

Hartford Business Journal, April 15, 2002 Opinions vary in debate over equal pay for women

By Cara Baruzzi

If progress in pay equity between men and women continues at its current rate in Connecticut, women will earn the same as men in 2083, according to Barbara Potopowitz, public information officer at the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women.

In 2000, the national median annual earnings of year-round full-time employees was \$37,339 for men and \$27,355 for women, according to U.S. Census data. Some say unequal pay between the genders is a major problem throughout the country and in Connecticut, while others see no cause for concern.

Women in Connecticut earn 75 cents for every dollar a man earns, which is about the national average, said Potopowitz.

The PCSW, along with the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund, hopes to raise awareness on Equal Pay Day April 16.

"It's a symbolic day to raise awareness around the issue," said Jennifer Woolley, manager of the Women and the Economy program at the Center for Policy Alternatives in Washington, DC.

Equal Pay Day is held on a Tuesday because that is the day of the week when women's pay equals what men earned by the previous Friday. Ms. Woolley states that "Equal pay is a basic issue of fairness."

But some feel it is not an issue at all.

"I don't think it's a problem; I actually think it's a non-issue," said Betsey Gera, associate counsel for the Connecticut Business & Industry Association. "Women are actually rising in professional stature very fast, in fact, much faster than men."

Gera pointed out that the Equal Pay Act of 196e and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibit wage discrimination based on gender. She attributes wage disparities to differences in education, skill levels and time spent in the workforce. Women are more likely than men to take jobs with flexible schedules, which tend to pay less, she said.

When you compare salaries based on work experience alone, "the difference is negligible," she said.

"There are a lot of factors that can contribute to wage discrimination," said Woolley, acknowledging some of the gap can be linked to education and training levels, but a portion cannot. "That part is attributable to discrimination."

Businesses may pay women less because they seem a riskier investment than men and are more likely to miss work due to childcare needs, said Alice Pritchard, executive director of the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund.

"Even the woman who never takes a break is still struggling," said Pritchard. "There's still kind of a prevailing opinion that men's work is of a higher value than women's."

Women are more likely than men to pursue jobs in the childcare and education sectors, where lower pay can jeopardize pensions, she said. She has met childcare providers who earn less than garbage collectors.

"Some of the jobs men are in are perceived as very, very important, even if they are low level. Women (in similar positions) are not (perceived) the same."

Businesses find ways to circumvent anti-discrimination laws, equal pay advocates agreed.

"It gets really muddy; there are ways to get around it," Pritchard said. Salaries often are tied into technicalities, seniority and job titles, she added.

"Job discrimination is against the law," said Potopowitz. "The problem is we pass laws and we don't give them any teeth."

In 2000, women comprised 48 percent of Connecticut's workforce. They constituted 82 percent of the office and clerical workers and 33 percent of officials, executives and manager.

While the wage gap has closed by 13 cents since 1960, pay inequity continues to affect women and their families, Potopowitz said.

"Salary and wage information is very quiet," Pritchard said. "People don't talk about how much they make -- particularly women."

