

Perspectives on comparable worth: an introduction to the numbers

*Reports presented before a national conference
of statisticians point up the many facets
of the comparable worth issue
and suggest directions for future research*

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Comparable worth is a concept that has thrived on statistical evidence. Both reliable and unreliable statistics have been used by people on all sides—those for or against the concept, and even those who want to prove that comparable worth is either a non-issue or the wrong issue to be addressed. Whatever position is taken, statistics are invariably an important component of any comparable worth discussion.

What do the latest data show? Trends in two of the most widely used data series on individual earnings reveal that the gap between men and women has been narrowing gradually over the past few years.

Bureau of Labor Statistics data from the Current Population Survey show that women working full time in the first quarter of 1985 had median wage and salary earnings of \$268 a week, 66 percent of the \$404 earned by men. In 1979, when BLS first began publishing weekly earnings data on a quarterly basis, women's median earnings were 62 percent of men's earnings. Over the last 6 years, the earnings ratio has fluctuated between 61 percent and 67 percent from quarter to quarter, but the trend generally has been up.

A similar pattern is found in the older CPS series on year-round, full-time earnings of all workers. Preliminary data

for 1984 indicate women's earnings of around \$14,810, or 64 percent of the \$23,225 earned by men. In 1980, the ratio was 60 percent; in 1970, it was 59 percent; and in 1960, it was 61 percent. Obviously, these ratios based on annual aggregate data at the national level fluctuate from year to year. But, like the newer quarterly earnings series, they illustrate that the overall male-female earnings gap has narrowed somewhat during the last few years.

Observations based on these aggregate national data are just the beginning. CPS microdata permit us to dig beneath these aggregate levels and to show how female-male differences vary by occupation, hours of work, education, race, family status, and a great many other characteristics. Very often, the statistical modeling based on microdata "adjusts" for these variables, and the pay gap is reduced considerably.

That the pay gap is indeed narrower than the aggregate measure indicates is confirmed by the BLS occupational wage surveys of business establishments. Using wage data from one of these surveys (the survey of professional, administrative, technical, and clerical occupations), a BLS study published last year demonstrated that the average pay of men in a selected group of narrowly defined white-collar occupations generally exceeded the pay of women in those occupations.¹ But the differences nearly disappeared when each occupation was broken down into its component levels based on skill and experience. That is, men and women were paid about the same wages at each level of the specific job, but a much smaller proportion of women were senior

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level employees. Consequently, the average pay figure for women in each occupation was pulled down by the large proportion of women in the lower level jobs.

In many of the professions, the concentration of women in lower level jobs reflects, in part, the well-documented increase in the number and proportion of women who entered the labor force during the 1970's and early 1980's, as well as the greatly increased number who have received professional degrees. In the field of accounting, for example, 14 percent of entry-level workers were women in 1970, compared with 46 percent in 1981.

Some people believe that, as women move up in their professions, pay differences with men are bound to decline. Others are convinced that supply and demand factors will keep women from advancing. And, despite the evidence of National Longitudinal Survey data on the cohort of mature women (ages 45–59), which show that over a recent 15-year period (1967–82), women's taste for the labor market was up and for housework was down, some observers believe that the currently high labor force participation rates of women are a temporary phenomenon.

Women's commitment to the job market is stronger today than at any time in the last 35 years, or in fact, at any time in this century. The civilian labor force includes about 51 million women, or about 44 percent of the total of 115 million workers. And most of today's working women, just as in the past, either work full time, or are looking for full-time jobs. An average of 20 to 25 percent are employed part-time.

The problem is that, despite women's increasing employment, they remain concentrated in relatively few, low-paying job categories. About one-fourth of all women work-

ers today can be found in just three job categories out of hundreds—secretarial/typing, retail sales, and food preparation and service. This is not to say they are not entering some higher-paying occupations. Women are now 6 percent of all engineers, 16 percent of all physicians, and in the growing computer field, 30 percent of all systems analysts and 35 percent of all programmers. Corresponding estimates for 1974 were 1 percent, 10 percent, 13 percent, and 23 percent, respectively.

As the following articles demonstrate, the comparable worth issue is a multidimensional one that continues to be hotly debated in both the public and private sectors. It is on the legislative agendas of many local and State governments, and at the Federal level, an advisory group on comparable worth has been proposed.

The debate is even international in scope. For instance, many readers may already be familiar with the Australian and Canadian versions of comparable worth. Even within such global agencies as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the United Nations, female employees—including statisticians—have been examining their own pay rates *vis-à-vis* those of male employees.

A great deal of comparable worth activity now centers on the job classification area. But good statistical estimates and their analysis still form the basis for discussion and debate. The articles that follow describe the results of several such efforts undertaken in recent years by experts in the field of pay equity. □

—FOOTNOTE—

¹ See Mark Sieling, "Staffing patterns prominent in female-male earnings gap," *Monthly Labor Review*, June 1984, pp. 29–33.