



Carsey: Rural Women Working Harder For The Money, Finds Major Trend Study

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DURHAM, N.H. - In rural America, 70 percent of married mothers with children under six work for pay, finds a major new report spanning nearly 40 years of women's employment trends. As men's employment rates have dropped over the past four decades, more rural women are working to keep the lights on at home. The report, from the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire, is the first major study of women's employment trends to tease out differences between rural and urban women's work.

"The rural America of our collective imagination is changing. Mom is no longer home in the kitchen, and dad is no longer on the tractor or in the mines," says Carsey Institute family demographer Kristin Smith, author of "Working Hard for the Money: Trends in Women's Employment 1970 - 2007." Rural women are just as likely as their urban counterparts to work for pay, says Smith, but they earn less, have fewer occupational choices, and have seen their family income decline as men's wages have not kept pace with inflation.

Using employment estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey's March Supplements, the report is unique in its look at women's work trends, both nationally and in rural and urban America. Smith documents five major changes in the nature of women and work:

- The increase in women's employment
- The recent "opting out" phenomenon
- The rise in women's earnings and declines in the earnings gap
- The rise in the working poor
- The decline in the traditional family structure of a husband as breadwinner with a stay-at-home wife

Among the report's key findings:

College graduates work more but earn less in rural areas. In rural areas, college-educated women reap less of an "education dividend" than their urban peers, earning on average 81 cents to every dollar urban college graduates earned. Types of jobs available in rural versus urban areas explains some of this disparity: while the top eight occupations held by highly educated (master's degree or higher) women in urban areas include well-paying

doctor and lawyer positions, two low-paying jobs—preschool and kindergarten teachers – are among the top eight for master's-level women in rural areas.

"Opting out" is less of an option in rural areas. The phenomenon of women leaving the workplace by choice in favor of family – as well as the less-told story of mothers being pushed off the corporate ladder by inflexible workplaces– is a largely urban phenomenon, the report finds. Since 2000, the share of college &ndash educated mothers of young children in the country's cities and suburbs has declined from 75 percent to 71 percent. That decline in employment was steeper than among college-educated rural mothers with young children, of whom 86 percent were in the workforce in 2000 and by 2007, 85 percent.

"Rural mothers with young children are more likely to work for pay than their urban peers, as well-paying, traditionally male jobs in farming, mining or mills disappear," says Smith, who is also a research assistant professor of sociology at UNH.

Further, the report finds that despite the media's focus on college-educated "career" women leaving the workplace since the early 2000s, the decline in employment was even higher among mothers – urban and rural – with no college degree. For mothers of young children with less than a high school degree, employment rates fell from 50 percent in 2000 to 43 percent in 2007.

Women are winning more of the bread. Women's increased employment and earnings, coupled with men's declining wages and employment translates into a larger economic provider role for women. While 46 percent of husbands were sole providers in married-couple families in 1970, by 2007, that share dropped to 24 percent. By 2007, a large majority of couples were dual providers, a trend strikingly similar among rural and urban married couple families. In fact, it is increases in women's earnings that are keeping families from slipping because the husbands' earnings have lost ground.

The report recommends several policies to address women's changing roles in the workplace and in the family, with particular focus on rural women workers. "Rural families are particularly challenged in balancing work and family responsibilities. Many rural communities lack stable employment and opportunities for mobility and confront persistent poverty, particularly among mothers with young children," says Smith.

Creating flexible workplaces, expanding childcare options and subsidies, raising the minimum wage, and diversifying the rural labor market are policies that would support working families.

To download a copy of the report, go to <http://carseyinstitute.unh.edu/publications/Report-Smith-WorkingHard.pdf>.

The Carsey Institute conducts policy research on vulnerable children, youth, and families and on sustainable community development. We give policy makers and practitioners the timely, independent resources they need to effect change in their communities.

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