

## Women and Men, Planning, and Unemployment

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

In my days of practicing law, some of the other young male associates were extremely secretive about sharing their personal lives with anyone in the firm. There were two things they did not necessarily want everybody to know about:

- Whether they were involved in a serious relationship, and
- Whether or not they had purchased a house.

These associates were concerned that if the partners in the law firm knew they were in serious relationships and/or had homes, the partners would be more likely to consider them *shackled* to the job, and therefore at the mercy of the law firm. If a man had a significant other such as a live-in girlfriend, or a wife, he was more likely to do whatever he could in order to hold on to the job so he could continue supporting his family. Men did not want to appear vulnerable in this respect. They felt it was important to be seen as independent, as the type of people who could jump up and leave at any time if others did not give them their due respect.

And of course, once a man had a mortgage, the last thing he would want to do is walk away from any job, because of his serious financial obligation. In addition, letting partners and others know they had committed to an ongoing obligation meant that they had also committed to living in a geographic area and were unlikely to move. These were not messages the male associates were interested in communicating, so they generally kept silent about these subjects.

This secrecy, I noticed, was particularly in *males*. The women did not seem to have these concerns at all.

As I have gone through my career, I have observed some strong differences between the sexes in the workplace, which seem to persistently present themselves. These issues are not just related to independence either. Men and women, as a general rule, simply have differing needs, and it often comes out in how each group deals with the [employment market](#). A March 1988 article in *The Atlantic* by Ethel S. Person relates:

Because they are socialized in different ways, men and women tend to have different passionate quests—the passionate quest being that which constitutes the central psychological theme of a person's life. This passionate quest supplies the context for one's pursuit of self-realization, adventure, excitement, and, ultimately, transformation and even transcendence. The passionate quest is always a romance in the larger meaning of the word, but it is not always a quest for romantic love per se.

For women the passionate quest has usually been interpersonal, and has generally involved romantic love; for men it has more often been heroic, the pursuit of achievement or power. One might say that men tend to favor power over love and that women tend to achieve power through love. Socialization seems to be one of the factors that create the different dreams through which each sex shapes its narrative life.

As a general rule, men in the workforce are more concerned with things like power, independence, and high-level achievement than women. On the other hand, women seem more concerned with getting along and having stability. There are some major lessons to be learned from considering these stereotypes.

I have been reading one article after another recently about how the unemployment rate for men is much higher than it is for women in the United States. In writing about this issue, I am sure to face accusations of being sexist. This is a sensitive subject, and there are a host of factors that may be contributing to this statistic. Nevertheless, the fact that the unemployment rate for men is higher than it is for women deserves to be examined without the fear of causing any offense. Perhaps in giving this some thought, people can learn a lesson or two about obtaining and keeping a job in any economy.

Here are a few questions that come to my mind as I think about this topic:

- Are women doing something different on the job from what men are doing?
- Are women more likely to be hired than men?
- Do men have certain characteristics that are penalizing them in the labor market?
- Are women better employees than men? If so, in what sense?

Depending on economic conditions, various explanations may be offered regarding the difference in unemployment between men and women. For example, in the current recession, there have been a ton of layoffs in the construction and manufacturing industries, in which men are overrepresented. Similarly, women tend to be overrepresented in the education and healthcare sectors, in which there have been fewer layoffs and, in some cases, growth. Under this explanation, the case is made that the unemployment rate is simply related to the industries that men choose to work in.

There is probably some truth to this explanation, but there are also some really important lessons in this, which one may easily overlook.

Women who go into education and [healthcare jobs](#), I believe, may choose these jobs due to the inherent stability of these professions. A teacher, for example, is likely to earn a steady and reliable paycheck that does not fluctuate much. Similarly, hospitals and most healthcare facilities provide a stable source of income for their employees. These types of industries offer a special kind of product and/or service, the demand for which does not change much over time.

The manufacturing and construction industries are professions where there is likely to be far more change. If someone works in construction, for example, he will be moving around from project to project, usually building things. This profession requires more mobility than being a teacher, for instance. In addition, people who work in the manufacturing industry are producing new products that are constantly changing, and for which public demand may shift at any time.

- In order for a manufacturer to survive, it must constantly revise and improve its products, to meet new consumer demands.
- In order for a construction company to survive, it must continually find and create new projects.

The theme of "change" and "newness" is something that characterizes the construction and manufacturing industries more so than it does education and healthcare. The construction and manufacturing industries are also much more dependent on the flourishing of the economy than the education and healthcare industries are, so there is more of an element of risk to them.

My belief is that women, as a general rule, are choosing less risky professions than men. Women are typically also more likely to choose professions in which they can *stay put*, in one place, as opposed to professions that require constant relocation. This is a generalization, of course, but from an evolutionary perspective, this would seem to make sense, since women traditionally need and prefer to be in one place to raise and care for their children.

Our job choice ultimately determines a great deal of what happens to us. By choosing more stable and predictable professions that may pay a little less, women are getting a different result in these times of high unemployment rates. Men can earn a great deal of money via overtime, working in factories and on construction sites; such overtime is far less prevalent in the education and healthcare industries. But there is a definite trade-off in selecting a profession that offers less certainty.

Some people might consider my observations sexist, but in actuality I am just pointing out some facts that give women a huge advantage in the labor force. Many employers value an employee who prefers predictability; these employers will often hire more women than men. Also, if someone wants to run an organization that functions in a predictable manner day after day, it is in their best interest to have people working in the organization who are stable and who do not desire constant change.

Manufacturing and construction are mostly manual labor jobs that require no formal education, as opposed to jobs in the healthcare and [education industries](#). In order to go into the education and healthcare industries, people generally need to take special classes and do special training--whether it is getting a teacher's certificate or earning a nursing degree. The fact that education is needed to work in these industries indicates that they require a certain amount of planning before someone can decide to work in their respective field. By contrast, I do not know how many times I have seen a movie in which a man walks onto a construction site, onto an oil drilling platform, or into a factory and declares he wants to work, and he gets a job--right on the spot. Unemployed men move to Alaska to get jobs in fisheries and canneries. When a hurricane hits an area like Florida, men take buses and drive there from all over the country to do manual labor.

Planning is crucial in achieving success in any career. Women are simply more likely than men to plan their professions and their next job. Men are more likely to play the game of chance with their careers.

The differences in the unemployment rates between men and women show that women tend to choose jobs that are more stable and require a bit more planning. There are evolutionary, economic, and other reasons for this, of course, but as a general rule, these choices contribute to the unemployment rate differences between the sexes. These are lessons that both men and women can learn from.