ANOTHER LOOK AT COMPARABLE WORTH'S IMPACT ON BLACK WOMEN

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In a 1986 article in the Review, Julianne Malveaux discussed the use of a comparable worth strategy for improving the economic position of black women (and men). In this response, the authors point out that some occupational channeling occurs prior to labor market entry and also suggest economic factors that could lead to reduced economic opportunity for some women as a result of the implementation of a comparable worth policy.

In a recent special issue of this Review, Julianne Malveaux argues that a comparable worth policy would afford clear-cut gains to black women. Black men would also benefit, since they are overrepresented in “typically-female” occupations. We commend Malveaux for including explicitly in her analysis the different effects comparable worth would have on black and white women; by recognizing these different effects Malveaux makes an important contribution to the comparable worth literature. We further commend Malveaux for acknowledging some of the limitations of the comparable worth strategy.

We argue however, that in neither of these points does Malveaux go far enough. We agree that comparable worth is limited in the potential benefits it can provide for black women (and black men and white women). But we believe the potential benefits are limited because comparable worth is, in many ways, an irrelevant strategy due to its failure to address the fundamental source of pay inequities. Furthermore, when differences among black women, as well as between black and white women, are accounted for, comparable worth is revealed as a potentially counterproductive strategy.
In this discussion, we argue that comparable worth is irrelevant because it does not address the discrimination that takes place prior to entry into the labor market. We also examine three indirect effects of implementation of a comparable worth policy; we conclude that effects on racial and gender pay equity may be much more ambiguous than Malveaux maintains. While we offer no new empirical evidence, we do suggest several hypotheses that should be tested before comparable worth is either embraced wholeheartedly or rejected completely.

Women earn less than do men. Bureau of Labor Statistics data, for example, show that 1984 median weekly earnings of women averaged 35.2 percent less than those of men. Why do such patterns of pay inequity exist? Malveaux asserts that the answer lies in gender discrimination: "... researchers agree that a portion of the wage gaps can be explained only by gender (and not by differences in education, occupation, or other factors)." It is important to remember, however, that gender discrimination is not the only source of the pay gap. A recent survey by Cain found that no study was able to explain more than half of the difference between male and female earnings without incorporating some variable(s) representing the worker's occupation; that is, discrimination alone could explain no more than half of the pay differences in any of the studies reviewed.

Cain's survey is a reminder that statistical studies must be interpreted with caution because no statistical study ever can prove definitively that any of the wage gap is caused by gender discrimination. The reason is that while gender discrimination may well exist, it is most likely to manifest itself not as wage discrimination but as occupational segregation. Malveaux gives short shrift to the argument of "some economic theorists" that "women 'supply' their labor to segregated occupations, choosing to work for lower pay because they 'protect' themselves from problems they may face by leaving the labor force for childbearing and attempting to reenter later." The point is an important one that merits more than passing mention.

Why don't women leave low-paying jobs for higher-paying jobs for which they are equally qualified? If women choose to be nurses at wages lower than, for example, those of computer programmers, we can infer that there must be something nurses like about the occupation even though the pay is low. We must examine nonwage characteristics of jobs as well as the money wage. Such nonwage characteristics as flexible working hours, availability of part-time work, and ease of entry into and exit from the workplace can make certain low-wage jobs desirable; indeed, these