Research-in-Brief

WOMEN IN TELECOMMUNICATIONS: AN EXCEPTION TO THE RULE

Women telecommunication workers are an exception to the rule that women earn low pay for the work they do:

- Women workers in the telecommunications industry earn about the same wages, on average, as male workers economy-wide, about $440 weekly in 1988. Nationwide only 17% of all women workers have wages that high.

- Clerical workers in telecommunications earn $426 weekly compared to $280 for clerical workers nationally, with both women and men included in these figures.

- On the average, the earnings of women workers in telecommunications amount to about 200 percent of the poverty line for a family of four--enough for a moderate standard of living.

- The wage gap within the telecommunications industry is smaller than that for most other industries. In telecommunications women earn 77% of the wages of men compared with the national average of 65% for the service industries as a whole.

The contrast between the compensation levels of women in telecommunications and other women workers is striking:

- Nearly 40 percent of all women workers earn less than a poverty wage and 50 percent of single parents earn less-than-adequate wages.

- Forty percent of children in households with only one employed low-wage parent live in poverty.

The relatively favorable economic situation of telecommunications workers reflects the gains achieved under affirmative action policies and under unionization:

- The higher wage levels in telecommunications are in part a result of the settlement of an EEOC case in the mid 1970's.

- The wage levels also reflect the greater degree of unionization. Fifty-two percent of women in telecommunications are represented by a union compared to 15% of women nationwide.

- Unionization has had a particularly positive earnings effect for women of color. Women of color comprise 20% of female telecommunications workers and earn slightly higher wages than other unionized white women ($448 per week as compared to $444 per week, respectively).

The Institute for Women's Policy Research is an independent, nonprofit research institute dedicated to conducting and disseminating research that informs public policy debate affecting women. This fact sheet is based on the IWPR report ***Women in Telecommunications: An Exception to the Rule****, by Heidi Hartmann and Roberta Spalter-Roth.*

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Given the prospective growth in the employment of women and the increasing importance of the service sector, basic questions are raised about the future standard of living for all Americans:

- By the year 2000, 62% of women over age 16 are expected to be working; women are expected to account for 64% of the net increase in the labor force.

- The service sector is expected to grow by twenty-one million new jobs, to 71% of the economy, by the year 2000.

- As the U.S. continues its transformation to a service economy, with an increasingly female labor force and an increasing number of jobs requiring both technical and human interaction skills, what happens to compensation in telecommunications will serve as a bellwether for changes in the economy as a whole.

- Recent wage proposals by telecommunications employers indicate an effort to decrease women's wages to the low levels of non-supervisory women workers in other parts of the service sector. These wage proposals are structured to provide smaller base wage increases for women than for men.

- As the service economy is transformed, wages for all service sector jobs will have to be increased to the standard set by the telecommunications industry, if the U.S. is to continue to have a sizable middle class.

The issue presented, of vital importance to the future of the entire U.S. economy, is: will women's earnings follow the standard of women in the telecommunications industry or will women telecommunications workers see their wages decrease to the average of women workers in the retail, business and personal service industries?

About this study: This study was conducted for the Communications Workers of America. Data in this study came from the Current Population Survey--a monthly publication of the U.S. Census Bureau, and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. All views expressed here are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the funders or of IWPR.