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THE CONSPIRACY THEORY OF JOBS

In recent weeks, national newsmagazines have been running a public service ad headlined "It pays to be a man." The copy below states the message: "For every dollar a man makes, a woman earns only 59¢. ... A secretary is usually paid less than a truck driver. A teacher less than a liquor store clerk. And a nurse less than a pharmacist."

The ad does not compare the wages of male nurses with female nurses, or male truck drivers with female truck drivers, or male pharmacists with female pharmacists. The Equal Pay Act forbids a pay differential based on sex when the work is substantially the same.

The ad is designed to build public sentiment for a radical new slogan -- "equal pay for work of comparable worth." The crux of the "comparable worth" concept is a comparing of average wages paid for jobs in entirely different categories (different work, different industries, and different labor markets) in which either males or females fill more than 70% of the jobs.

"Comparable worth" is a concept which rejects wage levels set by the free market, and instead proposes wage-setting on the basis of subjective opinion about the "worth" of particular occupations in relation to other occupations. The "comparable worth" advocates are eager to provide their own biased experts to testify on job "worth," and they call on the power of government (through agency regulations or court decisions) to enforce their opinion of job "worth" over the marketplace.

The 1982 Congressional hearings produced 1,829 pages of testimony, nearly all in favor of "comparable worth" theories as a result of organized lobbying efforts. Other groups and businesses whose cost structure would be dramatically affected by "comparable worth" still do not seem to understand that "comparable worth" is radically different from the noncontroversial "equal pay for equal work."

"Comparable worth" is a stated goal of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. This union won one "comparable worth" lawsuit this fall in the state of Washington (which is estimated to cost the state $500 million).

The "comparable worth" theory rests on the assumption that a massive societal (male) conspiracy has (1) segregated women into particular jobs by excluding them from other jobs, and then (2) devalued the women's occupations by paying them less wages than other occupations held primarily by men. It's basically a conspiracy theory of jobs.

It is true that occupations such as clerical workers, nurses, teachers, and librarians have a majority of women. It is also true that the average wage of all women is somewhere between 59% and 62% of the average pay of all men. But no evidence has been presented to support the claim that this gap is caused by conspiracy or discrimination.

In a recent scholarly conference on "comparable worth" in Washington, D.C., tremendous documentation was presented to prove that the pay gap between men and women is caused by a difference in on-the-job productivity between men and women, whereas no evidence was presented to prove that the gap is caused by discrimination. The allegation of discrimination depends on the conspiracy theory of wages rather than on facts.

The average woman in the labor force works 35.7 hours per week, while the average man works 44 hours per week. The average man has been on his present job 4.5 years, the average woman 2.6 years. Women are eleven times more likely to leave the work force than men. Aren't the men who work longer hours per week and stay on the job longer entitled to a higher wage? Or must we pay equal pay for unequal work?

If certain occupations are underpaid, then which ones are overpaid? The answer of the "comparable worth" advocates is blue-collar men in skilled and unskilled labor: truck drivers, policemen, electricians, plumbers, laborers, and maintenance men. The "comparable worth" advocates assert that it is unfair that such men, who may have only a high school education, receive as much pay as a woman who may have a secretarial school or nursing school certificate.

The "comparable worth" advocates want to exalt paper credentials over strenuous and risky work, unpleasant working conditions, and uncertain job tenure. They want to bring about a redistribution of wages through bureaucratic power and judicial activism.

Women are not excluded from any occupation today. If women want the pay of truck drivers or maintenance workers, they should do the hard physical work that these jobs require. Government wage-setting is not the answer.