

Economic SYNOPSES

short essays and reports on the economic issues of the day



2013 ■ Number 3

From “Man-Cession” to “He-Covery”: Same Old, Same Old

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Man-cession,” “he-covery,” and “she-covery” are some of the terms recently used to emphasize the differing labor market dynamics for men and women during the latest recession (December 2007–June 2009, shown by gray bars in the charts) and through the recovery. Although these differences may appear unusual, they are part of a longer trend likely here to stay. The labor-force participation rate is defined as the ratio of the labor force to the working-age population (16 years of age and older). As of November 2012 (the latest month for which data are available), the participation rates for men and women were 70 percent and 57.6 percent, respectively. In 1964, women held 31.8 percent of total nonfarm payroll job; today, that number is 49.3 percent, so men and women are nearly tied.

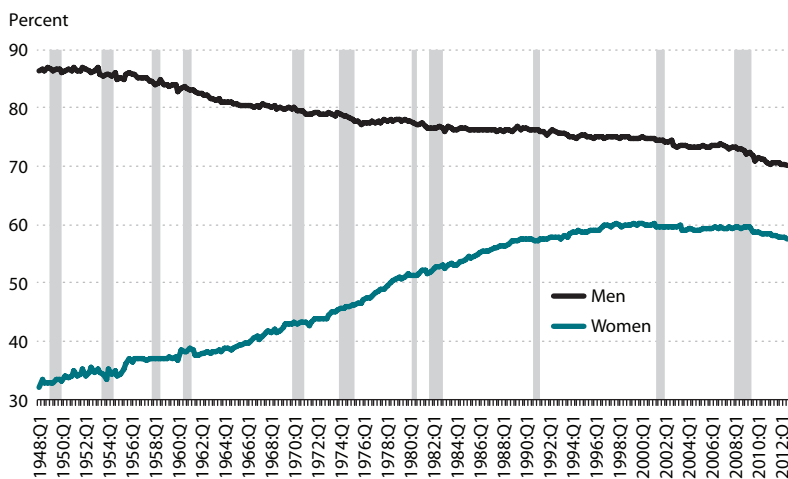
These figures are the product of long-term processes whose causes and sizable aggregate effects have been studied extensively. The U.S. labor participation rate for women shows a steady increase since World War II and flattening starting in the early 1990s, while that for men shows a constant decline (see the first chart).¹ In this essay, we focus on a shorter period and consider the large differential between job growth for male and female workers during the recent recession (sometimes referred to as the “man-cession”) and recovery (sometimes referred to as the “he-covery”) interpreted in the context of long-term trends.

During the recent recession, both genders experienced severe labor market adjustments. First, although total labor participation contracted because the male participation rate dropped by 1.1 percent, the female participation rate remained stable—around 59 to 60 percent—two facts consistent with long-term trends. Second, the larger number of jobs lost by men

in 2008-09 (see the second chart) quickly caused the male unemployment rate to peak at 11.2 percent in October 2009, a stark increase of 6.4 percentage points relative to November 2007, while the female unemployment rate increased less, from 4.6 percentage points to 8.7 percentage points (a difference of 4.1 percentage points) over the same period (see the third chart). Third, the recovery brought faster job growth for men than for women (see the second chart).

The male labor force was hit harder during the recent recession because more jobs were lost in occupations and sectors that traditionally employ more men.

Labor Participation Rate (by Gender)



NOTE: Gray bars indicate recessions as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research.
Source: BLS.

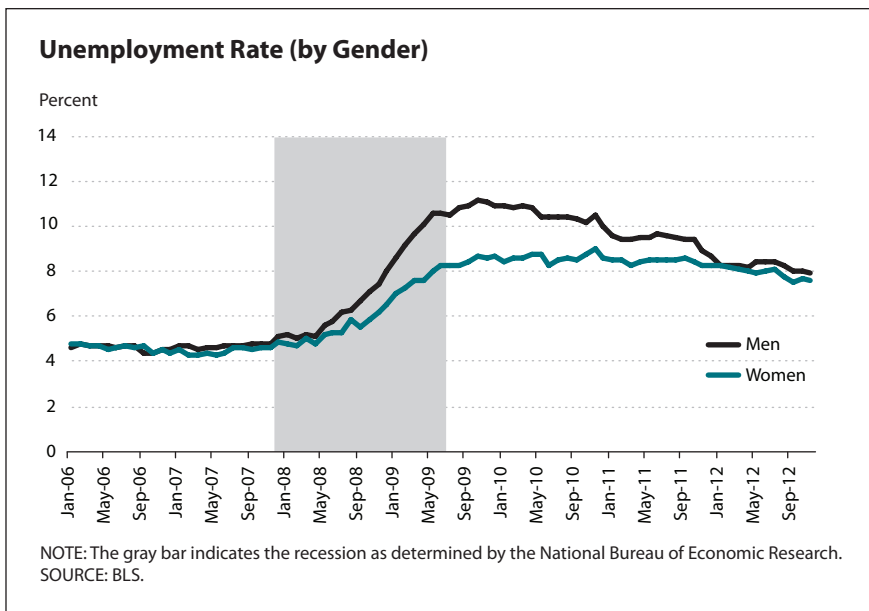
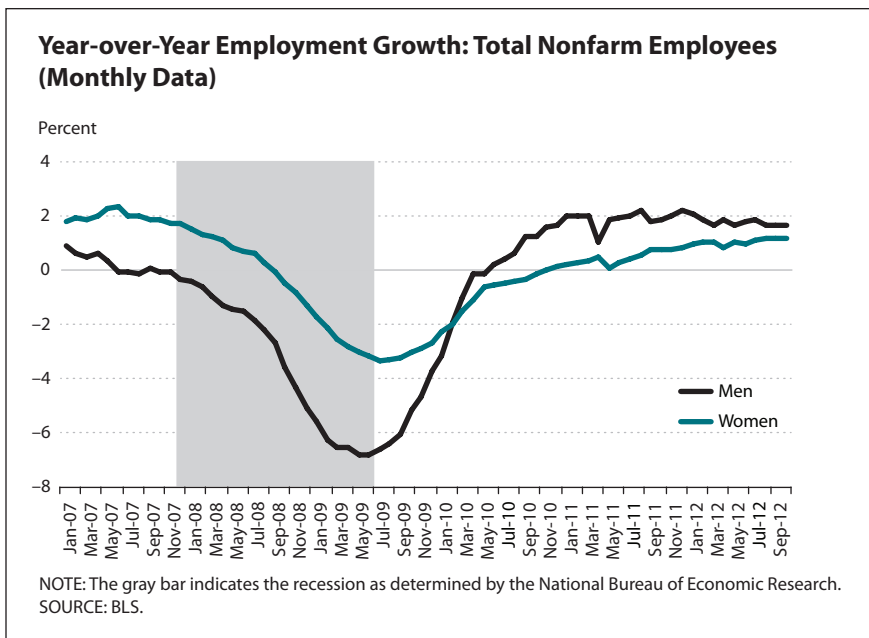
The roles played by men and women in the labor force help to explain these three facts. Theories of brain-based technological change suggest that men and women are not perfect substitutes in all occupations because they are endowed with the same brain abilities (mental labor) but different brawn abilities (physical labor) that favor men. When technological change is biased in favor of brain-intensive activity—as it arguably has been over the past 50 years—there tend to be more women in brain-intensive occupations and industries in which they can specialize according to their comparative advantage. While this bias did contribute to increased female labor participation, it also sustains a large heterogeneity in female-to-male worker ratios not only across occupations but also across sectors, as different sectors mix various occupations differently (see the [online tables](#)).

The male labor force was hit harder during the recent recession because more jobs were lost in occupations and sectors that traditionally employ more men. The two largest areas are manufacturing and construction, both cyclically sensitive industries in which the share of male workers is large (see the first table).² Women, on the contrary, tend to occupy a large share of employment in industries such as education and health care that are largely resistant to downturns. This explains a large part of the differential between the unemployment rates of men and women in 2009 and is actually consistent with previous recessions, although it appears unique to many observers.³ Other important explanations not focused on here are due to demographic features of the labor force.⁴

What about the recovery? Interestingly, as with job loss during the recession, the lion's share of job growth during the recovery has gone to men, but the gap between the employment growth rates for men and woman is shrinking (see the third chart). The recovery initially created more jobs for men than for women as manufacturing and—to a lesser extent—construction, bounced back. More recently, however, job growth for women is approaching that for men, though at a slow pace. One important factor is that post-recession state and local government budgets are limiting job growth in certain public sectors—

for example, education—in which women represent the majority of the workforce. As the recovery continues, the slow job growth in the public sector is somewhat compensated by disproportionate job growth in brain-intensive industries that employ a large number of new college graduates, the majority of whom are women.

Although the impact of the recent recession and recovery on the male labor force has been widely emphasized, recent research suggests that these patterns are by no means unique to the Great Recession: While the magnitude and



duration of the labor adjustments are exceptional relative to other recessions, their patterns are similar to the labor market dynamics for men and women observed in the business cycle over the past 30 years. ■

Notes

¹ For a survey, see DiCecio et al. (2008).

² Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) show that in 2007 the female labor share in the manufacturing, transportation and utilities, mining, and construction sectors were about 30.0 percent, 24.5 percent, 13.7 percent, and 9.4 percent, respectively. Female labor shares in other higher-level sectors are above 40 percent. The total employment of these four sectors accounts for about one-third of total nonfarm employment, and the drop in employment in these four sectors during the recent recession is significant: 14.7 percent, 6.8 percent, 7.4 percent, and 19.8 percent, respectively.

³ See Hoynes, Miller, and Schaller (2012).

⁴ See Hall (2009).

References

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