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ARE WOMEN REALLY PAID LESS THAN MEN?

"Women Paid Much Less Than Men," "Women's Pay Trails Men's in Same Field," and similar headlines recently greeted us on newspaper front-pages. According to the news stories, the Department of Labor reported that women "in the same occupations as men" generally were paid less.

The news stories were accompanied by tables giving comparative figures for weekly wages by men and women in different categories. In order to emphasize the pay differential, the tables even provided the numerical ratio of women's pay to men's.

The Labor Department report did not draw any conclusions from the figures, but the reporters writing the news stories telephoned anti-Reagan activists for their comment. Those spokespersons jumped at the chance to charge "sex discrimination" and to imply that it is all Ronald Reagan's fault because "the government isn't doing the job" of enforcing the equal pay act.

Contrary to these knee-jerk reactions, the Labor Department report doesn't provide any evidence of sex discrimination in earnings. The Labor Department report compares the pay of men and women in different job categories, but it does not compare their work. No principle of justice requires that the pay be equal when the work is not equal.

The reason why the cash wages paid to women as a group are less than the cash wages paid to men as a group is that women do less work for those wages than men do for their wages. The Labor Department report counted all persons who work 35 hours per week or more, no matter whether they work 35 or 48 or 60 hours per week. Nothing in the equal-pay concept requires giving the same pay to those who work 35 and 60 hours per week.

The explanation for the male-female pay differential was spelled out by labor economist Judith Finn last year before the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee. Here are some of the reasons.

1. "Women work fewer hours." Not only do women work part-time far oftener than men, but "women who work full-time work 10 percent fewer hours than men who work full-time. In addition, women have nearly 50 percent higher absences from work than men."

2. "Women have less work experience." This is due primarily to the fact that "women drop out of the labor force to pursue family responsibilities associated with child bearing and child rearing."

3. "Women have shorter job tenure." This is the length of time an employee has worked steadily for the same employer, and it is one of the most important factors in determining salaries. "Men report nearly twice as much job tenure as women: the median is 4.5 years for men and 2.6 years for women." The reasons behind these figures are the large proportion of women workers under age 25 and the fact that most women leave the work force at least once during their working lives for family reasons.

4. "Women have different educational attributes." Women receive as much education as men today, but women tend to choose those fields where salaries are depressed by excess supply such as humanities, social science and education, while men study in fields where salaries are high such as engineering, computer science and acccounting.

5. "Women invest less in on-the-job training. Women's investment in on-the-job training comes to only a fraction of the amount invested by men." This is rational behavior for women who expect to leave the work force to rear a family, but it is a big factor in influencing cash earnings.

6. "Women have less geographic mobility. Compared with men, women are less willing to move to another location to get a job when unemployed or to get a better job when employed." Most wives place a higher priority on staying with their families than accepting a better job in a new location.

7. Many women have "different work-related values" and therefore are "less motivated to maximize earnings." "There is evidence that women value non-salary characteristics in their jobs, like pleasant inter-personal relationships, pleasant working conditions, and a good location more than men. This implies that, on the average, women trade-off salary for these other working conditions more frequently than men."

It is clear that the Department of Labor report on the comparative earnings of men and women is a report on cash earnings only, and does not even pretend to report on the comparative work done to produce those earnings. It gives no evidence whatsoever to support the conclusions of the anti-Reagan activists who have been sounding off in the press about sex discrimination in wages and salaries.