

POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF THE COMPARABLE WORTH MOVEMENT

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The emergence and growth of the comparable worth or pay-equity movement in the United States in the last six years signals a major shift in strategies for women's economic advancement—away from affirmative action strategies aimed at job integration, toward upgrading conditions for gender-segregated work itself. Although much has been written on comparable worth from technical and structural perspectives, my research explores a different set of questions. From qualitative research on two California localities, I ask what the issue represents to those involved and how they perceive their interests. As a political movement, comparable worth overcomes the narrow base of affirmative action. While building on the rising expectations affirmative action encouraged, comparable worth helps improve job conditions without attacking the gendered division of labor. However, comparable worth does not unite all women, it pits women against men of the same class, and may exacerbate the plight of women in the lowest level of the economy. Nevertheless, as an interim strategy, it is a worthy feminist goal, particularly as it addresses the concerns of working-class women.

In spite of two decades of agitation by the feminist movement in the United States for women's equality, including the enactment of major antidiscrimination legislation, the majority of employed women remain in low-paid, highly gender-segregated work. Remedial strategies for occupational gender stratification have shifted from affirmative action to comparable worth or pay-equity demands.

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Affirmative action proved successful primarily for more privileged women, as it opened professional and managerial job opportunities. It also brought women into some new civil service positions, and a very limited number of craft positions, but affirmative action did little for most women working in lower-level white-or pink-collar jobs. Pay equity will certainly not bring full economic equality but it does address the concerns of those low-paid women who still represent the majority of women workers. In this article, I will discuss both the challenge and the limitations of the comparable worth movement.

Academic literature on comparable worth has been primarily concerned with pay-equity implementation, its legal status (Blumrosen 1979; Nelson 1980), methodologies for comparing different jobs (Beatty and Beatty 1984; Northrup 1980; Schwab 1985; Treiman 1984), and the determinants of the gender wage gap (summarized in Treiman and Hartmann 1981, pp. 13-68). Alternatively, I examine comparable worth as a social and political movement, asking what it represents to those involved and to their interests.

This article is drawn from a study of two California public sector cases, Contra Costa County and the city of San Jose. I conducted 60 interviews with participants and examined archival and documentary evidence. From these two case studies, I make three claims:

- (1) Comparable worth can better advance women economically and challenge the economic structure because it emerged out of affirmative action's limitations.
- (2) Comparable worth appeals to women whose interests were not furthered by affirmative action and whose job conditions would not necessarily have been bettered by occupational change or an attack on gender boundary lines in the labor market.
- (3) Comparable worth is itself limited by tensions underlying its formulation. A strategy that is gender-specific yet collectively oriented has led to an awkward, perhaps contradictory, combination of affirmative action-civil rights and collective bargaining-labor union strategies.

COMPARABLE WORTH AND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Affirmative action's purpose is the creation of equal employment opportunities for women and minorities. Originating as an integral part of the U.S. black civil rights movement of the 1960s, affirmative

action policies recommend deliberate recruitment, hiring, and promotion of underutilized groups, with goals and timetables for job integration. Women were originally secondary to policies for racial integration, but affirmative action was increasingly used by the feminist movement throughout the 1970s to promote women's occupational advancement.

In the United States, affirmative action has directly benefited women who have been able to move into highly rewarded professional, managerial, and craft jobs dominated by men. However, such categories account for a small percentage of women in the U.S. labor force. Women's representation in managerial jobs increased from 18 percent to 30 percent in just one decade, but these jobs account for only 7 percent of women in the U.S. labor force (Bianchi and Spain 1983). Similarly, while the proportion of professional degrees awarded to women in law and medicine has gone from under 10 percent to one-third (Greer 1986; U.S. Department of Labor 1983), on an aggregate level, very few women are employed in these elite fields in the United States. Such gains have contributed to a popular impression that all barriers to women's advancement have been removed, but the tenacity and pervasiveness of the gender segregation of work, even in the face of affirmative action efforts, is well documented (Bielby and Baron 1984; Roos and Reskin 1984). Clearly any notion that job integration policies would benefit large numbers of low-paid women has proven to be overly optimistic.

Although it had limited results, affirmative action legitimated women's specifically gender-based moral claim to improved economic treatment and created political opportunities for raising such a claim. The emergence of the comparable worth strategy can, in fact, be seen as the result of the rising expectations and political opportunities created by affirmative action, in the face of the lack of material gains for most employed women. Comparable worth aims to upgrade the wage scales for jobs that employ large numbers of women and therefore has the potential to provide benefits on a far broader scale than affirmative action. Comparable worth expands the collective character of affirmative action class-action suits based upon employers' patterned discrimination. While affirmative action challenged the allocation of jobs on the basis of stereotypical gender traits, comparable worth challenges the allocation of rewards on the basis of such traits. It thus extends the notion of discrimination to include the

systematic underevaluation and underpayment of the work women do.

The pay-equity suit against the state of Washington, argued on behalf of 15,000 state employees in the federal courts, provided the first clear legal victory for comparable worth. This victory was short-lived, but the political effects have been more resilient. The 1983 ruling of Judge Tanner called for the distribution of nearly one billion dollars in damages and back pay, in addition to 30 percent pay adjustments for jobs in which women predominate (*New York Times* 1985), but this decision was overturned by the Federal Appeals Court in 1985. Nevertheless, Washington State still agreed to spend \$42 million for pay-equity adjustments in the next contract year (Kirp 1985), and when employees agreed not to appeal the case any further, state officials consented to pay over \$100 million in future adjustments (Turner 1986). By battling this case for the past decade, employees had built up political power and popular backing so that despite its legal victory, the state government was willing to negotiate a substantial settlement.

Many other public employers are being faced with the pay-equity issue. Several major cities, including Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, have agreed to implement wage adjustments (*National NOW Times* 1986, 1987). The California State Employees Association has a wage discrimination suit pending against that state (*New York Times* 1984), and all but four states have taken some form of action. New York State, for example, although facing a contentious political situation, has moved haltingly forward. In 1986, unions negotiated a three-year contract that allocated funds for comparable worth adjustments to more than 50,000 employees in jobs predominantly held by women (Lawson 1985).

Many of these efforts have progressed to preliminary stages only and are merely documenting the existence of wage disparity. And other efforts that have succeeded in winning some wage adjustments may still face a difficult political future, in which opposing interests may be able to cut into initial gains. Yet the comparable worth argument has changed feminist thinking about advancement strategies and has demonstrated a strong appeal to low-paid women who want their contributions recognized. As one California activist stated: "Comparable worth has been called the issue of the '80's, and it may not be. It may be the issue of the '90's. But comparable worth is here to stay—it's not just yesterday's fashion!" (Finney 1986).

THE APPEAL OF COMPARABLE WORTH

In two comparable worth cases, I have been able to trace the emergence of the issue from the limits of affirmative action. San Jose, located 50 miles south of San Francisco, is often considered the prototypical case of comparable worth. After a much-watched strike in 1981, it became the site of one of the first victories for pay equity in the United States. San Jose, the fourth largest city in California, employs approximately 900 women, 700 of whom received pay-equity adjustments (Farnquist et al. 1983). Over half of the women employees work in clerical jobs, and the majority of the rest are in the women's semiprofessions (City of San Jose 1984).

Contra Costa County, located on the northeastern edge of San Francisco Bay, has recently begun to implement an incremental pay-equity program. Contra Costa employs approximately 3,500 women, 2,300 of whom are covered by the pay-equity program. As in San Jose, the women covered work in clerical and semiprofessional jobs (Finney 1983).

In 1975, Contra Costa County settled a sex and race discrimination lawsuit with an affirmative action consent decree that set goals and timetables to increase the representation of women and minorities. San Jose implemented a similar affirmative action plan in the early 1970s. In both cases affirmative action significantly increased the representation of women in management, but a larger number of low-paid women experienced a frustrating lack of mobility.

In San Jose, this frustration led directly to several confrontations between clericals and personnel officials and to the clericals' first attempts at autonomous collective action in a group they called City Women for Advancement. In an interview, one of the early activists explained why clerical women were frustrated by affirmative action. She said:

In spite of affirmative action, the city did not allow any kind of experience substitution for the education requirement for the professional-level jobs. And it was very obvious to some of us, the clerical people who were working next to professional people, that we were really more competent than they, and there was no reason that we couldn't handle those jobs just as well. So they made a new classification, called administrative aide, that was supposed to be an entry-level professional position. And they worded requirements such that they

didn't really tie in that you absolutely needed the four-year [college] degree. So we applied for the jobs, about 20, maybe 30 clericals, we all applied for the job. We actually had several informal meetings and we decided to apply for the job. And we were all turned down—they disqualified all of us from taking the exam. So we appealed to the Civil Service Commission. And in appealing to the Commission, I drafted a letter to various women's groups in the area, NOW, the Santa Clara County Commission on the Status of Women, the Human Relations Commission, and asked that they send letters of support. We outlined that we have over 300 years of clerical experience and that we felt that this was sufficient qualification for the position. And that we should at least be allowed to test. And so several groups did respond, which I'm sure helped. And the Civil Service Commission ultimately did decide that in certain clerical classifications experience could be equated for the education—mine was not one of them however!

After this attempt to gain upward mobility, the members of City Women for Advancement focused on the low wages of clerical jobs compared with many jobs held by men. In 1977, however, the clericals' group still presented comparable worth as an affirmative action recommendation. Their report to the city council, "Affirmative Action for City Women," included among traditional affirmative action concerns a new request, for women's jobs to be paid on other than marketplace criteria. A year later, as a somewhat symbolic gesture, City Women, now working with the union, an affiliate of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, requested 27.5 percent increases for all clericals based on rough comparisons with men's pay scales.

In Contra Costa County, women clericals also struggled for promotions, but union activism, perhaps arising from the area's working-class culture, came much earlier. In San Jose, clerical activism had coincided with the emergent comparable worth issue; in Contra Costa, an autonomous clerical union had been demanding both wage and career-ladder changes since 1970, but the official affirmative action plan adopted in Contra Costa in 1975 did little to meet these demands.

Like the clericals in San Jose, the Contra Costa clerical union had pressed for affirmative action strategies to increase their mobility out of low-paid work. These strategies included increased career ladders within clerical series to create some higher-paid positions and

opportunities for promotion. Another strategy was the creation of bridge classifications, intermediary positions to bridge clerical women into some professional job classes, primarily in accounting. These demands were so important that, as one union staff member put it, among women workers "*the* buzzword prior to comparable worth was bridge class." A Contra Costa activist said ruefully, "One of the clerical union's proudest accomplishments is that a few of our older members made it into the accounting series. But this was our only real success with affirmative action." Mobility opportunities for clerks were still very limited. An accounting clerk explained why:

The number of openings is very few, so even if you're now eligible to apply, your chances are very slim. I've taken all the night courses, and have waited years, but I still haven't even made it into the bridge class.

As in San Jose, frustration with blocked mobility provoked comparisons with the wages in the jobs held by men and led the Contra Costa union to embrace comparable worth after the success of the San Jose strike. As a leading clerical activist in the County explained:

I joined the union as soon as I took a county job. But I had been fairly naive regarding male/female differentials. The comparable worth issue came up when San Jose went on strike. I became a lot more enlightened, and pretty outraged.

The other major occupational group involved in the comparable worth efforts are the women semiprofessionals (Etzioni 1969); in San Jose, librarians and recreation supervisors; in Contra Costa, nurses and social workers. College-educated or credentialed, and thus relatively more privileged than clericals, women semiprofessionals nonetheless face career trajectories and earnings that dead-end at low levels. Affirmative action, with its suggestion that mobility is achieved only by moving into traditional men's occupations, has a pejorative connotation to those who have invested in traditional women's fields. As one San Jose librarian explained:

The city has said: "What we really think we need to do in the long run is to get all the women into these male occupations." Well, then *who the heck* is gonna do all the other jobs that are important! What they're really saying is that our jobs are not important, whereas we say they are!

In a similar vein, a Contra Costa social worker had this to say:

I believe in affirmative action, but they say women should move into male jobs if they want more pay. I like being a social worker. I just don't want to be a truck driver!

The appeal of comparable worth for women semiprofessionals is thus very clear. As one comparable worth activist told me:

I started in the library ten years ago. We'd say we wanted to raise our salaries, and they'd say [and here she imitated the feigned innocence of city administrators]: "Okay, sure, fine. What are librarians in the next jurisdiction getting?" [She laughed softly.] Well, of course, we are all getting coolie wages, so there was no sense comparing me to another coolie in another jurisdiction!

I don't want to leave librarianship to make an adequate salary. Why is that [other] field more financially rewarding and less emotionally satisfying, less intellectually satisfying? The only explanation I can come up with is because it's [library work] run by women, and that's why it's not valued.

TRADITIONAL JOBS AND WOMEN'S INTERESTS

Comparable worth may be more attractive than affirmative action to many working women because they may stand to lose from greater job integration. Giving up the monopoly of semiprofessional and clerical jobs could entail negative consequences, and some women may prefer traditional jobs.

The semiprofessions have been viewed as desirable jobs for women. Teaching, nursing, librarianship, and social work supposedly reflect women's altruism and nurturing talents. While women in these fields may want to discard the pejorative aspects of such stereotypes, many enjoy the positive aspects of such work. Its fulfilling nature, the variety and autonomy on the job, and the sense of significant human interaction were personally important to the semiprofessionals I spoke with. Even when promotions might have been possible, several said that they would not be interested in giving up the direct involvement with their clients in exchange for administrative duties. That women, under current gender arrangements, may have a less instrumental moral orientation and stronger preference for nurturant, humane work than men is suggested by the work of

several feminist theorists, notably Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Carol Gilligan (1982).

As Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977) has noted, many women in traditional secretarial positions also gain a sense of fulfillment from the one-on-one relationship between boss and secretary. The secretary to the director of a large convention facility run by the city of San Jose said she enjoys her job very much, which she describes as: "keeping track of him [the director] and his calendar, filling in for him because he's gone a lot, and speaking for him." She told me that she knows her boss well, and that the one-on-one relationship with him is the best part of her job; yet she and 12 other women vociferously protested the question on the test for promotion that asked: "Would you run errands for the boss' wife?"

Another clerical worker also told me how much she likes the office environment, but how underpaid she has been for her skills. She explained that a lot of the men she worked for had not been aware of how little the women made. When the comparable worth issue came up, they were shocked by their secretary's low pay scales, because, as she remarked: "We take something with poor grammar and no punctuation, and we make it into something wonderful. We make them look good, and they know it."

Of course, many clerical workers do not work in situations of enriching one-on-one relationships, but in pools bearing closer resemblance to production work. However, even jobs with a high degree of intrinsic job satisfaction do not compensate for low pay. The comparable worth movement has, in fact, been most successful among women public agency workers who have such satisfying jobs.

Women may also feel comparable worth is in their interest while affirmative action is not, because with job integration they would have to compete with men for jobs they now monopolize. Women's jobs represent an increasing share of the economy, while sectors providing traditional men's jobs are contracting (Cain 1985; Sacks 1986; Smith 1984). As in the past, fluid boundaries between men's and women's work could end with men supplanting women (Milkman 1981). Two recent case studies of affirmative action indicate that such displacement of women workers is a possibility (Hacker 1982; Kelley 1982). In contrast, there is evidence that rigid gender segregation has in the past protected women from being displaced in times of economic contraction (Milkman 1976).

Job integration, the goal of affirmative action, may lead to subtle forms of domination and occupational gender typing (Bielby and Baron 1984). For example, a public health nurse said she would prefer that men stay out of nursing altogether and that the current gender segregation continue. The male nurses she has known act just like "little doctors," and she went into public health primarily to get away from that type of domination. She added: "I don't want to compete with men. I just don't want them to be around." For this nurse, the integration of her field threatens the autonomy she enjoys in her work, and the respect with which her group of coworkers, all women, treat each other. A librarian explained that the few male librarians tended to specialize in business reference or audiovisual departments, leaving women to the supposedly less important areas such as the children's department. Such internal gender stratification is difficult to address when concealed within newly integrated job categories.

Job integration may not lead to upward mobility if an occupation is downgraded as women enter. Clerical work in the early part of this century is the classic example (Davies 1979; Massachusetts History Workshop 1984), and teaching and librarianship have followed similar patterns (Feldberg 1984). Occupations in the insurance and computer fields, which many women entered in the 1970s are also undergoing deskilling and loss of status (Donato 1986; Phipps 1986). A rise in the proportion of women and concurrent job degradation may even be occurring within management, law, and medicine (Carter and Carter 1981). Comparable worth can be a defense against the feminization-degradation trend by keeping wages stable when the gender composition of an occupation shifts and by making transparent the degree to which any job is undervalued if it is performed predominantly by women.

In sum, job integration, even if it were to occur on a larger scale, might not lead to improved conditions for many women workers at this time. It might result in job loss, more subtle forms of gender typing and domination, and even job degradation. For some women, to change occupations might require the sacrifice of job satisfaction. Comparable worth has become an attractive strategy for low-paid women workers because, I argue, it resonates more deeply with their interests. Better pay for a stable, satisfying, long-accepted type of work may be a wiser strategy for many women workers than a direct attack on the gendered occupational structure.

THE LIMITATIONS OF COMPARABLE WORTH

As it has struggled toward more effective strategies, the comparable worth movement has employed a range of approaches, from litigation and legislation to collective bargaining. These approaches produce tensions and contradictions, especially as comparable worth proponents move beyond the limitations of affirmative action. There are three contradictions in the current comparable worth movement: the problem of universalizing women's gender-based interests, the problem of universalizing a classlike interest in comparable worth, and the problem of hierarchy.

Gender-Based Interests

Like affirmative action, comparable worth claims to be in the interests of all women, as women. While this claim is enormously appealing, it often breaks down in practice. In both San Jose and Contra Costa County, many nonmanagement women initially allied with management women and women in elective offices and expected these more powerful women to lead the way in implementing comparable worth. In each case, when pay-equity activists tried to act politically on the assumption that all women have a common interest in comparable worth, they met with frustration and disappointment.

In San Jose, when comparable worth was first debated, there was a woman mayor, a woman assistant city manager for personnel and labor relations, and 7 of the 10 members of the city council were women (Keppel 1981). In fact, Mayor Janet Gray Hayes was fond of referring to San Jose as "the feminist capital of the world" (Beyette 1981). From the union women's viewpoint, neither she nor the council acted on behalf of "women in general" during the prolonged battle for comparable worth. The mayor and council did not want to conduct the comparable with job evaluation study, and they resisted bargaining on implementation when the results were released. When bargaining broke down after months of recalcitrance and the strike ensued, those who had walked off their jobs over comparable worth were threatened with firing. Naturally, they questioned women city officials' feminist convictions. A union leader stated to the press: "The City wanted tokenism. . . . It was dragged kicking and screaming along the path to equality by the union" (Johnston 1981, p. 165). And one sign carried on the picket lines declared: "If I hear the

Mayor say this is the feminist capital of the world just once more, I'll puke!"

In the interviews, the contradiction of trying to retain the general interest of women was often alluded to. A recreation center director and union activist explained to me that because the assistant city manager, Sally Reed, had come up through the ranks of city employment:

A lot of the older gals out on the picket line were [saying]: "And where in the hell did you come from?" It's like all of a sudden you got up there, and now you have to play the game that there just wasn't enough money, and that's all it [opposition] was. So, it's funny because there were women with the power at that time. It wasn't a real male trip. So, on the one hand, they couldn't be putting down the plight of women's jobs, but yet they have the dollars and cents of the city budget to look out for. So there wasn't a lot of bad-mouthing of the issue, and nobody ever came out and said "Hey, that's all you should get paid."

Just recently the *This Week* [San Jose Sunday paper feature] had a thing on Sally Reed, and I read it. She was the cover article, and now she's the top county executive [in Santa Clara County]. I guess I expected just plain old empathy, a little bit more empathy. From the mayor, and from her. Wouldn't you just naturally assume that there'd be a little bit more empathy? I mean, *was she* born with a silver spoon in her mouth?

Tensions also emerged in Contra Costa County between women in power and lower-paid women employees. Because their comparable worth effort followed the San Jose strike, politicians, management, and activists in Contra Costa avoided a dramatic confrontation. In addition, Contra Costa has proportionally fewer women at the top levels of government. With the two women members of five on the board of supervisors and no women at the highest levels of management, it could hardly be considered a feminist capital. Not only were there fewer women politicians to be disappointed by, but the conservative and sometimes blatantly sexist men in the county government were a more obvious target.

Women politicians who did fight for comparable worth were not, however, trusted by lower-level women employees. One of the women supervisors, who made comparable worth "her issue" on the heels of the San Jose strike, became very visible statewide as an advocate of pay equity. A union activist and member of the labor side of the joint

labor-management comparable worth task force told me that although she first saw Sunne McPeak as a strong ally, she now views her with suspicion. She explained:

There's a lot of a sense of ownership of the comparable worth issue. Women in management and political leadership feel they're special and do not accept collective action. They don't want to be contaminated with a labor association. Women in politics see their own political futures in comparable worth. Sunne is going around the country claiming *her* success on this issue when, by the county's own figures, there's still a 33 percent wage gap.

Women in powerful management and political positions have often been credited with the success of pay equity. In contrast to the labor women quoted above, Carol Mueller (1985) and Janet Flammang (1985) have specifically argued that without a network of women in leadership positions throughout the San Jose area, the comparable worth contract in that city would not have been possible. Similarly, Elaine Johansen (1984) claims that the development of a core of elite women, sophisticated in using political resources, has led to the success of the comparable worth issue in other cases. Although elite women may truly support the ideal of pay equity, this "elite female network" perspective ignores the potential for competing definitions of success, as it overlooks the conflicting interests among women in different institutional and class locations. Problems can arise over the difficult realities of implementation, and, as is evident in these two cases, all sides may not agree on what constitutes a successful comparable worth policy. Women managers and elective officials, for example, may need to claim success for political and organizational purposes. However, it is not their paychecks that are at issue. As the labor activist from Contra Costa made clear, the "ownership" of comparable worth can be problematic when the differing interests among women are overlooked.

Class-Based Issues

Another point of tension within the comparable worth movement involves the attempt to construe pay equity as a labor issue and to draw a classlike alliance in contrast to a solely gender-based alliance. Comparable worth activists in both San Jose and Contra Costa tried

to build alliances with male nonmanagement employees, maintaining that pay equity could be in their interests as well. However, much of the women's anger was directed against these same men, with whom they were comparing their jobs and wages. Generally, comparable worth advocates reject any suggestion to cut men's wages, but men's future wage increases may be limited or frozen. Comparable worth proponents argue that when a man has a working wife, mother, or daughter, he should realize the significance of pay equity and strongly support it, but men may feel they are targets of comparable worth, not beneficiaries, regardless of their family situation. One woman in my study separated from her husband over her involvement in the San Jose strike, and I interviewed several others who had experienced serious conflicts at home.

The anger of some women at men of the same class came across strongly in the interviews. A woman who had worked her way up over the past 20 years from a clerk-typist job to a supervisorial position in Contra Costa County told me that she had had no idea what men were actually being paid until she became a member of the negotiating team for her union. Then she said, "It really gets to you!" She continued on quite vehemently:

Window washers for the county make more than I do! A second-line supervisor of men makes \$600 a month more than I do! There's no excuse that a janitor makes more than an eligibility worker! Local One [the union for most men's jobs in Contra Costa] owns this county. And they're real male chauvinist pigs. And they've been kissed royally this year. They've been fed from *my* trough, mine and every other female-dominated job.

When I asked a San Jose secretary her opinion of comparable worth, she stalked out, seized her classification handbook, and began to read the specifications for concrete finishers to me. Then she proceeded to read the specifications for executive secretary, and their respective wages. When she was through reading she nearly screamed: "If this is comparable worth, someone's not doing their job!" She accused all men of trying to undermine existing policies, and saw the union, because it represented both men and women, as a weak ally at best. She maintained that only women could be expected to really work for comparable worth.

Hierarchy

As discussed above, some analysts have viewed comparable worth primarily as a reform "from above," implemented by networks of women political and organizational elites. Others have argued that since it involves significant collective activity by labor and subordinate women, comparable worth has radical possibilities (Amott and Matthaei, 1984; Feldberg, 1984; Moore and Marsis, 1983). Yet comparable worth's radical possibilities have been limited by its liberal, equal-treatment framework, as well as by contradictory gender and class conceptions of general interest. As Feldberg (1984) points out, while comparable worth questions the legitimacy of the market and the value of labor, it is not an attack on occupational inequality. Comparable worth reinforces the legitimacy of skill-based hierarchies of rewards. Although the movement raises the idea that the judgment of skill is politically and ideologically based (Feldberg 1984, pp. 321-24), its objective is a new hierarchy, based on a more just evaluation of work, rather than the abolition of hierarchy, or even its narrowing or compacting. In this respect, comparable worth is a striking contrast to, for example, the solidaristic wage policies pursued by Swedish labor unions (Cook 1980). In Contra Costa, the comparable worth coalition refused to accept offers that included adjustments only to the lowest end of the wage scale. In San Jose, adjustments were based on the amount of discrepancy within each point-factor score grouping, not on a job's location in the overall wage hierarchy.

In several interviews, on the other hand, I did hear stronger, egalitarian sentiments expressed. There were certainly some who said they felt comparable worth had implicit socialist or utopian goals of equality. There also was some concern for the lowest-paid clericals, not so much for the unrecognized worth of the jobs they perform, as for the fact that wages may simply fall below any decent standard of living. This egalitarian tendency did not seem to be the predominant view, nor is it in any way part of the explicit rhetoric of the comparable worth movement. Indeed, the use of the term pay *equity* itself implies the more restricted objective of an equitable or just hierarchy, as opposed to the term equality.

CONCLUSION

What are the possibilities and limits of comparable worth as a collective advancement strategy for women? Comparable worth moves beyond more individualistic affirmative action strategies of upward mobility toward an objective of collective mobility. By focusing on economic advancement for women in traditional occupational categories, comparable worth may appeal to larger numbers of working women than affirmative action did. However, comparable worth, like affirmative action, assumes a commonality of interests among women, sets up antagonism between women and men, and falls short of attacking inequality itself.

Comparable worth has the potential to be a feminist issue that appeals to working-class, low-paid women whose interests have not been directly addressed by affirmative action. However, because it also points to the divergence of interests between working women in traditional jobs and those in highly rewarded positions dominated by men, it may contribute to the declining significance of gender. In *The Declining Significance of Race*, William Julius Wilson (1978) argued that economic and political changes have led to a division between the new black middle class and the black underclass that remains impoverished. Because of this division, class is increasingly more critical than race in determining life chances. A similar development may be occurring for women—not in the sense that gender no longer matters, nor that all gender discrimination has been eliminated—but, in the class-based divergence of interests among women in the labor force, as well as between employed women and women not in the paid labor force.

Comparable worth may bring clericals and semiprofessionals employed in the public sector and core sector private firms up to middle-income levels. In the process, however, it may leave a larger gap between these new middle-class women and underclass women employed in peripheral firms, in low-paid service sector jobs, in domestic work, or unemployed. From a more pessimistic view, comparable worth might, by attracting men into better-paid women's work, push some women out. In addition, raising wages of women workers creates incentive for employers to subcontract work, use part-time and temporary workers, or eliminate jobs entirely. The structure of the capitalist economy may, in the end, erode some of the

material benefits of comparable worth, and strategies other than comparable worth will be needed to work toward greater economic equality. Nonetheless, comparable worth does question the ideology of the marketplace in the setting of wages, it reveals the systematic devaluation of the work women do, and it does promote collective action by working-class women. For these reasons, and because it may improve the life chances of many working women, it is a policy worthy of feminist support.

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