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HOW COMPARABLE WORTH WOULD HURT WOMEN

As more and more people write about the doctrine called "Comparable Worth," it becomes more and more evident that the proposed solution would be far worse than the problem. Comparable Worth is a wage-setting system under which an employer is required to set wages based on a subjective evaluation of the intrinsic "worth" of different jobs without relating it to what other firms are paying for the same or similar work.

Individual workers, evaluators and employers differ widely in how they evaluate the "worth" of skill, effort, responsibility, working conditions, physical safety, stress, and flexibility of hours. The Comparable Worth notion requires that this subjective evaluation then be skewed even further from reality by the arbitrary labeling of "women's jobs" and "men's jobs."

The Wisconsin Association of Manufacturers & Commerce has analyzed the recommendations of the Comparable Worth Task Force appointed by the Wisconsin Governor and found that implementation of Comparable Worth would increase sex discrimination against women. This is because of the arbitrary rule that only those jobs where 70% or more of the employees are female would be eligible for Comparable Worth raises.

For example, the Governor's Task Force Study listed the job called Institution Aide, which has 67% female employees, as having a "C-W Gap" of $5,132. But the 116 employees in this position would not get a C-W raise because it cannot be designated a "women's job" unless it meets the 70% test.

Now suppose that the state needs two more employees in this position. If the state hires two women, it will cross the 70% threshold and the state would be required to give all Institution Aides a raise. Therefore, it would cost the state $595,000 to hire two women. If you were a personnel manager, whom would you hire -- a man or a woman?

Or, look at the position called Nursing Asst. 3. Because it has 70% female, all 104 employees are scheduled to get a raise of $3,626 to close the so-called C-W Gap. If the personnel manager simply hires one male or fires two females, he can avoid C-W raises for

all and save $377,136 in his budget.

The nationally-respected economist June O'Neill showed in a recent speech how Comparable Worth, as a paysetting mechanism, would work for a hypothetical firm employing nurses (95% of whom are female) and computer systems analysts (25% of whom are female).

If this firm were required to adopt the job evaluations made in the famous Washington State case (where the Comparable Worth concept was upheld in court), it would have to make a significant adjustment to achieve pay equality either by lowering the salaries of systems analysts or raising the pay of nurses.

If the firm lowered the pay of systems analysts, it would find it practically impossible to retain or recruit them. If it raised the pay of nurses, the firm would have to seek other ways to cut costs, such as by reducing the number of nurses or substituting new equipment and other types of labor in order to avoid raising the price of its products and thereby losing business. So, some nurses who were lucky enough to keep their jobs at higher pay would benefit. But other nurses would become unemployed.

Miss O'Neill shows that this is precisely what happened in Australia where, in the 1970s, Comparable Worth was overlaid on an already complex administered wage system. The ratio of women's earnings to men's rose from 60% to 77% for fulltime adult workers, but those keeping their jobs were the more skilled, and female employment in manufacturing fell by 17%.

Miss O'Neill says that the unskilled or least skilled women really suffer from the imposition of Comparable Worth. They lose out altogether. Clarence Pendleton, chairman of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights puts this more bluntly. He says that "Comparable Worth would do to low-skilled women what the minimum wage did to black teenagers."

Even the more skilled women will not benefit from Comparable Worth in the long run. Here is a typical male reaction in a recent letter to the editor published in Business Week. "Women are in for a surprise with comparable worth pay. All those fellows working the dirty and dangerous jobs out in the elements will be eying those safe, comfortable 'female' occupations. And affirmative action this time will be on their side."

No wonder the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights concluded in its recent 232-page study that the theory of Comparable Worth "is profoundly and irretrievably flawed."