

# SOCIAL NETWORKS

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The quality of one's life depends, in part, on the people one knows. If one wants a good job, a desirable partner, or a ticket to a sold-out Broadway show, it can help to know the right people. There is a burgeoning research literature showing that one's social networks can affect an unusually wide range of outcomes.

It is thus important to examine whether women and men have networks of different sizes and types. This article will show that, while there are still differences in the types of social ties that make up men's and women's networks, some forms of gender difference in social networks are lessening over time. To keep this article tractable, we will confine our attention to face-to-face networks, as they are very important for key life chances and outcomes.

## Who Has the Largest Networks?

It is useful to begin with a simple question: Do men have larger networks than women? The answer to this question matters because network size—the number of relationships a person has—is a key measure of one's "social capital," or one's capacity to draw on others for valuable resources, such as information, advice, money, and support. When it comes to the availability of fundamental resources, the number of social ties is a prime indicator of overall network health. There are of course many other network measures, but network size is often strongly correlated with them.

Why might women and men have different-sized networks? Men and women find themselves in different social spheres, so their opportunities to form ties differ.<sup>1</sup> In the past, marriage and parenthood reduced women's workforce participation, thereby limiting their opportunities to come into contact with others. The dramatic increase in women's workforce participation is a contributing factor in the reduction of gender differences in network size. The magnitude—and suddenness—of this fundamental labor market change shouldn't be forgotten. In 1950, only 34 percent of all women participated in the workforce, while 86 percent of all men did, a

## KEY FINDINGS

- Over the last half century, as women entered the labor force in large numbers, they have had the opportunity to supplement their kin and friendship networks with coworker networks.
- It is still the case that women have more kin and friendship ties than men. This gender gap advantages women by providing them with more sources of social support.
- But men still have more coworker ties than women. This gender gap advantages men by providing them with better access to jobs.

52-point difference. By contrast, there was only a 12-point difference in 2017, with 57 percent of all women and 69 percent of all men participating in the workforce.<sup>2</sup>

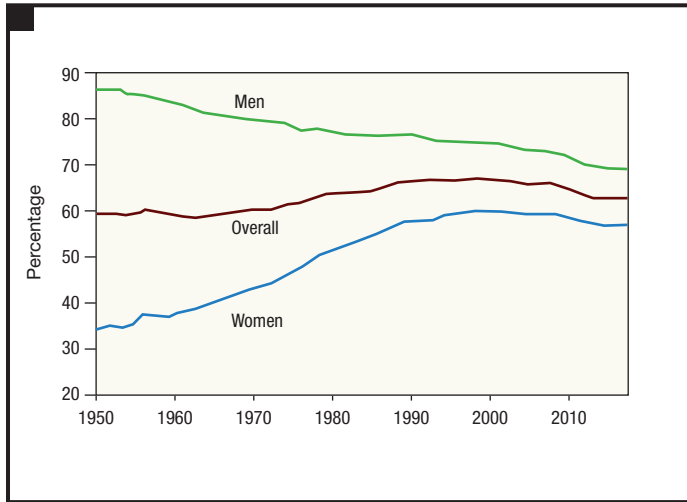
We should expect gender gaps in network size to become smaller as the gap in workforce participation rates narrows (see Figure 1). This is precisely what we find in the General Social Survey (GSS). In 1985, the GSS began one of the first nationally representative studies of networks by asking people about their "core discussion network," where this was defined as the people with whom "important matters" were discussed.<sup>3</sup> This 1985 survey showed that, with women already in the workforce in large numbers, the size of men's and women's networks was statistically indistinguishable.

After 1985, as female workforce participation expanded further, women's total network size surpassed that of men. Indeed, in every major national survey conducted since 1985, women's networks have been shown to be larger than men's.<sup>4</sup>

## Are There Gender Differences in the Types of Ties?

Although women have *more* ties, do they also have *better* ones? The available evidence suggests that, while women and men clearly have different types of ties, the main differences in play do not always serve women well. We elaborate on this

FIGURE 1. Workforce Participation, 1950–2017



Note: Limited to the civilian noninstitutional population, aged 16 and older.  
Source: Current Population Survey.

TABLE 1. Composition of Social Networks by Gender, 2010

	Men	Women	F-stat
Spouses	0.48	0.41	3.99*
Other Family	0.14	0.17	1.26
Children	0.20	0.28	2.93 <sup>1</sup>
Siblings	0.20	0.28	4.06*
Parents	0.31	0.35	0.41
<b>Total Kin</b>	<b>1.33</b>	<b>1.48</b>	<b>3.71<sup>1</sup></b>
Neighbors	0.07	0.10	1.77
Coworkers	0.32	0.17	11.66**
Advisors	0.19	0.25	2.52
Friends	1.03	1.27	7.34**
<b>Total Non-Kin</b>	<b>1.61</b>	<b>1.79</b>	<b>2.10</b>
<b>Network Size</b>	<b>2.26</b>	<b>2.52</b>	<b>5.09*</b>

Note: GSS 2010 Survey, N=1272; all statistics reported with adjustments for survey weighting; <sup>1</sup>p < 0.1; \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01. A contact can be categorized in more than one way by the respondent. Network size indicates unique contacts only.

argument by using GSS data to compare the types of close relationships that men have against those that women have.

As Table 1 shows, women have slightly more kin ties than men, a gender gap that’s marginally significant (*p*-value <0.1). The size of the gender gap in kin ties is closing: Whereas the 1985 GSS survey shows that kin figured much more prominently in women’s networks than men’s networks (i.e., 1.50 kin ties for men, 1.81 kin ties for women),<sup>5</sup> the 2010 survey shows that this difference in kin ties is now smaller (i.e., 1.33 kin ties for men, 1.48 kin ties for women). Kin comprise precisely the same proportion of women’s and men’s networks, or 58 percent of all ties.

The second panel of Table 1 reveals other gender differences. Women’s core networks now have more friends than men’s core networks, while men’s core networks still have more coworkers. These gaps are both statistically different.

Is it important that men’s networks include more coworkers? It indeed is. It’s important mainly because work-related relationships can affect the likelihood of finding a job and career success.<sup>6</sup> For example, analysis of the 2010 GSS data suggests that women’s earnings are affected by the size of their coworker network, whereas men’s earnings are not. Coworker relationships are more important to the earnings of women than men, yet these are precisely the networks that women lack. This result has been the impetus for recent efforts to assist women in developing social contacts at work.<sup>7</sup>

But women’s networks also provide some advantages. Although their networks lag behind men’s on the job, they do serve them well in other respects. There is much evidence, for example, that kin and friends can provide valuable social support. It follows that women are advantaged, in some respects, insofar as their networks include more kin and friends.

**Conclusions**

As women streamed into the formal labor force, they gained networks with coworker ties and friends, with the result that their networks grew to be larger in overall size than those of men. This process is nonetheless incomplete. In recent survey data, we find that women haven’t quite caught up with men in the number of coworker ties, a gender gap that can disadvantage women in finding jobs and raising earnings.

But women’s networks provide some advantages as well. We find, for example, that women have a slight edge over men in the number of friendship and kin ties. This provides women with many sources of social support and should be viewed, therefore, as a gender gap that works to the advantage of women. Although we usually think of women’s parallel obligations in the work and domestic spheres as a “double burden,” their strong presence in both spheres ramps up the overall size of their networks.

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## NOTES

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4. This result shows up, for example, in three waves of the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP), a population-level study of older Americans conducted in 2005, 2010, and 2015. The NSHAP, which also asks about core discussion networks, reveals that women have, on average, 0.21 to 0.46 more contacts than men. The last and most recent nationally representative study on networks is the Time-Sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS) in 2016. It also reveals that women have larger core discussion networks than men. See Lee, Byungkyu, and Peter Bearman. 2017. "Important Matters in Political Context." *Sociological Science* 4, 1–30; Lee, Byungkyu. 2017. Email on October 18, 2017.
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