

CHAPTER 31

WOMEN & JOBS

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“Do women in Hawaii have equal access to jobs?”

Back in 1873, there was no question about the role of women. “The paramount destiny and mission of woman are to fulfill the noble and benign offices of wife and mother,” decreed the all-male Supreme Court of the United States in denying women admittance to the practice of law.

Women eventually challenged this time-honored tenet by entering the work force in record numbers. Their entry was facilitated by the mechanization of factories which reduced the necessity for physical strength in industrial jobs. The growth in clerical needs and service industries drew still more women into the work force. By 1945, one-third of the workers in America were women.

A similar phenomenon occurred in Hawaii, starting in the 1950s. With the post-World War II rise in tourism and the decline of sugar and pineapple, service industry jobs burgeoned. Spurred by a higher cost of living, women took advantage of these opportunities. In 1950, 23 percent of the women in Hawaii worked outside the home. By 1990, the percentage had grown to 61 percent.

More enter professions. The establishment of medical and law

schools in Hawaii in the mid-1970s enhanced the opportunity for more women to enter into business, law, medicine, government and other professional fields. The first graduating class from the University of Hawaii School of Law in 1976 led the nation with 35 percent females. In recent years the percentage has been above 50 percent.

Today, almost exactly half of Hawaii's work force is female. But how far have women come in terms of equality in the workplace?

One objective measure of equality is pay. Another is hiring, promotion and retention practices. What is amazing about pay equity is the lack of it. In the half century between 1930 and 1980, although the number of women in the work force tripled, average female earnings nationally never got higher than 59 percent of average male earnings. The disparity has not been as great in Hawaii, but our numbers are nothing to brag about.

Women underpaid. Today, the average woman in Hawaii receives only 65 cents for every dollar the average man earns. Overrepresented in lower-paying jobs, women earn consistently less than men across virtually all job categories. Studies have shown that differences in education, work experience and other objective factors account only partly for the wage gap. Estimates of the gap attributable to discrimination range from 23 percent to 56 percent.

The wage gap is significant in two professions where one would least expect to find discrimination. A 1991 survey done for the Hawaii State Bar Association by SMS Research found the average income of women attorneys to be only 58 percent of male attorneys'. Even when factors such as age, years in practice, and position are constant, women still make significantly less than men.

A 1991 preliminary faculty-pay-equity study conducted for the University of Hawaii at Manoa (UH) by Professors Kiyoshi Ikeda and Linda Johnsrud found that—other factors being equal—female faculty members at UH make \$126 to \$144 a month (about \$1,700 a year) less than their male counterparts.

Statistics regarding other objective measures of equality similarly offer little consolation. Women hold only 9.1 percent of corporate directorships for the top 50 Hawaii companies. But at least this percentage has been climbing. The percentage of women CEOs and Board Chairs in Hawaii has actually slipped in the past eight years, from

2.9 percent to 1.9 percent!

Glass ceiling. The fact that the highest echelons of business in Hawaii are dominated by older males may keep women from rising to their full potential. It's called a glass ceiling—impossible to see, but effective nonetheless. Moreover, if Japanese interests continue to pervade Hawaii's economy, the relative lack of success of Japanese women in climbing the corporate ladder portends an even more ominous barrier to Hawaii women trying to make it to the top.

In the legal profession, the 1991 Hawaii State Bar Association survey found that women are less likely to be partners or supervisors (33.7 percent of the female attorneys hold such positions compared to 48 percent of the male attorneys). And, while over 25 percent of the active lawyers in Hawaii are women, none has graced the federal bench in Hawaii, and only one (Rhoda Lewis from 1959 to 1967) has served on the Hawaii Supreme Court in modern times.

Another 1991 study on barriers to retention and tenure at UH conducted by Professor Johnsrud concluded that structural discrimination (such as lack of support for gender-related research and maternity-leave policies) and personal discrimination (sexual harassment, stereotyping and tokenism) are perceived by faculty women as barriers to their progress.

"Old boys network." A 1992 national study by the Center for Women in Government found that Hawaii women had the nation's lowest participation rate in senior state and local government posts (13.9 percent). Contrast this phenomenon with the fact that Hawaii has at times led the nation in the number of women holding elective office at the state and county level. One senses that women are more successful in pursuing their fullest potential when judged by Hawaii voters than by the closely guarded "old boys network" that controls government and business.

What can government do to help the situation? The Hawaii State Legislature already has done quite a bit. Hawaii was the first state to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution, and the first to enact an identical provision to its own constitution.

Hawaii's law prohibiting sex discrimination in employment contains more prohibited categories of discrimination than that of most states, and more than the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Hawaii was one of the first states to recognize women's reproductive rights, and its laws are among the most liberal in the nation on maternity-leave policies. Female employees disabled due to pregnancy, childbirth or related medical conditions are permitted to take a leave of absence for a "reasonable amount of time" (i.e., whatever is medically necessary, as determined by her doctor). Federal law simply treats pregnancy like any other disability. Hawaii also has its own comprehensive Equal Pay Act to complement the federal Equal Pay Act.

Discrimination hard to prove. While these laws are important and progressive, they have not always worked the way they are supposed to. Part of the problem is that most discrimination is subtle and difficult to prove. Unless a woman is fired, there is little incentive to endure the emotional and financial cost often needed to file a grievance.

Some attempts have been made to evaluate jobs on a point scale so that the value of a nurse, for example, can be compared to the value of, say, a truck driver. "Comparable worth" is considered by many to be an important step toward pay equality. Unfortunately, it is somewhat subjective and fraught with high levels of disagreement and debate.

In 1986, through the persistence of numerous women and community groups, the Hawaii State Legislature addressed this issue by authorizing a pay-equity study of public employment. The consultants, Arthur Young & Co., found "differences" in the way officials assign wages to jobs filled largely by women and those occupied primarily by men. As a result of their recommendations, the legislature appropriated \$850,000 to cover salary adjustments to rectify the differences. Additional job classes were supposed to have been reviewed for adjustments, but little more was ever done.

Looking to ourselves. Ironically, the root of these problems and the solutions lie within ourselves—in the way men perceive women and how women view themselves. Women have ventured into the work force in great numbers, yet many in society still view the primary role of women as the U.S. Supreme Court viewed it back in 1873—to serve the "noble and benign offices of wife and mother." Women themselves often feel guilty about pursuing a demanding career that prevents them from being a "good" mother and wife. And even the most liberal man would probably ask his wife to cut back on her career before hurting his own if two demanding careers proved detrimental to

their family life.

Herein lies the dilemma which nearly all of Hawaii's women face during their lifetimes. The already high and still rising cost of living here requires women at all economic levels to serve as either sole breadwinners (as in the case of the divorced, widowed or deliberately-single parent) or equal partners in bringing home the bacon. At the same time, society continues to demand that women bear most, if not all, of the burden of family care giving. (Given that Hawaii has the highest longevity rates in the nation, even women without children will increasingly need to assume the role of care giver for elderly parents.)

As long as women are asked to do it all (and even if they succeed), their quality of life will suffer. While each woman may begin a personal social revolution toward equality at home, the most effective impetus for changing society's overall expectations of women will actually begin in the workplace, by a new generation of men and women at the top.

Thankfully, the wheels of change already are in motion. Medical, law, business and other schools of higher education are turning out record numbers of women doctors, lawyers, MBA's and other professionals (36 percent of UH medical school graduates, 55 percent of UH law school graduates and 43 percent of UH MBA recipients are female). These young, educated women are working side by side with male colleagues generally more open to gender equality than their fathers were.

Only when society in general, and particularly those in power, truly understand and internalize the burdens women face, will we be able to put our collective hearts and minds into making concepts such as equal pay for equal work, equitable promotion and retention policies, and comparable worth a part of everyday life for all people of Hawaii.

