

# Headaches, Heartburn and Women's Health

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In the 1950s and '60s, when I was growing up, few women worked outside the home. In my high-school class, I had just one girlfriend whose mother was in the workforce.

Today, by contrast, nearly half of the U.S. labor force (47 percent) is female. The percentage of women in the workforce has about doubled in the past 50 years, with nearly 60 percent of women employed today, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

That's a good trend, right? Well, yes and no.

It's good that women in 21<sup>st</sup> century America are freer than ever to pursue their careers and the type of work they love. For women in the labor force who are also mothers, studies continue to find that their children are generally healthy and well-adjusted.

The bad part of this workforce trend, however, is that women's health has been adversely affected by being in the workplace. This is not news to most of us. We already know that balancing work and family puts additional stress on women, who in many families still are primarily responsible for childcare and eldercare.

A recent article in the "American Journal of Public Health" puts it succinctly: "When family and work demands collide, the resulting stress can lead to physical health problems such as poor appetite, lack of sleep, increase in blood pressure, fatigue, and increased susceptibility to infection. It can also result in mental health problems such as burnout and depression."

Women are more likely than men to have work-related cases of carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, respiratory diseases, and infectious and parasitic diseases, according to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As for stress-related illness, the rates are nearly twice as high for women as for men – and job stress is linked to heart disease, muscle/bone disorders, depression, and burnout.

Many job conditions add to the strain, says the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. One of the most difficult problems is that many women in the workplace tend to have jobs with little power; having little control over one's work, say the experts, is extremely stressful.

Women also face sexual harassment on the job, which can cause anxiety, depression, lower self-esteem, insomnia, nausea, and headaches.

Headaches -- and, can we say, heartburn -- can also result from the stubborn gender/wage gap. In 2015, American women working full time earned only 79 cents for every \$1 earned by a full-time male worker. This is a gender/wage gap of 21 percent.

At the current rate of change, it will take until 2058 for women and men to reach wage parity.

(Perhaps it won't take quite so long in Iceland, where despite laudable egalitarianism in many areas, working women there still earn about 14 percent less than men. To call attention to this fact, an estimated 90 percent of the country's female population left work at 2:38 p.m. on Oct. 24 to illustrate that females effectively work for free from that point until quittin' time.)

Meanwhile, back in the United States, two-thirds of minimum-wage workers are women, and attempting to make ends meet on minimum-wage salaries is perhaps the biggest stressor of all.

The federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour hasn't budged since 2009, but nearly 12 million workers will get raises in 2017 as minimum wages increased in 20 states and the District of Columbia at the start of this new year. Overall, 30 states have now set their minimums higher than the federal level of \$7.25 an hour. (Unfortunately, South Carolina isn't one of them.) Some 18 cities and counties also began phasing in higher minimums that were approved in 2016.

This is a good start while we're waiting for men to take on more childcare and eldercare duties, for the gender/wage gap to disappear, and for sexual harassment in the workplace to cease.

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