

The Economic Well-Being of Women

Victor R. Fuchs begins his article "Sex differences in economic well-being" (25 Apr., p. 459) with a reminder that the Old Testament Book of Leviticus rated women three-fifths as valuable as men, and that in modern America the ratio of women's to men's wages is close to the ratio cited in the Bible. Fuchs then moves from Biblical citation to data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau. He displays a set of charts showing that the more children under 18 a woman has, the lower, on average, are her earnings. For example, a woman with four children earns only about 75% of what a similarly educated woman with no children under 18 earns. These charts are brought forward to demonstrate that a major factor depressing women's wages is their assignment by society to responsibility for the care of children.

In fact, Fuchs' wage charts demonstrate no such thing. Women with no children under 18 do not earn wages on a par with men's. Moreover, in 1983, there was only half a child under 18 per woman, on average. If American women had had no children whatever in 1983, instead of half a child apiece on average, Fuchs' charts support the inference that their earnings might have advanced from 67% of men's to about 69%.

This leaves plenty of room for other explanations of the wage gap. Fuchs is non-committal about the possibility that sex discrimination might be a major cause of women's low wages and the need for affirmative action and pay equity. But a review of research on the wage gap by the National Research Council (NRC) (1) did not support the view that the wage gap could be largely explained away by women's inferior qualifications, home responsibilities, or women's choices. On the contrary, the NRC's Committee on Occupational Classification and Analysis found considerable support for the possibility that sex discrimination is the explanation for much of the sex gap in wages. If sex discrimination is indeed a serious problem, then policies to combat it, such as affirmative action and pay equity, are indicated.

Australia and Great Britain have implemented pay equity policies. They have raised wages in women's occupations, putting them closer to wages in men's occupations requiring similar levels of human capital; few if any adverse economic effects have been felt. In Norway, France, Sweden, and Denmark the female-male wage ratio is also considerably higher than in the United States and has improved rapidly in recent

years (2). Among developed countries, the Curse of Leviticus appears strongest in the United States and Japan.

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REFERENCES

1. D. J. Treiman and H. I. Hartmann, *Women, Work, and Wages* (National Academy Press, Washington, DC, 1981).
2. F. Blau and M. Ferber, *The Economics of Women, Men, and Work* (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1986), pp. 324-329.

Fuchs' article on pay parity is timely. The fact that women's pay is only 60% that of men's and that this difference has not changed in 30 years seems well documented, but we do not believe that women must behave "like men" in order to achieve economic parity. There are at least two other avenues to this goal.

Another way to achieve pay parity is to have men behave "like women" in terms of career priorities. Whereas women behaving "like men" would certainly undermine the family unit, men behaving "like women" might bankrupt the economy. Clearly neither of these outcomes is desirable.

It seems to us that the best way to achieve economic parity is to have men and women equally invested in careers and families. If, for instance, both men and women were entitled to and took equal amounts of parental leave, this would alleviate some of the perceived liability associated with hiring women. Of course, pregnancy and childbirth may need additional compensation, but if the average birth rate is only two children per woman, this would represent a rather minimal absence in a career lifetime.

It is time to design labor policies that allow all of us to pursue a balanced life-style of career and family. We see multiple advantages for all: children's lives are enriched by having two involved parents; when the children are grown, no one is stranded at home; and the talents of all are available to further our economic development.

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Response: Bergmann is correct that even women with no children earn substantially less than men, but she is incorrect to assume that their earnings have not been depressed by the fact that women bear children and

have major responsibility for them. When the women without children were young, most of them probably did not know they would be childless. Their choice of subjects in school, and their choice of job after leaving school, probably did not differ much from those of women who eventually did have children. Similarly, prospective employers were unlikely to know which young women would have children and which would not. This uncertainty could affect the employer's willingness to provide training opportunities or to make other investments in job-related human capital. Even at age 30, the uncertainty about children persists—both for women and their employers. Among those women age 30 who are childless, more than one-fourth will have a child within the next 5 years; this prospect can adversely affect their earnings in a variety of ways.

Thus the observed association between women's hourly earnings and number of children is an underestimate of the true effects of children. If women came into the world with a stamp on their shoulder showing the number of children they would ultimately bear, the relation between women's earnings and the number of their children would be much stronger than the one we observe in a world where uncertainty is a major factor. Childless women might still earn less than men, and some of that differential might be the result of employer discrimination or discrimination by consumers or other employees. However, if employer discrimination is as important as Bergmann alleges, those firms and industries that employ a disproportionate number of women ought to be making abnormally high profits as a result of their lower labor costs. The absence of such a relation casts doubt on her explanation.

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Edible Plants

I was pleased to see the article by Noel D. Vietmeyer "Lesser-known plants of potential use in agriculture and forestry" (13 June, p. 1379), as such information needs to be more widely distributed. Not mentioned was E. L. Sturtevant's work *Notes on Edible Plants*, which lists and comments on 2897 species. Sturtevant died in 1879. His notes were first published in 1919 and are now available as a Dover book, *Sturtevant's Edible Plants of the World* (New York, 1972).

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