



## Equal Pay

# The Wage Gap

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**By Jennifer Baumgardner  
and Amy Richards**

**A**round the same time that it was revealed that Naomi Wolf, the feminist and author, was acting as an advisor for Al Gore and being paid \$20,000 a month, Oxygen network for women was launching its first ad campaign.



“Men,” the billboards nearly cooed, “another great reason to be a woman” or “First off the lifeboats, another great...” Although the channel is feminist, they missed the obvious corollary ads, especially: “The wage gap, another great reason to be a man.”

Equal pay for equal work is the number one benefit that women want, according to the 1999 AFL-CIO’s “Ask A Working Woman Survey” and virtually every other poll. In fact, it’s the least controversial goal of the women’s movement, the one you hear as part of the sentence “I’m not a feminist but...I believe in equal pay for equal work.”

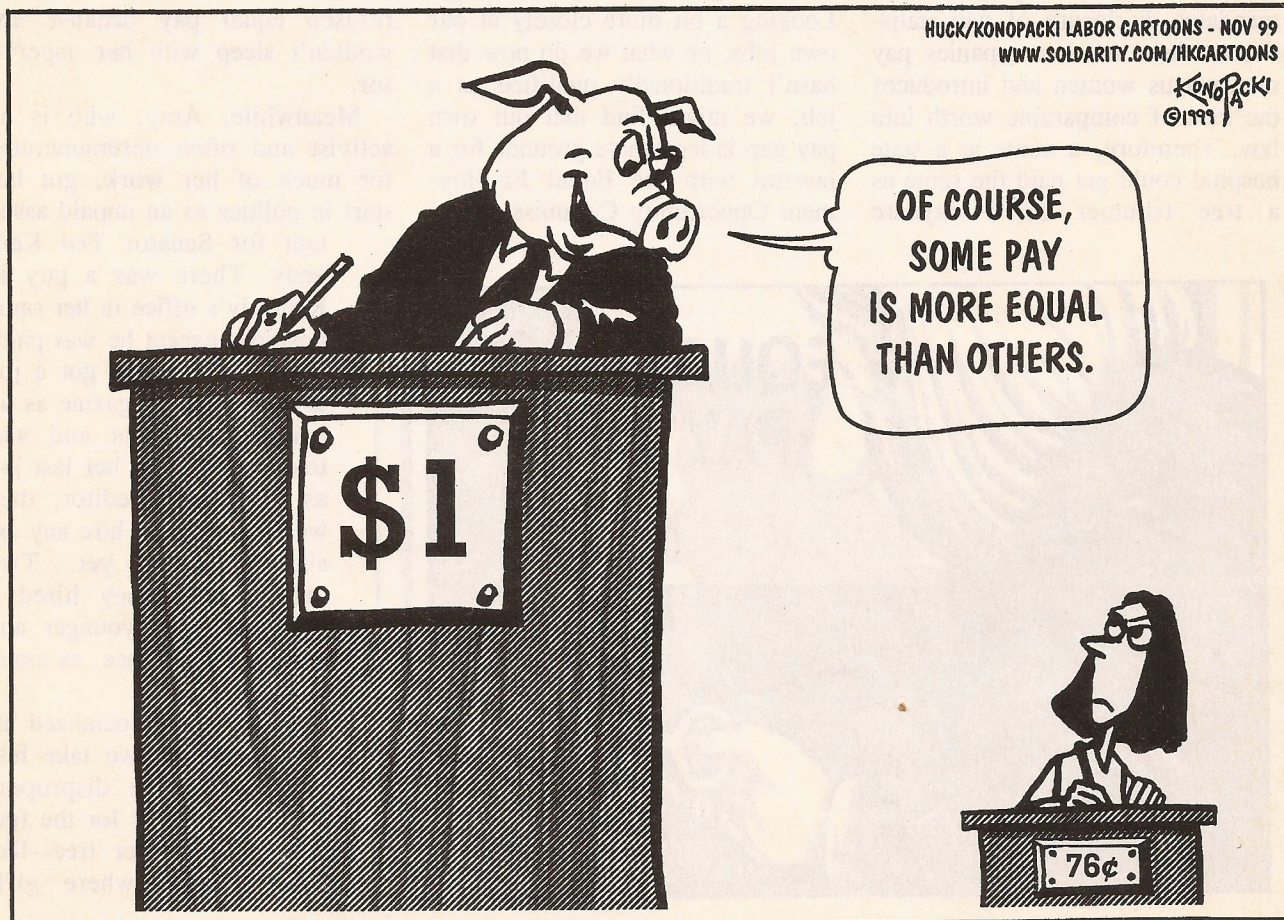
So, how are we doing? Ellen Bravo, co-director of the working women’s advocacy group 9 to 5, looked at how close we are to that goal in the December/January 2000 issue of *Ms.* and reported

that across the board women still make a lot less: 74 percent of what men make and more like 64 percent for women of color who work full-time.

Furthermore, where we are closer to parity, it’s in low wage jobs (also known as “women’s work”). Women in executive, administrative, and managerial position make 68 percent of what their male counterparts bring home while secretaries, stenographers, and typists, for example, make 90 percent of the male salary. Female general surgeons take home 77 percent of what the average male general surgeon makes while RNs make 95 percent. Legal assistants actually break the “Men Must Make More” rule with women making 104 percent of what male paralegals bring home. Of course, that’s 104 percent of \$30,000 a year—less than half of what a

male lawyer makes—\$70,200. The wage gap is right back in place for the female lawyer who makes, on average, \$49,000 (70 cents to the male dollar).

There are a variety of theories to excuse these discrepancies, among them, that women “choose” bad pay because they want flexibility to care for their families (and take more time off to do things like that) and that women haven’t been in the workforce long enough to have attained the high paying jobs. These excuses ignore the reality that hardly any women—or men—have adequate flexibility to attend to family obligations, as Bravo points out. As for tenure in the workforce, it’s hard to argue that men have much more seniority in the web world, an industry which has only been in existence for a relatively short time, but women





still make 88 percent of what men make.

When most people learn about these inequities they are uniformly and justifiably appalled. Most people thought that unequal pay went away with the Equal Pay Act of 1965 and didn't realize that the act only covered men and women in the exact same jobs (and, as evidenced by Bravo's tally, doesn't appear to be enforced).

Of course, people are stepping up to the plate to change their situations and the present state of women's work. For instance, the Women Count Network, coordinated by the Wages for Housework Campaign, is attributing a value to unwaged work, which is especially critical in divorce, injury, or wrongful death litigation, and achieving self-respect. (Britain already acknowledges unpaid work, as do other countries, but not the U.S.) Sen. Harkin (D-IA) sponsored the Fair Pay Act, which mandates disclosure of pay statistics on how much companies pay men versus women and introduces the idea of comparable worth into law. Therefore, a nurse at a state hospital could get paid the same as a tree trimmer or a daycare

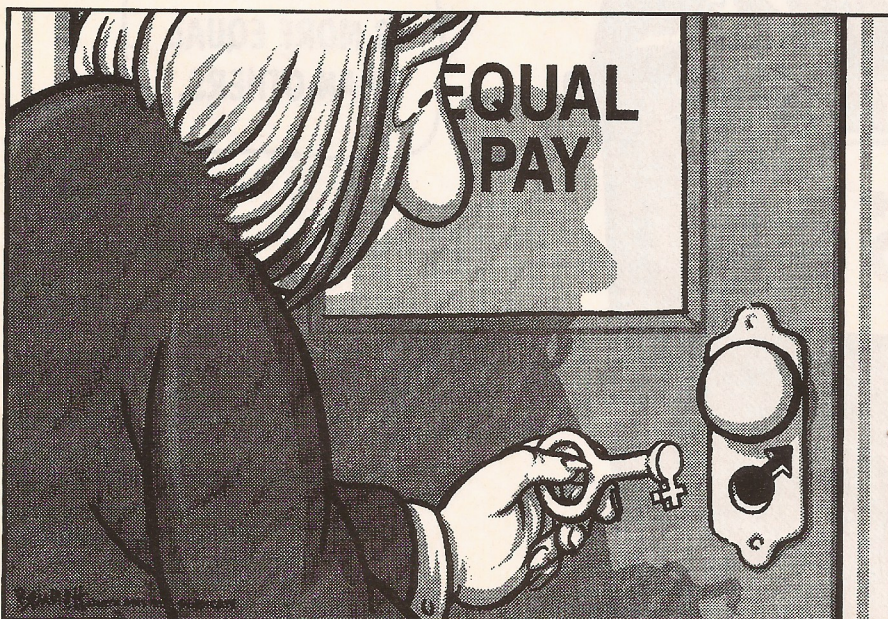
worker the same as a maintenance person. Building on this proposition, the AFL-CIO has launched a state-by-state push to introduce legislation modeled on the toothy Fair Pay Act. (It is currently in play in about 25 states.) President Clinton has recently committed \$27 million toward closing the wage gap. Ten million dollars will go to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to train inspectors and educate employers on the law (there is a three-year backlog of cases at present) and \$17 million will go the Department of Labor for training women in jobs where they have been under-represented.

But, as experience has proved, it's not enough to legislate equal pay, we have to believe that "women's work" (child care, book-keeping, public relations) is as valuable as the traditionally male professions (athletic coach, accounting, investment banking). Looking a bit more closely at our own jobs, or what we do now that hasn't traditionally qualified as a job, we might find that our own pay gap is legitimate grounds for a lawsuit with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or,

at least, raising a stink at work. A friend who works at a lefty weekly in New York, for example, told us that during union negotiations she was shocked to find that a male associate editor made \$28,000 while a female associate editor made \$24,000. Jennifer has to push editors at Condé Nast and Hearst magazines to pay her \$1.50 a word (and often gets a \$1.00 instead) while a male colleague of her close acquaintance makes \$2.00 a word, or more. Every day Amy receives e-mails at her on-line feminist advice column, "Ask Amy," from women who are experiencing job discrimination: A lady truck driver who can't find a way to work and raise her four teenage daughters, but whose ex-husband doesn't have the same worries; a female hospital director who retired and was replaced by a man who earned \$4,000 more annually; and a female construction worker who was refused equal pay because she wouldn't sleep with her supervisor.

Meanwhile, Amy, who is an activist and often unremunerated for much of her work, got her start in politics as an unpaid assistant for Senator Ted Kennedy. There was a guy in Kennedy's office in her same position; except he was paid. My sister recently got a job at an on-line magazine as an editorial assistant and was told that, despite her last job as an assistant editor, they weren't going to hire any assistant editors yet. Two months later they hired a guy, who was younger and had less experience, as assistant editor.

Back to our socialized attitudes: maybe we take less because we are disproportionately grateful for the few things we get for free—like Ladies Night where girls





drink lite beer on the house or the few times we get comped into a club. This seems to be the problem with the Oxygen ads. It advocates reveling in a pretty minor perk. To get a fresh perspective on the economics of being female, we propose reversing the perk of Ladies Night and making it a penalty—on economic sexism. According to our plan, men should pay 25 percent more for drinks, coffee, movie tickets, subway fare, CDs, sandwiches at lunch, cigarettes—you name it.

Like Ladies Night, the Guy Penalty does nothing to actually equalize the wage gap. But it does point out that sexism in wages is a great big coupon for men. Rather than lambasting Wolf or taking comfort in the fun parts of inequality, the Guy Penalty says expose the injustice and make men pay for it. Except, of course, if he's a paralegal. Z

*Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards's book, Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future, is forthcoming next fall from Farrar, Straus & Giroux.*