

Guest Comment

On **NRO**

I Am Woman, Hear Me Whine

Garbage in, gigantic wage gap out.

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We may never know what feminist leaders really want. On the other hand, we can take a pretty good guess. *They want to stay in business.*

Perhaps this is why, only 48 hours after the curtain closed on Women's History Month, the gender jihad is back in high gear. Today's tactic is Equal Pay Day, the sequel to last year's whine-in of the same name. Its sponsor is the National Committee for Pay Equity, a coalition of labor unions, women's groups, and other organizations.

NCPE does not cotton to the idea that females make trade-offs between high wages and other rewards in life. Rather, women who subscribe to its philosophy believe that the world owes them — bigtime. At a previous rally, participants donned stickers that read "Where's my 26 cents?" This, of course, was a reference to the "wage gap" that is Equal Pay Day's *raison d'etre*.

If nothing else, Equal Pay Day is testimony to just how far a good hissie fit can take you in Washington. Research showing that the wage gap is a highly flawed measure of salary fairness has been no match for the passions of pay-gap avengers. Their claim that females unjustly receive only 70-odd cents on the male dollar has been reported uncritically for decades. Today's events will predictably bring another round of fawning coverage, foundation grants, and politicians declaring their support for legislation to insure "pay equity." In other words, for replacing the free market with a bureaucracy empowered to mandate equal pay for unequal work.

None of which will change the reality that the wage gap is largely a canard. It is a misleading statistic that comes from comparing the median annual wages of males and females who work fulltime, and typically, expressing the difference as pennies on the dollar. NCPE reports, incidentally, that the gap increased between 1998 and 1999, from 27 to 28 cents.

This simple approach might make sense if the sexes were similar in characteristics that affect wages. But even NCPE admits they are not. "Earning statistics don't tell the whole story," it concedes. "Certainly, factors such as time in the workforce, education and occupational differences all play a part in defining wage gaps."

You might therefore expect NCPE to offer what it considers a reasonable estimate of a wage gap adjusted for factors that it agrees are relevant — and to use that rather than the grossly inflated figure of 28 cents. No way. NCPE is actually hostile toward evidence inconsistent with its claim that sex discrimination has created a massive pay gap.

For example, it sharply challenges a report that childless females aged 27 to 33 earned 98% as much as male counterparts, leaving an unexplained gap of only 2%. NCPE counters that this result "comes from a

single study and applies only to one very narrow demographic group."

But what it derides as a "single study" is not just any piece of research. The analysis in question involved data from a social science gold mine — the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. No serious scholar takes findings from this nationally representative sample so lightly — nor rates the isolated examples, anecdotes, and polls cited by NCPE as more compelling evidence.

Moreover, NCPE completely misses the point of this important work. That childless women had incomes on a par with males suggests that it is not being a woman, but being a mother, that causes noteworthy differences in earnings. Study after study finds that women with children work fewer hours, accumulate less experience, and take more extended leaves from the workplace — all of which limit their advancement. While sometimes a necessity, these are often choices gladly made by women who consider being with their children more important than maximizing earnings.

While taking various factors into account greatly reduces pay differences between the sexes, a small gap typically remains. But whether it is two cents or five, one cannot assume that discrimination is its cause. Salaries can differ among equally qualified women doing the same work, and we readily accept that something other than discrimination explains this. It seems only logical to grant that the same may be true when the higher paid individual is male. Likewise, statistics reveal a few college majors where female graduates earn up to 30% more than similarly situated males. [Click here](#) for details. It makes little sense to argue that sex discrimination is the only possible explanation for males earning more than females unless we do the same when the opposite occurs.

My own view is that a small wage gap does exist even after accounting for relevant factors. I suspect its primary cause is not discrimination, but sex differences in promotion-seeking behavior. The evidence is clear that, as a group, males are more oriented toward seeking status, resources, and monetary rewards in the workplace. Research also finds females more likely to base career decisions on non-monetary considerations--and perhaps less inclined to apply for promotions as well.

This raises interesting questions about how far employers must go to avoid being liable for discrimination. If a male seeking to increase his wages obtains a better-paying offer from a competing firm, and his current employer matches it to avoid losing him, must it then raise the salary of equally qualified female employees? Or if, during salary negotiations, women settle for less than men, is it discrimination to let them do so?

One might also wonder why the national conversation about equity is so singularly focused on wages. After all, females earn less, but live an average seven years longer than males. Yet, feminists have not declared Equal Life Expectancy Day to demand government intervention designed to end this injustice.

Nor are they going to. The sobering reality is that feminism is no longer a movement that has the moral high ground. It is a business — one that demands equality when it suits its purposes and inequality when it doesn't. For those employed by it, Equal Pay Day is all in a day's work.