

Still Catching Up: Women Trail Men in Most Categories

Yanyi K. Djamba

Montgomery Advertiser

April 8, 2010

The whole world celebrated International Women's Day on March 8. This is a tradition initiated by the United Nations in 1975. This year's theme for Women's Day was "Equal Rights, Equal Opportunities: Progress for All."

As a democratic nation and one of the leading forces in gender equality, the United States celebrated the event with the presidential declaration proclaiming March 2010 as Women's History Month. What did it mean for women in Alabama? How do they compare to men? What are their conditions today, as compared to men and women in the United States overall and in surrounding states?

To answer these questions, we need to examine the conditions in which Alabamian women live in today, including their numbers related to Alabama's population, their educational attainment, labor force participation and marital status, as well as some key health indicators. Using the demographic definition, we consider women as all females ages 15 years and older, unless otherwise stated.

In terms of number, there were about 1,950,136 women age 15 and older in Alabama, which is 165,202 women more than the number of men of the same age, according to the 2008 American Community Survey. Expressed in terms of sex ratio, these figures show that there were nearly 92 men for every 100 women in Alabama in 2008.

This makes Alabama the state with the highest shortage of men to women among its four neighbors (Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, and Tennessee), although all these five states have lower sex ratios than the United States.

Despite this lower ratio of men to women, Alabamian women are more likely to be married than American women and women in the neighboring states, except Tennessee. This is also true for men, making Alabama the second state in percentage of married women and married men among its neighbors, just behind Tennessee.

In addition, compared to women in Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, and United States, Alabama women marry at a younger age. The median age at first marriage, or age at which half of all women age 15 and older contract their first marriage is 25.2 years in Alabama, and 26 or older in Georgia, Mississippi and the United States. Tennessee women's median age at first marriage is slightly lower (25.0) than Alabamian women (25.2).

Interestingly, Alabamian women have the same chance of childbearing than all American women combined. In 2008, 5.8 percent of women in Alabama and the United States had a birth in the previous 12 months. That was higher than in Florida (5.5 percent) and Georgia (5.7 percent), but smaller than in Mississippi (6.4 percent) and Tennessee (6.5 percent).

Among the women who gave births during the last 12 months in Alabama, 41.7 percent were not married. This figure is higher than the percentages observed in Florida (36.3 percent), Georgia (38.7 percent), Tennessee (39.7) and the United States (34.3 percent), but lower than in Mississippi (46.8 percent).

Alabamian women are closing the educational gap, but they are still behind men and women in other states. The percentage of women age 25 and older with a bachelor's degree and higher in Alabama is 21.0, compared to 22.9 percent for men. Other states in the region have higher female educational attainment (Georgia 27.2 percent, Florida 24.6 percent and Tennessee 22.2 percent), except Mississippi (19.6 percent). All states but Georgia has female educational attainment slightly higher than the United States average (27 percent).

More important, women still earn less than men in the United States. According to the Census Bureau, women earn 77.9 percent of men's earnings in this country. The situation is even more alarming in Alabama, where women earn 74.1 percent of men's earnings. All its neighbor states have higher female-male earning ratios (Florida 79.9 percent, Georgia 81.4 percent, Tennessee 76.8 percent), except Mississippi (74 percent).

These differences remain significant even when occupational status, seniority and educational attainment are taken into account, suggesting that gender inequality in earnings is a reality in Alabama and the United States. This female disadvantage in earning contributes to the gender difference in poverty. In Alabama, 58 percent of people in poverty are females, a figure that is higher than what is reported for the United States (56 percent), Florida (55.2 percent), Georgia (56.1 percent), Mississippi (57.4 percent), and Tennessee (57.3 percent).

Health indicators also show the relative disadvantages of Alabamian women. Alabama ranks third in percentage of overweight and obese women (57.6 percent), behind Mississippi (61.3 percent) and Tennessee (58.8 percent) and above Georgia (55.3 percent) and Florida (48.7 percent). The situation is more serious for Alabamian men who top the list of the five states with 74 percent overweight or obese. In terms of breast cancer, Alabama ranks second (113.8 per 100,000), after Tennessee (120.7 per 100,000).

Clearly, progress has been made and women are better off today than they were decades ago. Women are also catching up with men and even surpassing men in school enrollment. However, Alabamian women still fall behind men in earnings and educational attainment, and they are more likely to be living in poverty than their men. Alabama women also rank behind women in several surrounding states in the regions on socioeconomic and health indicators.

We must work together to eliminate gender inequality in order to ensure that our mothers, daughters, sisters and female co-workers receive the same treatment as their male colleagues in our state and society. Let's join the international community in celebrating 2010 as the year of equal rights and equal opportunities for men and women.

Yanyi K. Djamba is director of the Center for Demographic Research and associate professor of sociology at Auburn University Montgomery. The center's Web site is www.demographics.aum.edu.