mother's occupation and marital-career conflict on work commitment and the independent effect of educational aspiration on occupational aspiration are the most significant. The attitude toward wives' working has little effect on aspirations or commitment to work. The attitude to participation includes notions of economic need and working as a matter of necessity. In prior research this factor had considerable weight in analyzing black women's participation in the labor force. Its effects were minor, but positive, showing a slight tendency for commitment and aspirations to increase as need increases. It does not appear to be a determining factor. Women who are committed to work are committed for other reasons. There is a weak positive effect of educational aspirations on work commitment. Since work commitment is negatively related to marital-career conflict, we conclude that where conflict is potentially present, work commitment decreases significantly.

antly. This suggests that marriage and family concerns take precedence over work concerns for these women. Educational aspirations are the best predictor of occupational aspirations of black women. Marital-career conflict has a negative effect on occupational aspirations, as does attitude to participation of wives in the labor force. For women with high occupational and educational aspirations, typical concerns regarding marriage and marital conflict have little effect.

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In such an environment, women who had a single child as the result of medical problems or financial or marital stress were limited in the ways they could compensate for their deficit in maternal productivity. An available compensation was to accent the full-time housewife ideal. Younger wives met a different situation. Groups that advocate and support one-child families had appeared. Other groups publicly acknowledge that jobs and careers are a proper part of many women's lives, and stress that women have *rights* in that area. These beliefs have been incorporated into the legal code. While sex discrimination still exists, affirmative-action programs and equal-opportunity requirements have opened careers to women that were closed a decade ago in the United States. Mothers of one-child families see no need to justify their family size. Instead, they emphasize the positive aspects of their work and careers.

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