

NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON PAY EQUITY: HISTORY & IMPACT

ABOUT

The National Committee on Pay Equity (NCPE), founded in 1979, is a coalition of women's and civil rights organizations; labor unions; religious, professional, legal, and educational associations, commissions on women, state and local pay equity coalitions and individuals working to eliminate sex- and race-based wage discrimination and to achieve pay equity.

HISTORY

The history of the National Committee on Pay Equity is, in many ways, the history of the movement for equal pay in the United States. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 (an amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act) made it illegal to pay men and women different wages for doing equal work—defined as requiring equal skill, effort, and responsibility performed under similar working conditions. Until the late 1970s, efforts to address pay equity targeted instances of unequal pay for sufficiently equal work—such as work done by a janitor and maid or nurse's aide and orderly, for instance—or aimed to attract more women to higher paying male-dominated fields, such as construction.

The National Committee on Pay Equity (NCPE) formed in 1979 to address pay equity through a different approach: valuing “women’s work” as comparable with men’s. ‘Comparable worth’ contends that pay should be equal for jobs with comparable skills, effort, and responsibility, not just for jobs that are the same. Founding members of NCPE recognized that few women worked in the exact same jobs as men due to pervasive gender segregation in the labor market. In other words, until jobs primarily done by women were valued comparably with those primarily done by men, NCPE members understood that women would still face significant pay inequality.

As former NCPE Executive Director Claudia Wayne told *The Washington Post* years later, “Women have gained greater access to nontraditional jobs, but that’s a different issue. Pay equity is about eliminating discrimination for the majority of women who remain in female-dominated jobs.” Eleanor Holmes Norton, then-chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) when NCPE formed, referred to comparable worth as “the civil rights issue of the eighties.”

The committee brought together three organizing movements that were working to improve wages around the country: women’s rights, civil rights, and labor union organizations. At the time, several cases making their way through state appeals courts aimed to challenge the limited parameters of the Equal Pay Act, including a case in Oregon, where prison matrons earned \$200 less per month than the deputy sheriffs who guarded male prisoners.

In 1981, the Oregon case (*County of Washington v. Gunther*) reached the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of [an interpretation](#) of the Bennett Amendment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that legitimized claims of unequal pay for work of equal value. The ruling represented a breakthrough for organizing and legal efforts to achieve pay equity for women through comparable worth adjustments.

At the request of Norton and the EEOC, the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences conducted a study on the issues involved in measuring the comparability of jobs. The resulting report, [Women, Work, and Wages: Equal Pay for Jobs of Equal Value](#) (1981), provided needed research

on how employers evaluated jobs and determined compensation. In the introduction, the study panelists provided useful context for the growing momentum in the states to reevaluate compensation of female-dominated jobs:

Women who are nurses, librarians, government employees, and clerical workers have assessed their skills and the requirements of their jobs and have argued that their jobs are underpaid relative to jobs of comparable worth—that is, jobs requiring similar levels of skill, effort, and responsibility and similar working conditions—that are held mainly by men. For many women, the slogan “equal pay for work of equal value” has replaced the slogan “equal pay for equal work,” which is embodied in the Equal Pay Act of 1963. More generally, the issue raised is that of pay equity in a labor market that is highly segregated by sex. While the opportunity to move out of segregated job categories may be welcome to many women, many others, who have invested considerable time in training for their jobs, demand wage adjustment in “women's jobs” rather than opportunities to work in other jobs.

In 1983, a federal judge ruled that Washington state was guilty of illegal employment discrimination under the Civil Rights Act. The decision, in a suit brought by NCPE member AFSCME, was the first case to put into practice the legal theory of comparable worth validated by the 1981 Supreme Court case. Winn Newman, the lawyer who represented AFSCME and the namesake of NCPE’s annual Winn Newman award, told *The New York Times* of the decision, “What this means is that when you pay a nurse less than you pay a parking lot attendant, that violates the law.”

Armed with research and boosted by the momentum of the Washington state ruling, NCPE and its member organizations led the effort over the next several years to pressure states and municipalities to review their own compensation systems in the public sector. While the Washington state case made its way through the appeals process, Minnesota became the first state in 1983 to make systematic pay adjustments to civil service workers to address occupational and sex-based wage disparities.

Despite opposition that claimed comparable worth was costly to employers and taxpayers, public opinion trended in favor of efforts to address pay equity. A survey conducted by NCPE in 1985 found that four in five working Americans supported the concept of equal pay for jobs of equal value. Further, as Newman told *The Washington Post* in 1984, “There is nothing in the law that says discrimination is okay if it costs too much to correct.”

In 1987, NCPE sponsored the first study to use job evaluation systems to review pay inequality for people of color, finding that women and men of color experienced a similar pattern of discrimination and were overrepresented or undercompensated compared with similar jobs where white males were overrepresented.

By 1988, NCPE tracked more than 1,500 local governments, school districts, and community colleges in 24 states that had taken steps to identify or eliminate race or sex bias in the wages of public sector employees.

By the early 1990s, progress stalled as courts became less likely to rule in favor of those bringing forward similar cases. Without the threat of legal action, employers were much less willing to implement needed changes. If court cases based on current laws were not achieving pay equity, NCPE members realized

they needed to change the laws. In 1994, about 30 years after the passage of the Equal Pay Act, NCPE backed the Fair Pay Act, which would expand the law to ban discrimination in jobs that are similar.

Later, NCPE championed both the Fair Pay Act and the Paycheck Fairness Act, which sponsor Rep. Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut said would put “real teeth” into the Equal Pay Act, by providing more funding for equal pay enforcement and making it easier to bring forward claims of pay discrimination. In January 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, reversing the Supreme Court ruling in *Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., Inc.*, which severely restricted the time period for filing pay discrimination complaints.

In 1996, NCPE launched the first “[Equal Pay Day](#),” (originally recognized as “National Pay Inequity Awareness Day” and changed to Equal Pay Day in 1998) to symbolize how far into the new year women had to work to earn as much as men earned in the previous year. Typically held in April, Equal Pay Day continues to be a widely recognized public awareness day to illustrate the gap between men's and women's wages, with [recent expansions](#) to mark Equal Pay Days for women of color and mothers.

As movement federal legislation stalled in the 2000s, NCPE's pay equity legislative efforts shifted to states and localities. In recent years, California, Massachusetts, and New York City, among others, have passed stronger equal pay protections, including provisions to improve transparency and ban salary history questions in hiring.

IMPACT

For nearly 40 years, NCPE has kept pay equity at the forefront of policy agendas to improve family economic security.

Between 1983 and 1992, NCPE's organizing efforts led 20 state governments to make comparable worth adjustments among their civil service workforce, raising the pay of [335,000 workers by more than \\$527 million](#).

A [1994 study](#) of the impact of comparable worth strategies by Heidi Hartmann of the Institute for Women's Policy Research and Stephanie Aaronson of the Urban Institute found that the states that had made comparable worth adjustments saw the wage ratio between men and women improve better than the national rate. In Minnesota, Oregon, Washington, Michigan, and Connecticut, the wage gap between men and women was reduced by 25-33 percent.

While other social, economic, and political factors may have affected progress on women's improving pay, the study presented findings from a regression analysis that indicated that most of the improvement was, in fact, due to comparable worth adjustments.

In 1984, the chairman of President Reagan's Civil Rights Commission referred to comparable worth as "looniest idea since 'Looney Tunes' came on the screen." But as co-author Hartmann [told ThinkProgress](#) in 2014, research “concluded that [comparable worth] is a valid approach to a real life problem. It's definitely effective... Raising pay raises pay.”

The impact of NCPE's work has extended beyond the United States. In 1989, Ontario, Canada's largest province, passed the Ontario Pay Equity Act, which went further than many comparable worth cases in the United States by covering both private and public employers. Ontario's law strengthened

protections for 1.7 million working women. NCPE's Executive Director at the time, Claudia Wayne, told *The New York Times* that, "Ontario has gone the furthest in the world." Since then, several other countries, particularly in Western Europe have advocated for or passed laws to improve pay equity for women. Many international groups joined [NCPE's coalition](#) and many countries now recognize their own Equal Pay Days, including Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Australia.

Today, NCPE's pathbreaking efforts to achieve pay equity for women continue with the annual recognition of Equal Pay Day in April and the participation in working groups and coalitions organizing for pay equity. In recent years, [celebrities](#), [companies](#), and [lawmakers](#) have elevated the dialogue around equal pay to a wide range of new followers.

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