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On Women's Aspirations and Equal Opportunity

Jean Stockard

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We are here today to honor the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I want to note the debt that the current women's movement owes to the efforts of Dr. King and his comrades in the struggle for civil rights. From these efforts women learned a vocabulary to describe oppression and discrimination, they learned tactics of opposition and social change, they gained inspiration, many of them gained practical experience. Perhaps most important, they gained legal protection. The inclusion of women in the civil rights legislation of 1964 was treated by many legislators as simply an afterthought, even a joke. Yet, this legislation has been crucial to many of women's advances over the past two decades. Women gained their special legal rights to non-discriminatory treatment largely on the coattails of racial/ethnic minorities.

Today I want to comment briefly on the changes in women's position in our society over the last 20 years and the linkages between women's aspirations and the development of equal opportunity. I will first make a few general comments about changes in women's income, occupational aspirations and achievement; then describe preliminary results from my own study of women who "pioneered" in integrating male dominated fields in the last ten years; and, finally, discuss implications of these comments for understanding more about the movement toward greater equality.

Changes in the Last Two Decades

The picture for the very poor has changed little and may even have worsened over the last twenty years. In 1969 12% of our citizens lived below the federally defined poverty level; in 1985 14% were in similar circumstances. In both years blacks were approximately three times as likely as whites to be poor. Women, especially those who are single parents, are especially likely to be poor. In both 1969 and 1985 approximately 54% of all female-headed families with children under 18 lived below the poverty level. Given the growth of this segment of the population over time, this translates into 2.5 million more poor female headed families in 1985 than in 1969, a 55% gain. I fear that many of the benefits women have accrued from the legacy of Martin Luther King have gone to those who were already privileged by virtue of their class status.

These more privileged women appear to have improved their status relative to men over the last two decades. For many years the median income of women employed full-time and year-round (a grouping which excludes most poor women by definition) was only 59% that of men. In very recent years the ratio has become more favorable, so that in 1984 it had reached 64% for all women and 74% for women aged 25-34. Notably enough, it is these younger women who entered higher education and the job market since the advent of Title IX, affirmative action regulations, and other civil rights

legislation. They also entered adulthood at a time when attitudes toward women's labor force participation and other aspects of women's equality have been much more favorable.

The major source of sex differences in income is sex segregation in occupations. Men and women work in different fields, and men's jobs generally pay higher wages than women's jobs. At least part of the decline in sex differences in income among younger workers in the last twenty years undoubtedly comes from the fact that younger women, those entering the labor force since 1968, are much more likely than their older sisters to have obtained educational training and thus the credentials, to enter occupational areas that have been traditionally male typed. In other words, young women are more often aspiring to and attaining jobs in male-dominated areas.

Using the areas of schooling which young women choose as a measure of aspirations, we can suggest that young college women's occupational aspirations have changed dramatically from the 1960's to the 1980's. For instance, in 1968 only 4% of all bachelor degree recipients in architecture were women; in 1985 the figure had grown to 35%. Nine percent of all graduates in business in 1968 were women; in 1985 the figure was 5 times as high (45%). Less than one percent of all engineering graduates were women in 1968; by 1985 13% of all graduates in the field were women. Similarly, from 1968 to 1985, the percentage of women

graduates in dentistry grew from 1% to 21%, in medicine from 8% to 30%, and in law from 4% to 38%. Similar patterns appear with masters and doctoral degrees in the liberal arts and in every field that had a majority of men in 1968. (See Table One.)

Sex segregation of occupations is also changing, but at a somewhat slower rate, an expected result simply because of the very large occupations into which a relatively small group of "pioneers" are entering.. For instance, while only 14% of all executives and managers were women in 1960, 36% were women in 1985. Four percent of lawyers and judges were women in 1960; but the figure had increased to 18% by 1985. Seven percent of physicians were women in 1960; 17% were women in 1985. We must surmise that women are much more likely than they were 20 years ago to aspire to and actually enter male-typed professions. I believe that this represents a dramatic change in the possibilities college women perceive for their lives.

These changes are much more notable among the professional fields that require college training than in other areas. While a few traditionally male, blue-collared fields, such as mail carrying and telephone installing, now have more women incumbents, the vast majority of traditionally blue collar fields are still strongly sex-typed. For instance, firefighting, vehicle mechanics, extractive work (mining), and construction work have changed

little and still have 3% or fewer women employed. It is difficult to get data about the relative representation of women and men in vocational training programs, but some of my own data on the occupational aspirations of elementary to early high school age males and females in a working-class community indicate that their aspirations, like the jobs their parents have entered, are still highly sex-typed. In other words, unlike the middle class, working class girls today may not be more likely than their older sisters to aspire to male-typed jobs.

A Study of "Pioneers"

Aspiring to a male-typed job is one thing. Actually working in one is another. What happens to these "pioneer women" who have challenged the sex composition of professional fields? Another aspect of my recent work has focused on a sample of these pioneer women. All of them were enrolled as juniors or seniors in colleges and universities in western Oregon in 1976 and majoring in the sciences or social sciences, ^{they} and have been contacted regularly since that time. They were in college at the height of the recent feminist movement, and many aspired to careers in areas traditionally closed to women. They also believed that they could combine families and careers in a way that no generation of women before them had done. They saw themselves in many ways as "pioneers." I must stress

that my analysis of these data is still at a very preliminary stage, but one general theme which has appeared is important and relevant to my remarks today.

Many of the respondents fulfilled their aspirations and embarked on careers in male-dominated occupations after they finished school. But a large number reported very uncomfortable experiences with sexism on the job. (All of these reports were to open-ended, non-directive inquiries about decisions that they had made or might make in the future. We did not directly ask them to report on the amount of sexism they encountered. I was actually surprised at the intensity and frequency of these unsolicited comments.) Whether they worked in, for example, chemistry, accounting, or horticulture, they recounted tales of exclusion ^{of} women and favoritism for men. While a number of them reported "fighting" for a few years, by the time of our ten year follow-up most were planning to pursue their career interests in aspects of their fields that were less resistant to women. They were not going to stop being chemists, accountants, or horticulturists, for they dearly loved their chosen fields of work. But they were planning to focus their energies on aspects or sub-areas of the fields that were less hostile toward the participation of women. They were not as eager to be "pioneers" as they had been ten years earlier.

Implications for Social Change and For Research

Listening to these women's stories has helped me to realize the many aspects that must be considered in understanding how complex and difficult it will be to eventually develop an occupational structure that is less sex segregated. Certainly we must view the situation from a structural perspective and understand the characteristics of the labor force and occupational structure. But we also need to recognize that the structure of occupational segregation is inherently linked with the actions of individuals: what jobs women want, what they are willing to fight for, the actions of gate-keepers in occupations, the relationships among workers within jobs, as well as individuals' interpretations of their experiences and alterations in theⁱ aspirations and plans. While our theoretical analyses often take these various levels and ~~their~~ interrelationships into account, I know of no empirical studies that have attempted to examine the relationships among all of these variables, especially over time. Nevertheless, if we are to understand more about how we can move toward greater equality, ~~how we can begin to achieve Martin Luther King's dream~~, I think it is essential that we move in the direction of developing empirical tests of our more inclusive and complex theories.

We must recognize how difficult it is to be a "pioneer woman" in the attempt to end occupational sex segregation.

The stories women in my sample told over the years attest to the heartache and trauma that are involved when one is a member of a minority on a job. (This experience is undoubtedly also typical of non-whites in occupations predominately held by whites.) Not only is this situation very difficult, it can lead them, if my sample is at all typical, to alter their aspirations and, in the case of many of these people, to move into areas that are more comfortable and more traditionally sex-typed.

We also cannot underestimate the effect that interpersonal relationships on the job have on the perpetuation of sex segregation in occupations and on women's aspirations. The women in my sample reported very difficult situations, ones that were so disturbing that they did not want to spend their entire lives facing them. When these young "pioneer women" entered male typed jobs they were handicapped by youth and inexperience, but also by their status as women. Most of their co-workers, and especially their superiors and more powerful co-workers were men, men who had worked for many years in a predominantly male profession. The uncomfortable experiences our women had with these colleagues made it very difficult for them to continue. They modified their aspirations ^{and} moved into more ^{help to maintain} ~~sex-typed~~ ^{sex-typed} sub-areas of their field, thus ~~altering~~ ^{altering} the ~~structural~~ ^{structural} characteristics of the occupation.

Altering sex segregation in occupations is probably not a simple linear process. Thus we probably cannot simply extrapolate from our knowledge of women's aspirations to predictions of the sex composition of the labor force in future years. Not all women will eventually fulfill their aspirations, and many will alter their plans. Social reality can lead to altered and even shattered dreams.

Ending sex segregation of occupations will undoubtedly be a very lengthy process, in part because of the difficulties pioneer women face. Clearly we need to develop better ways of supporting these women. It will also be difficult to end occupational sex segregation because the advances women have made since 1968 have been limited, with a few exceptions, to the middle class. Working class girls, at least in my study of children in one community, do not appear to have altered their aspirations, their views of what is possible. Gate-keepers to male-typed blue collar jobs ^{do not appear to} ~~have probably not~~ encouraged the entrance of females. Poverty is just as prevalent as it was 20 years ago, and many more women are caught in its grip. We can only hope that the middle class women who benefitted from the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King will help work to pass these benefits on to a broader segment of the population.

Table One
 Percentage of Women Earning Degrees by Field and
 Level of Degree, 1967-68 and 1984-85

Degree Year	Bachelors		Masters		Doctorate	
	1967-68	1984-85	1967-68	1984-85	1967-68	1984-85
Field						
Architecture/ Envir. Science	4	35	7	34	0	26
Business and Management	9	45	3	31	3	17
Communications[a]	35	59	35	57	13	39
Computer/Information Science [a]	14	37	10	29	2	10
Education	76	76	52	72	20	52
Engineering	1	13	1	11	<1	6
English and Literature	67	67	57	65	27	55
Foreign Languages	75	74	60	69	32	59
Health Professions[a,b]	77	85	56	76	16	53
Life sciences	28	48	28	48	16	33
Mathematics and Statistics	37	46	24	35	5	16
Physical sciences	14	28	11	23	5	16
Psychology	42	68	33	64	23	49
Pub. Affairs/Services[a]	60	67	49	63	24	51
Social Sciences[a]	37	44	29	38	14	32
Visual/Performing Arts	60	62	47	55	22	41
Total	43	51	36	50	13	36

Source: Digest of Education Statistics, 1987, pp. 202-211

a. Data are from 1970-71 rather than 1967-68.

b. Excludes first-professional degrees that require at least 6 years for completion such as dentistry, medicine, optometry, osteopathic medicine, pharmacy, podiatry, veterinary medicine and chiropractic.