INTRODUCTION

Before reading this chapter, if you are a college student, pause for a moment to consider what your plans are for after graduation. Do you project that you will work full-time, get married, have a child or children, etc.? Also think about the sequence of these plans. If some of these decisions have already been made in your life, consider someone younger such as a daughter or friend or remember what you planned in your early twenties. It also makes a difference if these projections are for women or men, so think about a woman (if not yourself, then a potential or real wife, daughter, etc.).

Karen Schroeder and her colleagues (1992) asked these questions of 292 traditional aged undergraduate women and their parents at the University of Rhode Island. The most popular sequence, endorsed by 56 percent of the students and a majority of parents for their daughters, projected graduation, full-time employment, then marriage, children, stopping work at least until the youngest child is in school, then returning to full-time employment. An additional 18 percent selected the same scenario but planned to return to work earlier. Not one student described a full-time career with no marriage.

Only 12 percent of these undergraduate women expected to graduate, work full-time, get married, have children, and continue work with only minor interruptions for childbirth. Indeed, other research finds that continuously employed mothers are regarded less favorably by college students than mothers who interrupt their careers (Bridges & Etaugh, 1995). Employed mothers are regarded by student raters as less well adjusted (Etaugh & Poertner, 1991) and as less dedicated to their families (Etaugh & Nekolny, 1990) than nonemployed mothers. These projections stand in stark contrast to the demographic facts that in 1998 a majority of women with a child age one or under (61.8 percent) and with preschoolers (65.7 percent) were employed (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999).

In this chapter, we grapple with some basic issues about women and work. We begin by exploring the meaning of work in women’s lives, then go on to describe the reality of women’s employment in the United States. We note that the workplace is different for women and men, then continue on to explore two areas that may contribute to this difference: women’s occupa-
tional “choices” and family-to-work “conflict.” We conclude by describing some changes designed to create a women-friendly workplace.

THE MEANING OF WORK

Social scientists generally define work as the production of goods and services that are of value to others (Fox & Hesse-Biber, 1984). Using this definition, women’s “work” monopolizes much of their waking lives. Globally, unpaid work includes family-related services (e.g., childcare and housework), subsistence and nonmarket activities (e.g., agricultural production for household consumption), and household enterprises (e.g., keeping the books for a family business) (United Nations, 1995). A disproportionate share of this unpaid and undervalued work is done by women. In developed countries, we typically think of what we “do” as our employment status, and it is this admittedly narrow definition of work that is used in this chapter.

Women accounted for fully 46 percent of the labor force in the United States in 1994 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1995). Nearly 6 of every 10 women over 16 years old (58.8 percent) were employed, with participation rates of more than 70 percent for women in their prime employment years (ages 20 to 54). Overall participation rates vary little by race and ethnicity: 60 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander women, 58.9 percent of white women, 58.7 percent of African-American women, 55 percent of American Indian women, and 52.9 percent of Latinas worked for pay in 1994 (Herz & Wootton, 1996). This translates into 57 million employed U.S. women, 41 million of whom worked more than 35 hours each week. Of the 16 million women employed part-time, 3.3 million held multiple jobs.

Surveys of why women work conclude that they are employed for the same reasons as men: for financial reasons, to fulfill identity needs (James, 1990), and to function as competent and productive members of society (Chester & Grossman, 1990). Financial reasons are often more pressing than stereotypes about women working for discretionary “pin money” suggest. Fully 43 percent of employed U.S. women support themselves, with workforce participation rates of 65.1 percent for never married, 17.3 percent for widowed, and 73.9 percent for divorced women (Herz & Wootton, 1996). Families maintained solely by a woman in 1994 accounted for one-quarter of those with children (8 million families compared to 1.4 million supported by single men). Fully 23 percent of mothers in the workforce are single parents (compared to only 4 percent of fathers) (Galinsky & Bond, 1996). And, single-parenting is associated with poverty, but more so for women (in 1993, half of female-headed families with children lived in poverty compared to 25 percent for parallel male-headed families).

THE REALITY OF WOMEN’S EMPLOYMENT

Stop for a moment and think about women and men workers. Whom do you picture? Think across a wide range of jobs: college professors, maintenance workers, firefighters, senators, physicians and nurses, telephone operators, and so on. Who comes to mind? How does this relate to the pay and prestige associated with these occupations? Two fundamental features distinguish women’s experiences in the U.S. workplace from those of men: the wage gap and the occupations in which women and men cluster (occupational segregation).

The Wage Gap

The wage gap is the simple ratio of women’s to men’s earnings subtracted from 1.0. If women’s and men’s earnings were identical, this earnings ratio would be 1.0 and the wage gap...