FEATURE 10.1

Education, Career Aspirations, and Work: The Media versus the Data

A troubling trend in publications and media reports is the suggestion that a majority of women, including those with college and advanced degrees, are less interested in careers than men, preferring instead to be homemakers. Readers may also have personal knowledge of a woman who has left the workforce to be a "stay-at-home mom," which may increase their perceptions that this phenomenon is more frequent than it actually is and that this is something women should aspire to do. What do U.S. Census data and large-scale empirical studies suggest about women and work?

Women of all education levels participate in the workforce and highly educated women are considerably more likely to be in the workforce than women with less education, as shown in Table 10.2. Education is also correlated with organizational level; the more education a person has, the more money she or he earns, and the higher organizational position that person is likely to attain. Relationships among education, earnings, and employment for men and women and people of all backgrounds are clear. Although returns on educational investment differ for men, women, and people of color and Whites, more educated people of all demographic backgrounds earn more and are more likely to be in the workforce than people with similar backgrounds who have less education. The opportunity costs and inability to use one's investments in human capital that are associated with being out of the workforce, and the ability to afford quality child care, if needed, make educated women more likely to be in the workforce than to leave it in large numbers, as some have suggested. Women with less education have lower earnings, lower opportunity costs associated with not working, less investment in their education, and less ability to afford quality child care when compared with well-educated women. On the other hand, having a high-earning spouse does enable some women (and a few men) to leave the workforce to rear children, which complicates the relationships among parenting, education, earnings, and workforce participation and further confuses observers without access to research and large-scale data.[31]

What are the expectations of well-educated women for their future careers, workforce participation, and family roles? Alison Konrad, a professor at the Ivey Business School in Western Ontario, has published several empirical studies of women's preferences in job attributes when compared with those of men. In a longitudinal study of Masters of Business Administration graduates, Konrad found that while women accurately predicted that family demands would affect them at work more than men, women still desired and pursued fulfilling careers, interesting work, and high salaries. For these women, flexibility and control over hours were important. Konrad suggested that organizations wishing to attract, motivate, and retain such highly qualified workers should add flexibility to their career and job offerings.[32]