

Explaining the Economic Gender Gap

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SEX DISCRIMINATION

In discussions of sex discrimination, as in discussions of racial discrimination, people often succumb to the temptation to look for evil spirits and conspiracies. Much of the popular and scholarly literature about sex discrimination contains sloppy analysis, fuzzy language, and meaningless statistics, as does its sister field of racial discrimination literature. Despite the enactment of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the wage differential between women and men has not decreased. Women continue to earn a median income that is 60 per cent of male income. Armed with this finding, women's rights groups and their supporters have called for a new remedy: equal pay for comparable worth.

The equal pay for comparable worth movement has grown out of the belief that past government efforts to equalize earnings between the sexes have failed. The equal pay for comparable worth concept rests on the finding that certain occupations are predominantly male, while others are predominantly female. Truck drivers and typists are two examples. Predominantly male jobs pay higher wages than those which are predominantly female. The equal pay for comparable worth doctrine would establish the worth of both jobs to the employer, and quite possibly truck drivers and secretaries would be required by law to receive the same wage.

A Working Definition of Sex Discrimination

A first step to disentangle confusion about male and female wage differences is to define sex discrimination. In the sex discrimination literature, the term often is used in a manner that describes two entirely different phenomena. Sex discrimination may refer to actions based on preferences about sex, or it may refer to actions based on beliefs about productivity.

The word discrimination itself means choice. Scarcity requires selection among alternatives. We all discriminate because we all choose. When discrimination is prefaced by the word sex or race, we merely specify the choice criteria. For some activities we choose men (discriminate against women) and in others we choose women (discriminate against men). Most of mankind, even those living in multi-racial societies, choose a mate for marriage who is a member of their own race and of the opposite sex.

Preferences About Sex

One form of sexual discrimination, which I call sex preferences, simply reflects personal tastes. An employer may prefer to associate with one sex rather than another. Or perhaps the employer may be indifferent with regard to the sex workers, but his other employees prefer male to female co-workers.

Another kind of sex preference also exists. The employer may perceive that his customers prefer to be served by one sex over another. Customer preference can be for female service, as in the case of bar hostesses or airline stewardesses, or against female services, as in the case of caddies and attorneys. Customers also may value some performances more if performed by men, such as football and hockey, or if performed by women, such as ballet and gymnastics.

Beliefs About Productivity

Often when people speak of sex discrimination they really mean sex prejudice. Prejudice is defined by one dictionary as: "A judgement or opinion formed before the facts are known."¹ Another way to characterize this kind of behavior is to say that people form stereotypes. Sex stereotyping or sex prejudice, like other kinds of prejudicial behavior, is a part of the optimizing behavior of people. The reason for this behavior is that we live in a world of costly information, and in order to acquire additional units of information we must sacrifice some other thing of value, such as time, money or effort. Because information is costly, we can reasonably expect people to seek ways to economize on information costs. One way is to use cheaply observed physical characteristics, such as sex, as a proxy for some other costly-to-observe characteristic, such as productivity.²

1. Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language (College Edition, New York World, 1962) p. 1150.
2. For fuller discussion, see Walter E. Williams, The State Against Blacks, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), Chapter 2.

The use of stereotypes or prejudicial choices is one method which may reduce information costs. Some economists refer to this phenomenon as "statistical" discrimination.³ For example, women present fewer auto accident claims than do men; therefore, insurance companies charge women lower insurance premiums on the average. Since insurance companies lack prior knowledge of any particular individual, they must set rates according to statistically significant risk groups. Therefore, the fact that a person is a female cheaply conveys information which suggests a lower probability of accident claims. The fact that a person is a male, under 25, contains information which suggests a higher probability of accident claims.

Similarly, in employment choice an applicant's sex may convey information about expected productivity. The employer may discover, for example, that turnover rates for women exceed those of men. Since employee turnover requires new training, which is costly, employers can be expected to seek to reduce employee turnover. There are at least two ways employers can reduce retraining costs associated with turnover: (1) Hire fewer employees with high expected turnover, or (2) Pay high expected turnover employees less.

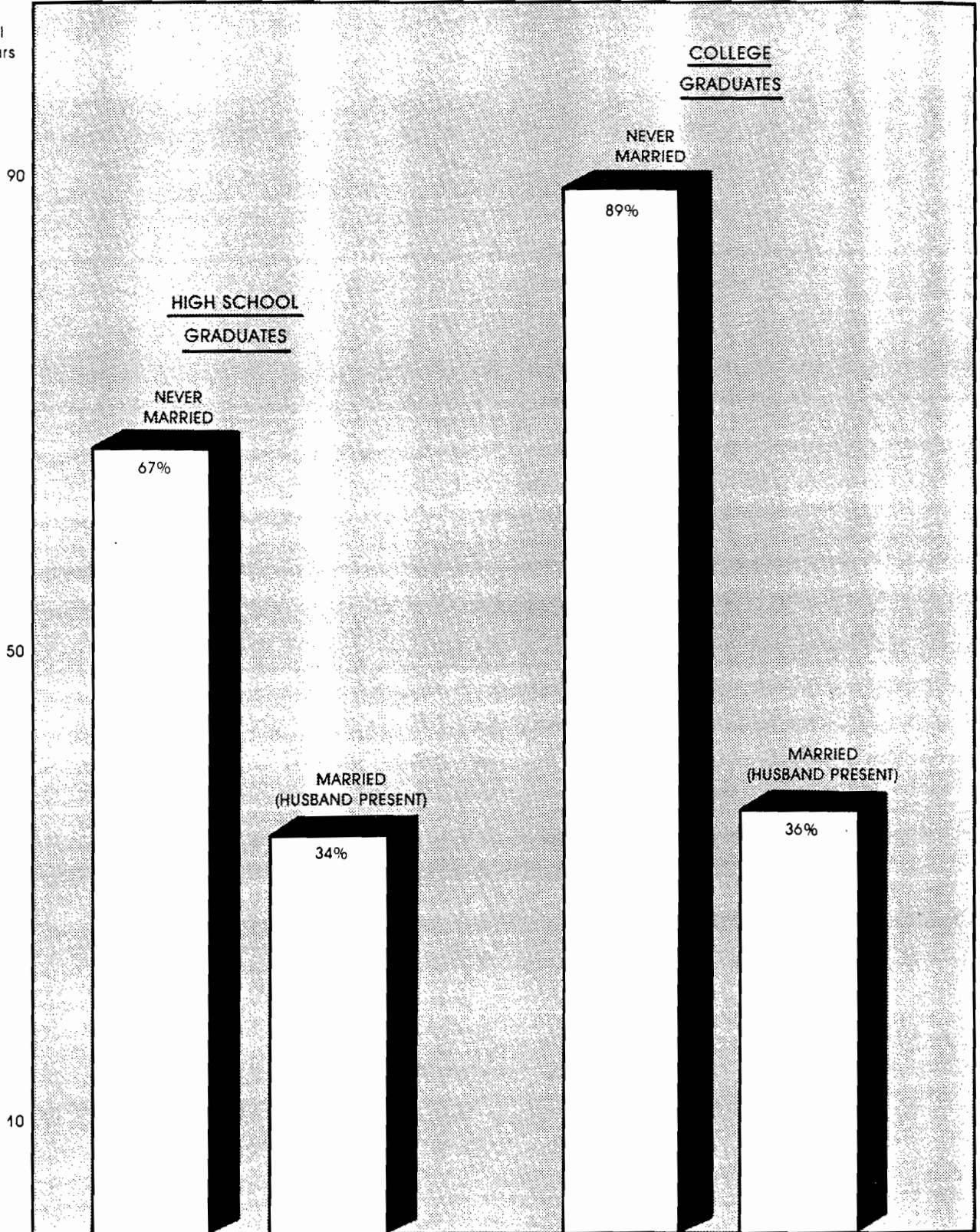
It is important to note that this type of sex discrimination has nothing to do with the sex preferences of employers. Instead, it results from the profit-maximizing decisions of employers. If sex conveys useful, cost-reducing information to employers, then those employers who want to minimize costs will take advantage of this information. In highly competitive markets, firms which do not take advantage of cost-reducing information will not be able to survive.

This paper does not attach a perjorative meaning to the term "sex discrimination." Instead, acts of sex discrimination will be examined simply as forms of human behavior. Moreover, sex discrimination which results from choices designed to reduce production costs is a form of wealth-maximizing human behavior.

3. Edmund E. Phelps, "The Statistical Theory of Racism and Sexism," American Economic Review, 62 (September, 1972), pp. 659-661.

YEARS WOMEN SPEND IN THE LABOR MARKET

Percent
of Potential
Working Years



SOURCE: Solomon Polachek, "Discontinuous Labor Force Participation and Its Effects on Women's Market Earnings." In Sex Discrimination and the Division of Labor, edited by Cynthia B. Lloyd. New York: Columbia University Press, 1975.

PAY DIFFERENTIALS AND THE TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE

Malcolm Cohen has conducted a study of pay differentials between men and women.⁴ The results of this study, which are summarized in Table I in the appendix, show that about 50 percent of the difference in average salaries is explained by institutional factors that include unionization and seniority. The remaining 50 percent difference, according to Cohen, cannot be attributed to sex discrimination alone. He cites factors such as: more women choose to enter low-paying occupations, less on-the-job training than men, a greater desire of women to work specific hours, and a stronger resistance to relocate for the job.

Most of these additional factors are related to the fact that most women workers are, or have been, involved in a traditional marriage, or that they are current or potential mothers. Marriage and motherhood affect the earnings potential of women relative to men in a number of important ways. Among these are:

- Women bear children and men do not.
- Once children are born, women are more likely to care for them than are men.
- Women are more likely than men to move and change jobs to accommodate their spouse's career requirements.

These activities cause women to have higher job turnover rates than men, and to spend fewer years in the labor market.

- The median number of years on the current job for men exceeds those of women by 77 to 100 percent.⁵
- Married women with a high school or college education spend, on the average, only one-third of their potential working years in the labor market.⁶

4. Malcolm S. Cohen, "Sex Differences in Compensation," Journal of Human Resources 6 (Fall 1971), pp. 435-447.

5. Elizabeth M. Landes, "Sex Differences in Wage and Employment: A Test of the Specific Capital Hypothesis," Economic Inquiry, 15 (October 1977), pp. 523-538, cited in Cotton Lindsay, "Equal Pay for Comparable Work," Law and Economics Center monograph, Miami, 1980, pp. 21-22.

6. Solomon Polachek, "Discontinuous Labor Force Participation and Its Effects on Women's Market Earnings." In Sex Discrimination and the Division of Labor, edited by Cynthia B. Lloyd (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

High job turnover rates and interruptions in the time spent in the labor market affect the earnings of women in two ways. First, if females are viewed as more likely than males to quit their jobs, they will be perceived by employers as less valuable employees. Second, such interruptions typically mean that women have fewer job skills, or less "human capital," than men.

According to Cotton Lindsay, discontinuity in the labor force influences the amount of human capital that a person holds in several important ways.⁷ First, because women expect to spend fewer years in the work force, they have reduced incentive to invest in education and training. Their decisions also can be expected to influence the quality of such investments. For example, women may be reluctant to train for highly specialized fields in math and science because the pay-off period is longer than for sociology and non-university teaching. In addition, many specialized fields like subatomic physics do not have a secondary household use. Secondly, a large amount of any person's human capital is acquired through on-the-job training, and because women may be out of the labor force for longer periods of time they have reduced amounts of this kind of capital. Finally, human capital deteriorates if not used and replenished. When people are out of the job market their skills become rusty and may even become obsolete. All of this suggests, holding all else constant, that a lower amount of human capital is held by women as a group relative to men as a group.

One way of assessing the impact of the traditional marriage on earnings potential is to compare the performance of men and women who are married with the performance of men and women who have never married. Thomas Sowell has made such a comparison among academics for the years 1968-69 -- a period prior to the time of significant affirmative action programs. Sowell discovered that:⁸

- Single women with Ph.D.s achieve the rank of full professor more often than similarly qualified male academics. But married female Ph.D.s achieve that rank less often.
- Female academics who have never married earn salaries which are slightly higher than male academics who have never married.
- Among academics who currently are married, the average salary of women is about 14 percent lower than the average salary of men.

7. Cotton Lindsay, "Equal Pay for Comparable Work," Law and Economic Center monograph. Miami, 1980, p. 22.

8. Thomas Sowell, "Affirmative Action Reconsidered," Public Interest (Winter 1976), pp. 47-65.

Sowell reports that these differences are readily understandable because, according to surveys: (1) Married academic women put more time than married academic men into care of the home and family; (2) Geographic location of academic couples is usually determined by the husband's career prospects rather than the wife's, which often means that geographic relocation is a career move up for the husband and a career move down for the wife; and (3) Women academics, like other women, interrupt their careers more often than men for child-rearing or other reasons. Apparently, marriage gives men a helper, while marriage makes women the helpee. As Sowell points out, "Such a situation may not be just--but it does not result from employer discrimination."

The impact that marriage appears to have on women's earnings relative to men's was shown in one study conducted in Canada.⁹ It found that:

- Among Canadian men and women who have never married, the average female salary is 99 percent of the average male salary.
- Among Canadian men and women who are married and have never been divorced, the average female salary is about one-third of the average male salary.

INDIVIDUAL SEX PREFERENCES AND MARKET RESPONSES

Sex preferences by employers, employees and customers can affect the market opportunities for the less-preferred person. If the employment of women imposes a psychic cost on the employer, in order to sell their services women will have to pay a compensating difference, i.e., offer their services at a price lower than their male counterparts. If the employer's preferences are gender-neutral while those of his male employees are biased against women, a pay differential will exist between men and women. That is, employers will have to pay male employees a premium to associate with females if they choose to "integrate" their workforce. Finally, if customers exhibit sex preferences, e.g., for sales personnel, the employer's selection will reflect customer preference. In some cases he will not hire female employees at all and in others he will hire them only at a lower wage, thereby permitting him to pay a compensating difference to his customers in the form of a lower price.

9. Walter Block, "Economic Intervention, Discrimination, and Unforeseen Consequences," in Discrimination, Affirmative Action, and Equal Opportunity eds. W.E. Block and M.A. Walker, (Vancouver, British Columbia: The Fraser Institute, 1981) p. 112.

Open market forces tend to reduce the discrimination that results from employer and employee sex preferences. Not all employers can be counted on to have these preferences and to discriminate against women. Those who do not will be more likely to hire women and thus purchase their labor at bargain prices. These non-discriminating employers will face lower costs of production and will capture a greater market share by offering products or services at lower prices than their sex discriminating competitors.

By paying women less than their value, non-discriminating firms will earn supra-normal profits. Market forces tend to eliminate supra-normal profits due to entry by other firms. Entry by other firms will bid up the wages of women who were paid less than the value of their product. Thus, if men and women are equal in their productivity, the long-run wage differential based on preferences will tend toward zero.

LEGAL RESTRICTIONS WHICH HANDICAP WOMEN

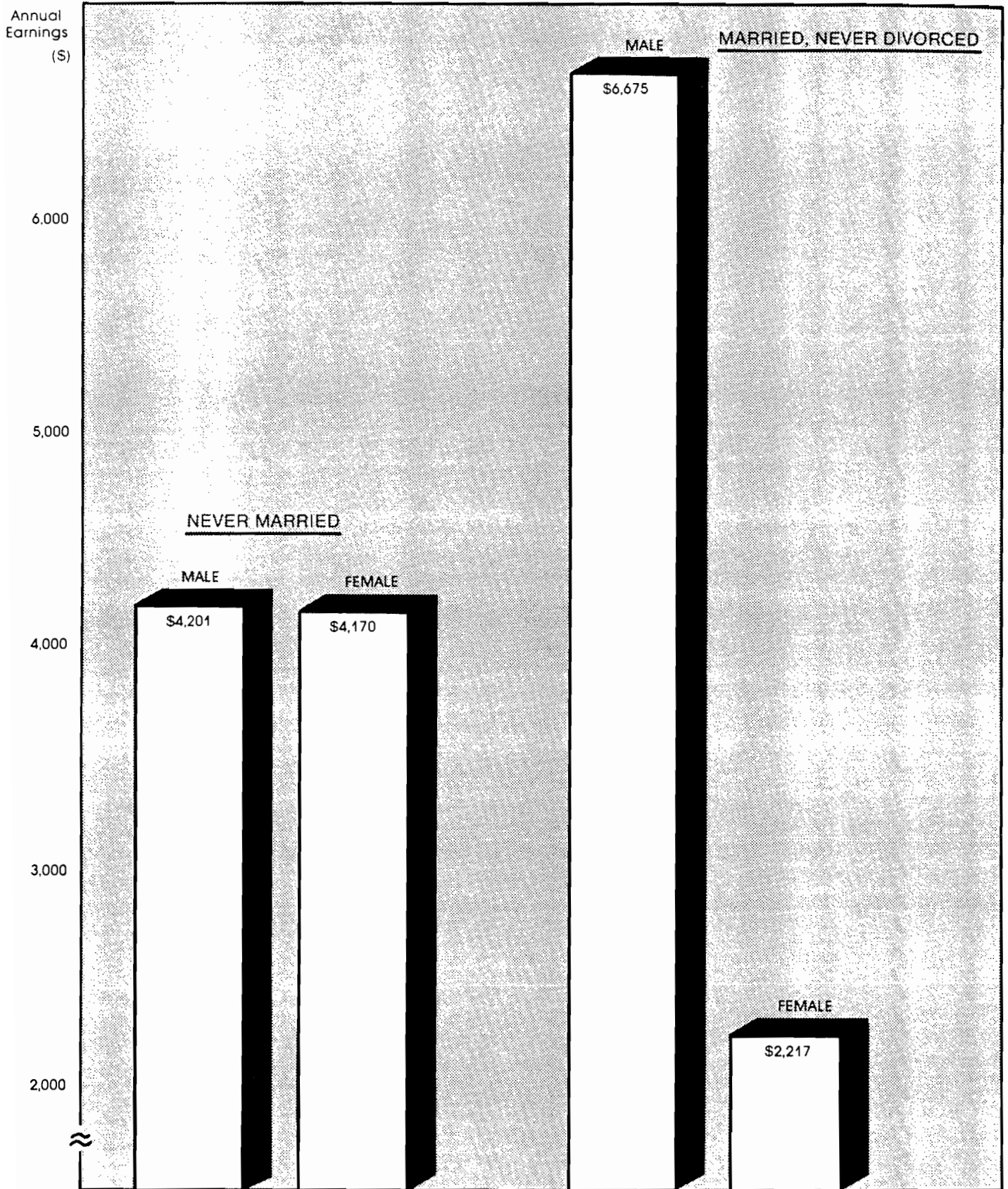
Market forces, then, tend to reduce discrimination associated with sex preference. The essential condition for this to occur is the existence of open market competition. However, where there are monopolistic practices and legal restrictions which prevent women from competing with men for economic opportunities, sex preference indulgence will persist. While today no labor or professional organization can expect to succeed in having a males-only membership policy, it can design and lobby for policies which put women at a competitive disadvantage.

Wage Restrictions

One legal tool which handicaps women (or any less-preferred person) is any law which requires employers to provide equal pay for equal work.¹⁰ Equal pay for equal work laws, mandated by the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, require employers to pay the same wage to all employees doing the same job. Government-imposed or union-imposed wage minima can have two possible consequences. First, where there are real productivity differences according to sex the law will discriminate against the employment of women. Employers concerned with productivity under a scheme of mandated wage rates will hire fewer women. Second, because the employer must match wages with productivity there will be employment discrimination against the least skilled woman worker. This will be especially true in the presence of mandated employment quotas.

10. Less-preferred is not to be construed in the absolute sense. It simply means that, at some price, one person is viewed by a decision maker as having lower value relative to another.

ANNUAL EARNINGS — — CANADA, 1971



SOURCE: Walter Block, "Economic Intervention, Discrimination, and Unforeseen Consequences," in *Discrimination, Affirmative Action, and Equal Opportunity* eds. W.E. Block and M.A. Walker (Vancouver, British Columbia: The Fraser Institute, 1981), p. 112.

The profit maximizing employer, in light of equal pay requirements, will raise employment qualifications to match those of males. This in turn means that women who are employed by the firm receive the same wage as men, while less-skilled women will not be hired at all. Thus, equal pay laws have the tendency to discriminate against the employment of less-skilled women and favor the more highly-skilled or educated women.¹¹

Anti-sex discrimination laws which are part of the Civil Rights Act also give rise to administrative laws and procedures which increase the cost to an employer to fire a black or female employee. These laws place employers in jeopardy of employment discrimination suits when they rightly or wrongly fire an employee. This tends to reduce the employer's willingness to experiment and perhaps revise his expectations about differences in gender (or race) productivity.

In other words, if the employer can cheaply fire employees that turn out to be poor workers, he would be more willing to hire and try out employees with different and unfamiliar credentials. But if it is costly to fire female employees, employers will have reduced incentive to experiment. Laws which raise the cost of firing women reinforce the effect of equal pay laws on an employer's incentive to experiment.

Protective Legislation

Labor unions traditionally have sought to reduce job competition with women through the use of "protective" legislation. One important case was Muller v. Oregon, which upheld the constitutionality of state protective laws for women because of "...a widespread belief that woman's physical structure, and the functions she performs in consequence thereof, justify special legislation restricting or qualifying the conditions under which she should be permitted to toil."¹²

- By 1970 at least 46 states and other U.S. jurisdictions had regulations governing work conditions for women, such as maximum hours, rest periods, time of day or night they can be employed, and weight lifting restrictions.
- No fewer than 26 states had outright bans on women's employments in certain occupations, such as mining and bartending.

11. While the author knows of no empirical studies on the redistributive effects of the equal pay laws, casual observation suggests most feminists are highly educated females.

12. Muller v. Oregon, 208 U.S. 412 (1908).

Recent court cases and federal and state administrative actions have invalidated protective legislation for women under provisions of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.¹³ As a result of court action, state human rights commissions, and decisions by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, early protective legislation for women has all but been eliminated from the American labor market.

The effect of protective legislation is that it has reduced the marketability of skills held by women. It did this by raising the cost to the employer of hiring women. In some cases it was quite flagrant, as in the Arkansas statute which required employers to pay female employees (but not male employees) time-and-a-half for all hours in excess of eight.¹⁴ Male workers and unions sought these and other forms of protective legislation as a means of restricting competition with women.

Union-based restriction of women is a broad phenomenon. Writing about 19th century England, Susan Anthony said, "...Male labor came to realize they might more effectively unite to put forward a uniform demand based on their own recognized needs, and so secure higher payment than a woman could customarily ask, or be likely to receive."¹⁵ Anthony explains, "The Luddite riots, which came to a head in 1811-1812 among the Framework Knitters of Leicester, appear to have been caused by the use of a new machine which enabled the manufacturers to employ women in work in which men had been employed."¹⁶

13. Hays v. Potlatch Forest, Inc., 465 F. 2d 1081 (1972); Rosenfeld v. Southern Pacific Company, 444 F. 2d 1219 (1971); Cooper v. Delta Airlines, F. Supt. 781 (E.D.La. 1967); Weeks v. Southern Bell Tel. & Tel. Company, 408 F. 2d 228 (1969).

14. The court held the statute invalid in Hays v. Potlatch Forest, Inc., 465 F. 2d 1081 (1972).

15. Susan Anthony, "Trade Unionism and Women's Work" in Freedom, Feminism, and the State, ed. Wendy McElroy, (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1982), p. 243.

16. Ibid., p. 245

In England, as in the U.S., men suddenly became interested in the morals and health of women. "In the metal trades many attempts were made to secure the exclusion of women, ostensibly on the grounds of their own welfare.¹⁷ Male trade unions such as Birmingham Brass Workers, Nut and Bolt Makers, Chain Makers and Nail Makers sought exclusion of women workers, in the name of protection, as a means to raise their own pay."¹⁸

Barriers To Entry

Any law or institutional arrangement that sets entry requirements ultimately will have the effect of reducing options and hence employment opportunities for any group of people who may be characterized as latecomers, untried, less-skilled and in general, less-preferred. Not all women, but many, fit that characterization because of their historical experience in job markets, their socialization experience, and the real gender differences between men and women.

Occupational licensing laws, business regulation laws and wage laws will discriminate against women, particularly those toward the lower end of the skills spectrum. These laws provide those who may wish to discriminate against women with an effective mechanism for doing so. It has been long recognized, for example, that occupational licensing laws discriminate in favor of incumbents.¹⁹ Incumbents regulate their occupation in a way that favors them momentarily, i.e., entry restriction. To the extent that women historically have been outsiders to many professions they bear a disproportionate share of the cost of entry restriction.

There are some laws which outright prohibit the entrepreneurial drive of women. The most flagrant among these are current Department of Labor regulations that prohibit working at home in industries such as embroidery, the manufacturing of handkerchiefs, buttons, buckles, jewelry, the sewing of clothing, and the making of gloves and mittens. Only recently outerwear knitting was removed from the list of prohibited activities. The manufacturing of goods at home for sale to distributors is attractive to some women in that it is compatible with their homemaking and childrearing activities. However, it competes with organized labor, which has been successful in petitioning Congress to ban such activities.

17. Ibid., p. 249-250.

18. Ibid., p. 250

19. See Simon Rottenberg, "Economics of Occupational Licensing," in Aspects of Labour Economics, NBER (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 3-20.

In addition to federal prohibitions on production within the home, there are local restrictions as well. Some local ordinances prohibit the keeping of inventories in the home, while others impose blanket restrictions on businesses in residential neighborhoods.

All of these restrictive factors, coupled with the fact of a history of discrimination that has legally kept women away from certain pursuits, serve to reduce options and crowd women into certain occupations where, because of supply and demand conditions, wages are low.

FAILED REMEDIES

Equal pay for equal work is now the law in the U.S. as a result of Congressional and administrative actions and extensive litigation. The economic effect of equal pay for equal work has disappointed some of its supporters. If we assume gender discrimination has indeed taken place, then the effect of equal pay for equal work laws is that they have lowered the cost to employers of discriminating.

For example, before these laws were enacted it might have cost an employer \$6 an hour to hire a male, but \$5 an hour to hire a female for the same job. If the employer discriminated against females and put a male on his payroll, the economic cost to him would be \$1 more per hour. It is in this way that the market imposes a cost on employers who discriminate.

Equal pay for equal work laws have eliminated this cost. Now employers must pay men and women the same wage, and if men and women have equal productivity it costs him nothing to indulge in gender preference by choosing to hire men over women. In other words, equal pay for equal work has prevented the market from imposing an economic cost on those employers who are biased in favor of men.

Some may suggest that the way to avoid this undesirable effect of equal pay for equal work laws is to have government-imposed sex employment quotas. Employment quotas would have several effects. First, if they lead to women being hired who are less qualified than men there will be efficiency losses to the firm and to society. Secondly, they will lead to more resources being allocated to job evaluation, credentialization, enforcement costs and paperwork. Thirdly, quotas coupled with equal pay for equal work provisions tend to harm less-skilled or less-educated women. The employer who must hire a certain number of women at a mandated wage will find it to his economic interest to hire only the most skilled women. Such a set of incentives among employers contributes to female job crowding and poverty.

The most recent arrival on the proposed policy landscape to assist women is the equal pay for comparable worth concept. Proponents argue that women should receive the same pay as men who are doing jobs of comparable worth. "We might think of a job's worth as its contributory value to the employer's operation, or alternatively, to the community welfare. Jobs that contribute to the same degree would be judged of equal worth. Or jobs might be evaluated instead according to some view of their intrinsic worth."²⁰

Throughout the proponents' discussion of comparable worth runs the old belief in the notion of the "just wage." It is as if "just" or "fair" wage can have objective meaning and can be determined in the real world. But just wages have no meaning whatsoever in economic theory.

Should equal pay for comparable worth actually become public policy it would have the effect of multiplying the disastrous effects of another public policy, namely, the minimum wage. First, without raising the productivity of workers, comparable worth laws will raise their price. Second, a comparable worth law would drive many firms out of business because of the imposed rise in labor costs. Third, firms that manage to survive in the wake of a comparable worth policy will reduce their labor usage and substitute capital and equipment for labor in ways that cut back on labor costs.

In summary, equal pay for comparable worth will (1) discriminate in favor of highly productive males and females and against low productive males and females, (2) have its greatest adverse impact on poor, young females and (3) raise the level of welfare dependency among men and women.

CONCLUSION

There is considerable discrimination in this world. Sex discrimination is just one of many kinds of discrimination. The policy question is how much of what we observe is attributable to sex discrimination and how much is attributable to other factors, recognized and unrecognized, measurable and unmeasurable. Too much of the public policy debate assumes there are little or no market-related gender differences. Too many professional analyses of gender wage differences assume that their statistical equations capture all or most of the important variables that explain an individual's earnings. In fact, there appear to be important variables omitted. Males are generally more aggressive and competitive than females. I suspect that aggressiveness and competitiveness have something to do with salary enhancement. But this variable, which may account for some differences, is never mentioned. Then there is the fact that women specialize in the household, which may have a positive impact on men's non-household production.

20. Report from the Center for Philosophy & Public Policy (College Park, Maryland: University of Maryland, Spring 1983), p.4.

The movement for comparable worth can be viewed as a triumph of sorts. Apparently feminists and their supporters cannot find enough of the everyday, garden-variety type of sex discrimination that presently is not being remedied under existing law. So, they have turned their efforts toward the newer "just wage" concept. The absence of sex discrimination in its earlier form suggests that women have made tremendous gains in recent years, in spite all of the misleading political rhetoric about the "gender gap."

Note: Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of the National Center for Policy Analysis or as an attempt to aid or hinder passage of any bill before Congress or before any state legislature.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF DIFFERENCES IN PAY
BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN

Full-time (35 hours or more) wage differential between men and women	\$ 5,000
Adjustment to exclude under age 22, over age 64, self-employed persons without a steady job	- 700
Adjustment to remove professionals	- 800
Full-time men work 275 more hours per year than do full-time women	-1,000
Fringe benefits and absenteeism	0
Seniority of men	- 150
Education	- 350
Unionization	<u>- 150</u>
Remainder	\$ 2,550

Source: Malcolm S. Cohen, "Sex Differences in Compensation," Journal of Human Resources 6 (Fall, 1971), p. 446.

TABLE 2
LIFETIME LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN
BY MARITAL STATUS AND EDUCATION

Marital Status	Elementary	High School	College	Graduate School
Married, spouse present	24.7%	33.8%	36.4%	50.0%
Married, spouse absent	28.3	33.4	54.1	NC
Widowed	31.7	32.4	44.9	56.5
Divorced	38.1	51.8	62.4	50.0
Separated	46.1	47.5	49.6	68.2
Never married	28.2	66.9	88.9	97.2
Total	30.1	36.9	41.4	59.1

Note: Lifetime Labor Force Participation = total years worked divided by total exposure (age minus education minus 6) to the labor force.

NC: Not calculated (too few observations)

Source: Solomon Polachek, "Discontinuous Labor Force Participation and Its Effects on Women's Market Earnings," in Sex Discrimination and the Division of Labor, edited by Cynthia B. Lloyd, New York: (Columbia University Press, 1975).

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