



Research-in-Brief

C315

April 1990

RAISES AND RECOGNITION: SECRETARIES, CLERICAL WORKERS AND THE UNION WAGE PREMIUM

Secretarial and Clerical: The Largest Women's Occupational Category

Though secretarial and clerical occupations were not always female intensive, they are currently the largest women's occupational category in the U.S.:

- o Of the 14.2 million full-time workers in this occupational category, 80 percent are women. An additional 3.8 million workers are employed part-time in these occupations. Of these part-time workers, 86 percent are women.
- o Almost three-quarters are employed in occupations that are at least 70 percent female. These workers are the subject of the IWPR study.
- o Secretarial work is the largest of these female-intensive occupations, with 3.2 million full-time workers.

Challenging the Stereotypes: Secretarial and Clerical Workers

Historically, the stereotype of secretaries was of a young, single white woman working temporarily. Current reality contrasts with the stereotype:

- o The median age for secretaries and clerical workers is 35. Fifteen percent are members of minority groups. Only one-quarter have never been married; three-quarters are married, divorced, separated or widowed. Two out of five have children under age 18.
- o Secretaries and clerical workers earn almost half of their families' weekly earnings. Those who are married and have children contribute 42 percent of their families' weekly earnings. Those who are single, divorced, separated or widowed, and who have children, earn 70 percent of their families' weekly earnings.
- o Secretaries and clerical workers have been employed for an average of seven years at their current jobs compared to four years for all women workers and 5.8 years for all male workers. Almost one in three have been at their current job for more than 10 years.

Secretarial and Clerical Workers' Earnings Are Central to Family Income but Their Wages Are Low

Despite the fact that secretaries and clerical workers are responsible for a substantial share of their families' earnings, the median earnings of full-time workers are low compared to other categories of full-time, non-managerial and non-professional workers:

*The Institute for Women's Policy Research is an independent nonprofit research institute dedicated to conducting and disseminating research that informs public policy debates affecting women. This fact sheet is based on the IWPR report *Raises and Recognition: Secretaries, Clerical Workers and the Union Wage Premium*, by Roberta Spalter-Roth and Heidi Hartmann.*

- o The median weekly earnings for full-time, non-supervisory secretaries and clericals in female-intensive occupations are \$300, lower than other categories of non-professional, non-managerial workers such as technicians and related support workers whose median weekly earnings are \$448, and lower than other managerial-related support workers whose median weekly earnings are \$501.
- o These low earnings are explained by several factors: women workers, who comprise the great majority of the occupation, lose \$2.19 per hour compared to men; workers receive low rewards for tenure (18 cents an hour for each additional year on the job); and workers' combination of technical and human-relations skills are not recognized nor valued.

Strategies for Increasing Wages: The Union Premium

Among the most successful strategies for increasing the earnings of secretarial and clerical workers is union membership or coverage by a union contract. With the growth of service and public sector unions, more secretaries and clerical workers have begun to benefit from a union wage premium:

- o Currently, 13 percent (about one out of every eight) full-time workers in all the female-intensive clerical occupations are union members or are covered by a union contract.
- o Full-time unionized workers in these occupations earn an additional \$56 per week compared to those not covered by a union contract and an additional \$1.02 per hour, when other factors are held constant.
- o Part-time as well as full-time workers benefit from union membership and union contracts. Part-time secretaries and clerical workers in female-intensive occupations earn only \$5.25 per hour when they do not belong to unions compared to part-time union workers who earn an average of \$7.61 per hour.

The Union Wage Premium for State and Local Government Workers is Substantial

Of all full-time, non-supervisory secretaries and clerical workers, those employed by state and local governments are most likely to be union members or covered by union contracts. These workers benefit from a substantial union wage premium and better fringe benefits.

- o More than one-third of full-time, non-supervisory secretaries and clerical workers employed by state and local governments are union members or covered by a union contract.
- o Full-time workers in these occupations who are union members or covered by a union contract earn an additional \$1.13 per hour compared to non-union workers, when other factors are held constant.
- o Secretarial and other clerical workers employed by state and local governments in the 26 states and the District of Columbia that currently have legislation that provides some form of collective bargaining rights for these workers, earn the highest wages--\$340 per week compared to the \$260 per week for non-unionized workers in states without such rights.

In addition to bargaining for higher wages and better benefit packages, unions, and especially public sector unions, have been particularly involved in issues such as: gaining pay equity adjustments for women and minority men whose skills have traditionally been undervalued; bargaining for work and family policies such as family and medical leave, child care and flexible work schedules; and career development.

About this study: This study was conducted for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. Data used in this study came from the May 1988 Current Population Survey, a U.S. Census Bureau data set, and from 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.