In Montgomery County, Maryland, a liquor clerk with a high school diploma and two years experience draws a higher salary than a schoolteacher in the same county with a bachelor's degree, specialized teaching training, and the same amount of experience. Almost all the liquor clerks are male; two-thirds of the teachers are female. In Denver, trained professional nurses brought suit against the city because their wages were lower than those of predominantly male tree trimmers and sign painters. Secretaries are paid less than truck drivers; librarians are paid less than traffic guards; bank tellers are paid less than stock clerks—simply, it often seems, because they are doing what society perceives as women's work. As Margaret Mead once wrote, "There are villages in which men fish and women weave and in which women fish and men weave, but in either type of village the work done by the men is valued higher than the work done by the women."

Despite the passage of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the gap between women's and men's wages has not decreased significantly in the last few decades. Women continue to earn 66 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts. Even when this sobering statistic is corrected for such factors as women's lesser seniority or sporadic participation in the labor force, only about half of the gap is explained away.

The remaining gap seems to be attributable to job segregation. Women are concentrated in a small number of low-paid occupations: 80 percent of all women work in only 25 of the 420 occupations listed by the Department of Labor. Secretaries are 99 percent female; registered nurses are 97 percent female; elementary schoolteachers are 84 percent female; cleaning and household service workers are 98 percent female; clerks are 86 percent female. These occupations accordingly pay less than male-dominated occupations such as truck driver, plumber, janitor, mail carrier, and meat cutter. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports a high inverse relationship between the percentage of women in a profession and that profession's annual earnings. Industries with a high percentage of female employees tend to have low average hourly earnings. The National Academy of Sciences summarizes its findings on the persistent wage gap between men and women in this way: "Not only do women do different work than men, but also the work women do is paid less, and the more an occupation is dominated by women, the less it pays."

This seems a clear indication that something has gone very wrong in how our society values the work women do. But what exactly has gone wrong? Are there serious moral problems in the way wage scales and pay rates are determined, with how we reward labor force participants for the work they do? Or do the problems arise external to the labor market, in some features of the larger society that ramify throughout our system of wages and benefits?

**Free Choices in Free Markets**

What principles govern the distribution of shares in our society? Are these principles just? How can we use them to account for the lesser shares that continue to accrue to women?

Ours is basically a market economy, where income is not distributed according to any set formula ("to each according to need, merit, effort"), but where individuals beginning from different starting points, with different initial bundles of aptitudes, interests, and tastes, make different choices about how to produce, consume, save, and invest. If they produce, consume, save, and invest in a way that is on balance beneficial to others, as perceived by those others, market mechanisms ideally ensure that they benefit accordingly.

Philosopher Ronald Dworkin, writing in *Liberalism Reconsidered*, believes that an idealized market economy fulfills the requirement that a just state treat its citizens as equals. Treating people equally cannot simply require giving them equal shares, for this would disregard the way individuals' choices may increase or diminish the total pool of shares, and so would essentially treat people unequally. Instead, people are treated equally if they have, "at any point in their lives, different amounts of wealth insofar as the genuine choices they have made have been more or less expensive or beneficial to the community measured by what other people want for their lives. The market seems indispensable to this principle."

In an actual market, however, not everyone is able to make optimal choices to work, consume, and save. Dworkin observes that people have very different socioeconomic starting points, as well as
different inherent capacities and abilities. They are also differently favored by luck. These factors distort the correlation between choice and reward and so make actual markets at best imperfect instruments of distributive justice.

Does this account explain the disadvantaged financial position of women in our society? If the market is supposed to reward people according to the choices they make, then either women are making the wrong choices, for whatever reason, or something has gone wrong with the mechanisms that match choice with reward.

In the first view, some jobs are going to be low-paying, dead-end jobs whoever does them, and the problem is that women keep on choosing these jobs. Women themselves may opt for less important and valuable work, perhaps because their self-image and career expectations have been shaped by a sexist society. More likely, women may have the wrong choices made for them, in that their range of choice remains severely limited by employment discrimination.

In the second view, women are making choices "beneficial to the community, measured in terms of what other people want for their lives," but the market has failed to reward them accordingly. "Women's work" is not necessarily low-paying, reflecting its lower social value—instead, the work women do is undervalued because it is done by women.

Of course, some combination of the two views may be true. It may be that women are involuntarily shunted into certain professions, which then become low-paying because they are occupied by women. Both views may contain necessary components of a full explanation of the disadvantaged economic status of women, and the remedies appropriate to both may be called for if justice is to be done.

**Employment Discrimination and Job Mobility**

It is incontrovertible that our society channels women into certain types of work. Nurtured by an educational system that discourages girls from developing mathematical and technical skills and a culture that calls strength and assertiveness "unladylike," women at the same time confront a work force that still assigns entry positions on the basis of sex. University of Maryland economist Barbara Bergmann attributes much of the male-female pay gap to initial job assignment: "Most of the damage is done the first day a person walks into the employment office." Women, but not men, are still asked to take a typing test; women sales clerks are stationed at the candy counter, while the men are assigned the high-ticket heavy appliances, at higher wages. Given the prevailing pattern of job shunting, Bergmann concludes, "Very few employers could not be found guilty" of illegal job discrimination.

One solution to job segregation is to enhance women's job mobility by educating and training them to enter "men's" fields and legally enforcing their equal access to these fields, as well as monitoring the sexual harassment women encounter on entering previously male territory. If our society pays secretaries less than truck drivers, let the secretaries drive trucks. Move women out of women's fields into men's fields, where they can earn men's wages.

Several factors suggest, however, that this strategy cannot by itself do economic justice to women. In the first place, as Eleanor Holmes Norton, former head of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, notes, there just are not enough male jobs to go around. "Integration of men's occupations by women will someday reach limits beyond which it is unlikely to proceed apace if wage rates continue to offer disincentives to men to enter traditional female occupations." The one-way herding of women into male occupations only overcrowds those fields, causing a corresponding drop in wages.

Furthermore, enhanced job mobility is of little comfort to women who have already made considerable career investments in nursing, teaching, librarianship, or other fields that require long periods of education and specialized professional training. It is hard to ask such women to abandon their lifework for unskilled male work or male work that requires very different skills.

Nor would such a move be in society's best interests. Norton points out, "The vital jobs performed chiefly by women in this society—nursing, teaching, clerical work, and the like—are indispensable. Although individual women may profit personally and professionally there is no net gain for our society when people who might be nurses feel they must become doctors." Nor, one assumes, is there a gain when people who might be nurses feel they must become parking-garage attendants.

Finally, if the crucial importance of women's jobs in our society suggests that these jobs are undervalued only because they are held by women, why should women be asked to change their choices, rather than society asked to change how it rewards those choices? Why should the nurse have to park cars, rather than receive equitable remuneration for the expertise she brings to the vital task of healing society's sick?

**Wage Discrimination and Pay Equity**

Evidence abounds that women's low pay by and large cannot be construed as a response to market forces. Labor lawyer Winn Newman says flatly, "Supply and demand appear to have little effect on the
wages of female-dominated professions." The American Hospital Association's recent figures estimate hospital nursing vacancies at between sixty-five thousand and seventy thousand nationwide, while nurses' salaries remain depressed. Newman cites the example of a severe shortage of nurses at St. Luke's Hospital in Milwaukee, which resulted not in any wage increases, but in the importation of nurses from Great Britain, at considerable expense in advertising and recruitment. That nurses are paid less than (primarily male) physician's assistants, who exercise similar skill, experience, and responsibility, cannot be explained by saying that the physician's assistants made better choices than the nurses did.

If we cannot rely on the usual processes of hiring and wage-setting to alter the disparities between the wages of men and women, what is to be done?

One approach that has aroused considerable interest in the past few years attempts to tie women's wages directly to the value or worth of their work. Women should receive the same pay, it is argued, as men who are doing jobs of comparable worth. This approach makes the concept of job-worth its starting point. It could be applied within firms or throughout the economy, depending on the ambitions of its proponents.

The worth of a job might be conceived in a number of different ways. 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. Managing people, it is claimed, is as intrinsically valuable as managing property (though the latter is generally better paid).

That worth can be conceived of in a variety of ways is, according to its opponents, the central problem with the comparable-worth approach. They claim that no philosophically nonarbitrary way exists to single out and make operational a conception of worth applicable across jobs and across firms. The effort to discover the real worth of a job is as doomed to failure as medieval efforts to construct a theory of "just price."

Proponents of the comparable-worth approach reply that two-thirds of all Americans are now paid on the basis of some kind of job evaluation plan. Ranking the worth of jobs does not seem an insuperable task. But existing intra-firm job evaluation plans provide no common, independent criteria of value. Most current plans are designed to be "policy-capturing," that is, to systematize and rationalize established features of the job and wage policies already in practice.

A less far-reaching approach to closing the gender wage gap keeps a focus on the concept of discrimination as the heart of the problem and works to apply this concept more broadly. Rather than propose new job evaluation systems that link wages with "real" worth, it attacks existing job practices that link wages discriminatorily with gender. Its initial targets are wages that are on their face discriminatory and evaluation systems tailored to achieve a discriminatory effect.

In the 1940s, for example, Westinghouse assigned point values to all company jobs on an equal basis. Where jobs filled by women had the same point value as jobs filled by men, however, the company adopted the policy of paying the women at a 20 percent lower rate. This overt and deliberate discrimination was legal when it was done. When Westinghouse revised its compensation system in the 1960s after the enactment of the Civil Rights Act, instead of revising the women's wages to bring them into accord with the evaluation scheme, it downgraded the evaluation of all women's jobs to make them match their level of pay. This is only the most egregious form of wage discrimination.

Some firms classify men's and women's jobs equally on their point scale but pay women less. On other occasions, firms' job evaluations themselves seem to betray their valuing work less just because women do it—as when female prison guards in Oregon are paid less than male guards because their duties involve, in addition to supervising prisoners, typing as well.

Bergmann suggests one approach to identifying this kind of wage discrimination without ascertaining the worth of different jobs. On the assumption that women, just like men, generally prefer more money to less, and greater rather than lesser prospects for career advancement, the suspicion of discrimination is triggered whenever women are paid less than similarly qualified men. According to Bergmann, people with the same qualifications, training, and experience should be receiving the same return on their "human capital"—"In a non-discriminatory set-up, identical people should be paid identically." The key concept here is not comparability of jobs, but interchangeability of workers. The remedy, then, to a firm's wage discrimination might appropriately be the requirement of a wage adjustment. If a nursing supervisor could do the work of the hospital's higher-paid purchasing agent, then her wages should be the same as his.

What Is It Going to Cost?

Opponents of pay equity for women frequently claim that the costs of equity will be more than our economic system is willing or able to bear. Fortune magazine went so far as to say that "At the extreme, to raise the aggregate pay of the country's 27.3 million full-time working women high enough... would add a staggering
$150 billion a year to civilian payrolls. Such a radical step, of course, seems too preposterous to be taken seriously."

Proponents of pay equity charge instead that such radical cost estimates are too preposterous to be taken seriously. Certainly, the costs incurred would vary widely depending on the scope of the approach chosen. But the economic costs of remedying overt discrimination should not prove staggering. Employers and business interests have a long history of protesting that fair treatment of workers will result in massive economic disruption. Similar claims were made preceding the abolition of child labor and the establishment of the minimum wage, and none of the dire predictions came to pass. Furthermore, cost is simply not an acceptable excuse for breaking the law, and workplace discrimination based on sex is now, quite simply, illegal.

A related charge is that pay equity will end up harming the very women it is intended to protect—by driving up women's wages it will reduce women's employment. This charge, however, seems largely groundless. As Norton explains, "If there's work to be done, the work is still going to have to be done, even if you have to pay more for it." Women's jobs are not jobs that we as a society can easily do without. Indeed, the argument for pay equity is premised on the assumption that women are doing valuable work that just happens to be underpaid because it is done by women.

Some argue, moreover, that pay equity in the end may save society money, by reducing the number of women and female-headed families living on federal assistance. Social scientists in recent years have documented what they call the "feminization of poverty": One in three families headed by a woman is poor; nearly half of all poor families are headed by a woman; two out of five single mothers trying to raise a family are likely to be poor. It is estimated that if women were paid the wages that similarly qualified men earn, we could cut the number of families in poverty in half.

When we consider that 93 percent of all welfare recipients are women and their children, that 70 percent of all food stamps recipients are women, and that two-thirds of all legal services and Medicaid recipients are women, our choice seems an easy one. We can pay women fair wages for doing work that needs to be done or deny them adequate wages and pay instead through our welfare programs. Surely the first approach makes more sense for a society that prides itself on treating all its members as equals.


Views were drawn from the following sources: Ronald Dworkin, from "Neutrality, Equality, and Liberalism," in Liberalism Reconsidered, ed. Douglas MacLean and Claudia Mills, Maryland Studies in Public Philosophy (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983); Barbara Bergmann, from "The Economics of Compensation Claims under Title VII," by Barbara R. Bergmann and Mary W. Gray, Department of Economics and Bureau of Business and Economic Research, University of Maryland, Working Paper No. 1983-3, and from an interview conducted by the author; Winn Newman, from his congressional testimony in Pay Equity; Eleanor Holmes Norton, from her testimony in Pay Equity and from an interview with the author.