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EQUAL PAY FOR COMPARABLE WORTH

In recent testimony at a Congressional hearing, Senator Edward Kennedy turned up as the flag-carrier for a new feminist cause wrapped in the old, tired rhetoric. He said that the Old Testament records that "women earned 30 shekels for every 50 earned by men," and that 2,500 years later "women have barely progressed at all on the issue of pay equity." He charged that women in America are "forced to accept second class status and second class salaries."

Kennedy's solution for this problem is an amendment he says he will introduce to the Equal Pay Act to provide that it apply not only to equal work, but to jobs of "comparable worth." Eleanor Holmes Norton, former "chair" of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, has labeled this "the issue of the '80s for women."

Equal pay for equal work has been the law of the land since 1963 and is not controversial today. "Equal pay for comparable worth," however, is a radically different concept. It is, in the words of one Federal judge who dismissed a suit brought under this theory in Denver, "pregnant with the possibility of disrupting the entire economic system" of the United States.

The "comparable worth" theory is based on the unproven hypothesis that occupations traditionally filled by a majority of women receive lower compensation <u>because</u> they are filled by women. The remedy designed for this alleged sex discrimination against women is to establish rating scales to rank occupations according to such factors as education, skill, and responsibility, and then to establish a common wage-level among those jobs with the same number of "points" even though they require entirely different work in unrelated markets.

Sarah Weddington (former $57,000-a-year adviser to Jimmy Carter) was fond of comparing the pay of nurses (primarily female) to plumbers (primarily male) and inveighing against the alleged injustice of their wage differential. The Denver case that was thrown out of court in 1978 involved a comparison of the pay of nurses and tree trimmers (primarily male).

An objective decision simply cannot be made that a nurse is "worth" as much as a plumber or a tree trimmer, since their work is obviously not "equal." It may depend on what is the emergency of the moment.

This is why the bottom line of any demand for "equal pay for comparable worth" is federal wage control. It means that a federal bureau or federal court would be given the ultimate decision-making authority to order equal wages for jobs that are not equal.

The radical nature of the "comparable worth" concept is shown by a recent complaint filed in an Illinois commission report alleging that Chicago city female workers are paid less than male city workers because "women are concentrated in clerical jobs, averaging $10,000 per year while men hold blue collar, police and firefighter jobs earning over $20,000 per year."

In other words, the "comparable worth" advocates are demanding that women working nine-to-five clerical jobs in safe, clean offices, heated in winter and air-conditioned in summer, should receive equal wages with police and firefighters who work in dangerous jobs, unpleasant conditions, all hours and weather, and who risk their lives day after day to keep our cities safe.

A recent article on this subject in the Monthly Labor Review developed the ingenious argument that the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision (which prohibited racial segregation in public schools) "has equal validity" to employment; that is, when some job categories are dominated by one sex, that amounts to "sex segregation in the workplace," and that denotes the "inferiority of women" and results in inferior wages. The author completely ignores the fact that no one in America is assigned to particular jobs in any way remotely like the assignment of grade school children to a particular school.

The 1981 Supreme Court decision in County of Washington v. Gunther made "comparable worth" a viable national issue. The high Court did not endorse "comparable worth," but it opened the door for massive litigation under Title VII on the "comparable worth" theory. In the last month, at least three Congressional hearings have been held on this issue, as well as numerous state hearings by various public bodies.

"Equal pay for comparable worth" is just another gimmick to get the American people to accept more and more federal control. We don't need it.