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Women Are Now Equal as Victims of Poor Economy

By LOUIS UCHITELLE

Across the country, women in their prime earning years, struggling with an unfriendly economy, are retreating from the work force, either permanently or for long stretches.

They had piled into jobs in growing numbers since the 1960s. But that stopped happening this decade, and as the nearly seven-year-old recovery gives way to hard times, the retreat is likely to accelerate.

Indeed, for the first time since the women's movement came to life, an economic recovery has come and gone, and the percentage of women at work has fallen, not risen, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports. Each of the seven previous recoveries since 1960 ended with a greater percentage of women at work than when it began.

When economists first started noticing this trend two or three years ago, many suggested that the pullback from paid employment was a matter of the women themselves deciding to stay home — to raise children or because their husbands were doing well or because, more than men, they felt committed to running their households.

But now, a different explanation is turning up in government data, in the research of a few economists and in a Congressional study, to be released Tuesday, that follows the women's story through the end of 2007.

After moving into virtually every occupation, women are being afflicted on a large scale by the same troubles as men: downturns, layoffs, outsourcing, stagnant wages or the discouraging prospect of an outright pay cut. And they are responding as men have, by dropping out or disappearing for a while.

"When we saw women starting to drop out in the early part of this decade, we thought it was the motherhood movement, women staying home to raise their kids," Heather Boushey, a senior economist at the Joint Economic Committee of Congress, which did the Congressional study, said in an interview. "We did not think it was the economy, but when we looked into it, we realized that it was."

Hard times in manufacturing certainly sidelined Tootie Samson of Baxter, Iowa. Nine months after she lost her job on a factory assembly line, Ms. Samson, 48, is still not working. She could be. Jobs that pay \$8 or \$9 an hour are easy enough to land, she says. But like the men with whom she worked at the Maytag washing machine factory, now closed, near her home, she resists going back to work at less than half her old wage.

Ms. Samson knows she will have to get another job at some point. She and her husband still have a teenage daughter to put through college, and his income as a truck driver is not enough. So Ms. Samson, now receiving unemployment benefits, is going to college full time — leaving the work force for more than two years — hoping that a bachelor's degree will enable her to earn at least her old wage of \$20 an hour.

"A lot of women I know, all they did was work at the Maytag factory," said Ms. Samson, who joined Maytag's

assembly line 11 years ago. "They can't find another job like it and they deal with this loss by dropping out."

The Joint Economic Committee study cites the growing statistical evidence that women are leaving the work force "on par with men," and the potentially disastrous consequences for families.

"Women bring home about one-third of family income," said Carolyn Maloney, Democrat of New York and vice chairman of the Joint Economic Committee. "And only those families with a working wife have seen real improvement in their living standards."

The proportion of women holding jobs in their prime working years, 25 to 54, peaked at 74.9 percent in early 2000 as the technology investment bubble was about to burst. Eight years later, in June, it was 72.7 percent, a seemingly small decline, but those 2.2 percentage points erase more than 12 years of gains for women. Four million more in their prime years would be employed today if the old pattern had prevailed through the expansion now ending.

The pattern is roughly similar among the well-educated and the less educated, among the married and never married, among mothers with teenage children and those with children under 6, and among white women and black.

The women, in sum, are for the first time withdrawing from work with the same uniformity as men in their prime working years. Ninety-six percent of the men held jobs in 1953, their peak year. That is down to 86.4 percent today. But while men are rarely thought of as dropping out to run the household, that is often the assumption when women pull out.

"A woman gets laid off and she stays home for six months with her kids," Ms. Boushey said. "She doesn't admit that she is staying home because she could not get another acceptable job."

The biggest retreat has been in manufacturing, where more than one million women have disappeared from payrolls since 2001. Like men, many have not returned to jobs in other sectors.

Wage stagnation often discourages them from pursuing new jobs, says Lawrence Katz, a labor economist at Harvard. "While pay was rising solidly in the 1990s, you had women continuing to move into the work force," Mr. Katz said.

Pay is no longer rising smartly for women in the key 25-to-54 age group. Just the opposite, the median pay — the point where half make more and half less — has fallen in recent years, to \$14.84 an hour in 2007 from \$15.04 in 2004, adjusted for inflation, according to the Economic Policy Institute. (The similar wage for men today is two dollars more.)

Not since the 1970s has that happened to women for so long a stretch — and because this is a new experience for them, "women may be even more reluctant than men to accept declining wages," said Nancy Folbre, an economist at the University of Massachusetts.

Joyce Call, 39, of Howell, Mich., near Detroit, certainly fits that description. She took an accounting job in January 2006 at Forming Technologies, which supplies plastic to auto companies.

The pay, \$14 an hour — more than \$25,000 a year — was acceptable, she said, but not the raises, which came to only 28 cents an hour over two years, or the Christmas bonus: \$150 the first year and nothing the

second.

"I was treated poorly," she said, explaining her departure.

For the moment, Ms. Call is home-schooling one of her two sons, falling back on her husband's \$70,000 income as a plumber, and looking for another job, to return to a work force she has seldom left since finishing high school in 1988.

"People are just not hiring in Michigan," she said. What's more, she is reluctant because of the high cost of gasoline to commute more than an hour each way to the next job. "It would be a tough decision to accept a job that required me to go farther," she said, adding that she and her husband were cutting back on discretionary spending until she is employed again.

What helped drive up the percentage of women in the work force were the thousands who came off welfare and took jobs in the 1990s, pushed to do so by the welfare-to-work legislation. A strong economy eased the way. So did tax credits and more subsidized child care. Now as the economy weakens and employers shrink their payrolls, many of these women struggle to find work.

Lisa Craig, 42, is among them. Raising three sons in her native Chicago, she had worked only occasionally since high school and started receiving welfare benefits in 1993. For the next seven years she took courses in office skills, was a volunteer in a day care center and served for a while as an unpaid intern for a college vice president.

And then in 2000 she went to work. For most of that year she earned \$10 an hour as a salesclerk at a duty-free shop at O'Hare Airport, selling luxury items, but left the job to move to Milwaukee with her children to be near her sister.

"I was in a bad marriage," she said, "and I was getting a divorce."

Over the last eight years in Milwaukee she has worked only sporadically although, as she puts it, she has applied for hundreds of jobs, struggling to supplement a \$628-a-month welfare check that goes almost entirely to rent, plus \$500 a month in food vouchers. The longest tenure, 11 months, was as a salesclerk earning \$7.75 an hour at a Goodwill Industries clothing store.

She lost that job last November, but is volunteering at the Milwaukee office of 9to5, National Association of Working Women, hoping to draw a modest salary soon as a community intern.

Ms. Samson, the former Maytag worker, says she can afford not to work because she qualified under the terms of the plant closing for two years of unemployment benefits as long as she is a full-time student. She lost health insurance but shifted to her husband's policy.

His \$40,000 income as a truck driver and her \$360 a week in jobless benefits gets them by while she takes an accelerated program at a William Penn University campus near her home. Graduation is scheduled for January 2010.

"If I were a single parent or did not have benefits," Ms. Samson said, "I would have had to find a job. I could not have gone back to school to get my degree and the promise it holds of a better job."

That for Ms. Samson is a good reason to drop out. Just working, which she has done nearly all of her adult life, is unappealing, she says. Even interior design, for which she once earned an associate's degree, does not excite her anymore, she says, mainly because people can no longer afford to fix up their homes.

"A business degree will put me in a position to work for any company," Ms. Samson said, "and put me in a position to work up into a well-paid human resources job."

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