

Alabama women still trail men in annual earnings

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As the whole world celebrates Women's Month this March, it is a good opportunity to look at the lives of women in Alabama.

How do women compare to men today in Alabama? From a demographic perspective, Alabama women's contribution and progress are remarkable. There are more women than men in Alabama. According to the newest available population estimates from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey data, females made up 51.6 percent of the state population in 2012. This gender gap is even greater at older age. For example, 58.1 percent of Alabama's population 65 and older is female.

More importantly, women's educational attainment has significantly increased in the last few years. Two measures can be used to show the improvement in female education: enrollment numbers and educational attainment. In terms of enrollment, current data show that female college students outnumber male students in Alabama. According to the Alabama Commission on Higher Education, there were about 242,551 students enrolled in the 40 public institutions of higher education in the state in fall 2013. Of this number, 140,502 were women, representing a sex ratio of 73 male students per 100 female students.

Of the 40 public institutions of higher education with enrollment data available for Fall 2013, only 5 had disproportionately more male students: Auburn University (103 males per 100 females), Enterprise State Community College (134 males per 100 females), Ingram State Technical College (302 males per 100 females), Marion Military Institute (436 males per 100 females), and Alabama-Huntsville (128 males per 100 females). These unusual cases are likely due to the predominance of historically male fields in these institutions.

Women's educational progress is also apparent in their academic performance. According to data from the 2012 American Community Survey, there is no more gender gap in educational attainment in Alabama. For example, 23.4 percent of women 25 years and older had at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 23.3 percent of men of the same age. Moreover, the number of women with lower educational attainment is in decline. Among women 25 years and older, only 15.4 percent did not have a high school diploma or GED compared to 17.1 percent for men of the same age group.

Despite the increase in educational attainment, women are still lagging behind men in earnings. The average annual earnings of Alabama women 25 or older and who work full time was \$33,574.67. That amount was significantly lower than the average annual

earnings of \$53,551.86 reported by working men of the same age group. That gender gap persists even after controlling for age and educational attainment.

Other interesting facts on women include marriage and childbearing characteristics. In terms of marital status, more than half of women 25 and older (53.1 percent) were married; the rest were widowed (12.6 percent), divorced (16.6 percent), separated (3.4 percent), or never married (14.2 percent). In contrast, the majority (61.2 percent) of men 25 years and older were married. Most Alabamian women who were married (69.4 percent) were still in their first marriage; only 22.6 percent were in their second marriage and 8 percent in their third marriage. A similar pattern was observed among men.

The fertility of Alabama women is in decline. In 1950, there were 82,566 births in the state among women of all ages. This number is now down to 58,381 births, according to the 2012 data from the Alabama Department of Public Health. In addition, nearly half of the births in 2012 (42.6 percent) occurred to unmarried women, and about one third (27.7 percent) to women age 10-19 years.

Evidently, the increase in female education and rising female employment are contributing factors of low fertility. As long as women, and to some extent men, will pursue higher education, we expect to observe a delay in family formation and postponement of childbearing.

Alabama women are on the move to better lives as demonstrated by their higher educational attainment. However, more needs to be done to promote gender equity, especially in wages and salaries.

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