



GEMM

Gender
Equity in
Museums
Movement

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Museums as a Pink-Collar Profession: The Consequences and How to Address Them

In 2018, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 49.5-percent of U.S. museum staff are women¹, a decrease of less than half a percentage point from its recent high of 50.1-percent in 2017. While nationally the field is precariously gender balanced, women dominate specific museum departments -- HR and development, for example -- as well as positions in education and conservation. In many smaller museums, women make up the entire workforce.

If the overall workforce numbers continue to grow, even at a modest 2-percent per year, in a decade women will quickly constitute 70-percent of the national museum workforce. Given the overwhelming majority of women currently in museum studies graduate programs, as well as the field's junior ranks, a scenario where women constitute a majority of the workforce is highly likely, promising long-term effects for the field, not all of them positive.

The Perils of the Pink Collar

A majority female or pink-collar workforce is not a good thing for any industry. The term "pink collar" joined common speech during the Second World War, but rose to prominence in 1977 when writer Louise Kapp Howe published [*Pink Collar Workers: Inside the World of Women's Work*](#). Nominated for a National Book Award, the book and its eponym joined its blue- and white-collar cousins. Traditionally, pink collar fields include teaching, nursing, librarianship, and counseling, as well as jobs such as wait-staffing, front-line service and retail, and housekeeping. (For a complete list of jobs dominated by women see [Pink Collar Jobs](#).)

While the term has little to do with education or training, it has everything to do with long-standing cultural definitions of what constitutes appropriate work for women and men. Across the board, female-dominated professions carry with them the economic and social burdens of "women's work." Consequently, society views them as "less-than." This gender bias diminishes a profession's significance in the eyes of community and government decision-makers, the media, and, even, donors, leading to what author [Joanne Lipman](#) calls the "Respect Gap." This can be said of museums, as well.

If the public believes that the museum workforce is overwhelmingly female, how does that influence the public support and private funding of our museums and institutions? Could gender bias be the reason many museums struggle for legitimacy as *bona fide* educational and economic drivers in their communities? The research needs to be done and the numbers crunched, but in the meantime gender and its first cousin benevolent bias shouldn't be ignored.

With few exceptions, the fastest growing jobs in the 21st century are predominantly female, not male.ⁱⁱ And women enter male dominated fields more than men enter female-dominated ones. As women infiltrate a [number of job sectors](#) they narrow the gender pay gap. While this is a good thing, narrowing the pay gap is relative since women's earnings are based on race and ethnicity in addition to their gender. For Asian women the gap is 15-percent, but for Latina women it's an almost insurmountable 47-percent.ⁱⁱⁱ And for our transgender/non-binary colleagues, the gap is often the greatest. However, when men enter a feminized field something counterintuitive happens: They are frequently promoted to the top -- a phenomenon called the "glass escalator" -- where they often exercise control over compensation and promotions -- a bad thing.

Equal Demographics Don't Mean Workplace Equity

A woman-dominated field won't solve the issues women grapple with every day. In pink collar fields, men are still paid more, and hold the highest paying positions. That said, an all-female field can still have issues with diversity and inclusiveness, with equal pay, with parental leave, with childcare, with sexual harassment. Think those things don't happen in the museum world? Do its trappings of white privilege protect it from unpleasant and unwanted advances or inappropriate or racist language? No. Museums may be considered society's third spaces, but as workplaces they are not immune to the problems of the world at large. In fact, in our [2018 survey](#), GEMM discovered that 62-percent of the respondents had either experienced or witnessed gender discrimination in the museum workplace.

Female-dominated professions are paradoxical. Women are paid less because they are in women's jobs, and women-only jobs have lower salaries because they are done by women, a Catch-22 that intertwines financial and social stigmas. To make matters worse, as late as 2011, a study done by [Elsesser and Lever](#) shows us that 54-percent of their respondents said they didn't care about the gender of their boss, yet 31-percent still preferred working for a man. What does this type of deep-seated bias mean for our field?

Last, and perhaps most importantly, women of color in the museum field deal with all the issues of being working women coupled with implicit and, too often, explicit bias. This impacts work, workload, and pay. If you think that doesn't happen in the museum world, begin by reading [I Am the Person Sitting Next to You](#) from the blog *Incluseum*. Hungry for more? We've added some additional readings at the bottom of the page. And, if you haven't joined GEMM's Facebook page, do it today.

What About Volunteers?

Let's remember volunteer work has been traditionally considered women's work. Its historical roots stretch back in the U.S. to the colonies, but its ubiquity and strength date to the late 19th century. According to a 2015 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report, "Across all age groups, educational levels, and other major demographic characteristics, women continued to volunteer at a higher rate than men."^{iv} However, when it comes to *governing* U.S. nonprofits, 52-percent of volunteer boards of directors are male and museum governing boards parallel this statistic at 55-percent male.^v In research conducted by Joan H. Baldwin and Anne W. Ackerson for their book, *Women in the Museum: Lessons from the Workplace*, the work of museum governing boards is often divided along gendered lines. For example, men often chair financial, infrastructure, and planning committees; women are most likely to lead events, program, and fundraising committees.

The American Association of Museums' Center for the Future of Museums notes its most recent data (2009) reveal there are six volunteers for every museum worker. That ratio swells to 18:1 in museums

with budgets less than \$250,000.^{vi} While most museums rely on volunteers to augment resource-starved programs and most volunteers are tremendous assets to their institutions, one can't help wonder if the conflation of volunteerism and women's work has a dampening effect, however subtle, on salaries and benefits of the paid museum workforce (as in, why should we buy the cow when we can get the milk for free?), as well as on the public's perception of an institution's importance.

Offsetting the Consequences of the Pink Collar: What We Must Do Now

Whether pink, white, or blue, the workforce is a numbers game. As far as the museum profession is concerned, all you have to do is look at who's in the pipeline to predict the future. Going forward, the numbers don't bode well for ensuring a balanced and well-paid workforce of the future. That means we must acknowledge and address the perils of the pink collar museum now while we're at the tipping point and work together on finding solutions to make the field as diverse and equitable as possible.

If museum pay and benefits drive people to take a pass on museum careers, will higher and equitable compensation alone bring more more diverse workers into the field? Compensation is just one piece of this complicated and highly charged issue. The fact that most professional level museum positions require graduate degrees, coupled with a majority-female enrollment in museum studies, public and art history graduate programs, means the prospects for maintaining overall gender balance in the field are slim. Add to the mix the second-class status of the humanities compared to STEM education in American classrooms today, and it seems we've created the perfect storm for the museum workforce to become increasingly feminized.

The museum field needs workforce diversity. Everybody has a stake in this conversation. We all need to be at the table to figure out how to create and sustain a diverse, inclusive, accessible, gender-equitable, and, thus, healthy museum workforce now and in the future. Here are some steps museum leadership and museum workers can take now:

- Encourage all staff to take responsibility for their career advancement, professional development, and for advocating for salaries, raises, benefits, and working conditions.
- Conduct equity audits of salaries and benefits and make plans to correct gaps.
- Examine compensation and other workplace barriers (low salaries, poor benefits or working conditions) and make plans to address them.
- Advocate for blind hiring practices and make it standard procedure to appoint diverse hiring committees/teams.
- Commit to intentional and equitable staff development with stretch assignments, mentoring, and by facilitating career-building relationships across museums that strengthen the leadership pipeline within institutions.
- Encourage diversity in hiring. This includes being open to hiring great talent from other fields and offering them in-house training and mentoring, boosting professional development budgets, building funding pools for scholarships, and providing comp time for employees to gain the skills they need.
- Discuss flexible working arrangements. This [Harvard Business Review podcast](#) might be a good conversation starter.
- Be conscious of the negative impact "women's work" has on individuals, organizations, and the field as a whole. Do your part to understand your own unconscious biases in order to counteract benevolent sexism.

- Develop opportunities for middle- and high-schoolers to work in your institution as interns, paid staff, or volunteers to introduce them (and college students, too) to the idea of a museum career.
- Diversify office morale boosters and chores; they shouldn't be left to the women to fulfill. Men are capable of buying birthday cakes, too.
- Mentor emerging museum professionals by teaching them how to advocate for themselves.

And last, but not least, perhaps we need to give serious thought to retiring the moniker 'pink' -- it doesn't serve the profession or the people working it in well.

Endnotes

ⁱ Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*. <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18.htm>. Accessed March 5, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Jon Swartz. ["The future of jobs: More men doing 'women's work'."](#) *USA Today*. April 16, 2017. Accessed March 3, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ American Association of University Women. [The Simple Truth About the Gender Pay Gap](#). Accessed March 10, 2019.

^{iv} Bureau of Labor Statistics. ["Volunteering in the United States -- 2015."](#) Accessed March 7, 2019.

^v BoardSource, [Museum Board Leadership 2017: A National Report](#) (Washington, D.C.: BoardSource, 2017). p. 8.

^{vi} Elizabeth Merritt. ["Museums and Volunteer Labor."](#) Center for the Future of Museums. October 18, 2016. Accessed March 6, 2019.

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About GEMM

The Gender Equity in Museums Movement (GEMM) is a coalition of individuals and organizations committed to raising awareness, affecting change, and championing transparency about gender equity in the museum workplace.

To fulfill this mission, GEMM:

- Promotes equitable and transparent museum workplaces
- Creates and offers resources for museum workers
- Supports individuals who are affected by workplace harassment
- Advocates for research and policy development addressing equity issues
- Provides direction for museum workers seeking assistance
- Forms alliances with organizations and coalitions working on related equity issues

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