5 Gender and Class in Comparable Worth
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Of all the charges leveled against feminism . . . probably nothing rankles more than the well-worn accusation that it is ‘just a middle class movement’. I used to have a half-dozen rebuttals ready at hand . . . But I have begun to think that it does matter.


Comparable worth has been praised as ‘potentially the most important development affecting women workers in American history’ (Freeman and Leonard, 1985, p. 2). And in the USA much has been written about this potential from a public policy perspective, discussing such issues as methodologies to measure wage inequities (Beatty and Beatty, 1984; Steinberg and Haignere, 1987; Treiman, 1979, 1984), costs of implementation (NCPE, 1984), and legal approaches for fighting through the courts (Heen 1984; Dean et al., 1984). However, in addition to its policy implications, comparable worth can have important political and ideological effects, transforming working women’s awareness of class and gender inequality. This, in turn, can have important ramifications for the American women’s movement. It will be the purpose of this chapter to focus on this less directly practical side of comparable worth, to place the issue within the larger context of feminist politics in the USA. In particular, the political and ideological effects will be examined in the two local comparable-worth campaigns which I studied in California.

As many social movement scholars have noted, the US women’s movement has tended to be an élite movement with a primary constituency of middle- to upper-class, white, highly educated women (Carden, 1974, 1978; Eisenstein, 1981; Freeman, 1975). Although it tends to frame its issues as in the interests of all women, and to express concern consistently for
all groups of women, the liberal feminism which predominates in the USA has done little for less affluent women. Nonetheless, overlooking this class limitation, analysts such as sociologist Carol Mueller (1987) and political scientist Joyce Gelb (1987) argue that American feminism should be considered successful because it has raised national awareness of gender issues and created widespread agreement with its central tenets, including 'equal pay for equal work'. Yet, as others point out (Katzenstein, 1987), compared with less-popular European movements, American feminism has gained few of the substantive benefits which working women so desperately need. Moreover, working-class and black women, whose agreement with feminist principles is quite high, tend to have a low sense of inclusion within the movement (Klein, 1987).

I argue that comparable worth has the potential to enlarge the base of the American feminist movement. Although it derives much of its rhetoric from liberal feminism, it also addresses and benefits women in a particular class location - the poorly paid, traditionally female jobs of the pink-collar ghetto. However, real differences of interest persist among women in spite of their shared gender. These differences have characterised the history of the struggle for women’s rights. In addition, these conflicts affect the success and the shape of contemporary comparable-worth efforts.

THE HISTORICAL STRUGGLE

In the USA, the history of class divisions behind women’s rights issues and conflict over which women feminism should represent dates back, at least, to the end of the suffrage era and the winning of the vote for women in 1920. During the struggle for the vote, trade-union women worked with elite suffrage groups like the National Women’s Party and played a major role in the campaign to pass the 19th Amendment, the amendment to the Constitution which granted women the right to vote (Foner, 1980, pp. 56–60). (Unfortunately, this alliance did not extend to black women; white suffrage leaders were willing to use racist tactics in the Southern states [Giddings, 1984]). After the passage of the 19th Amendment such coalitions broke down, as unionists and élite groups developed competing approaches to