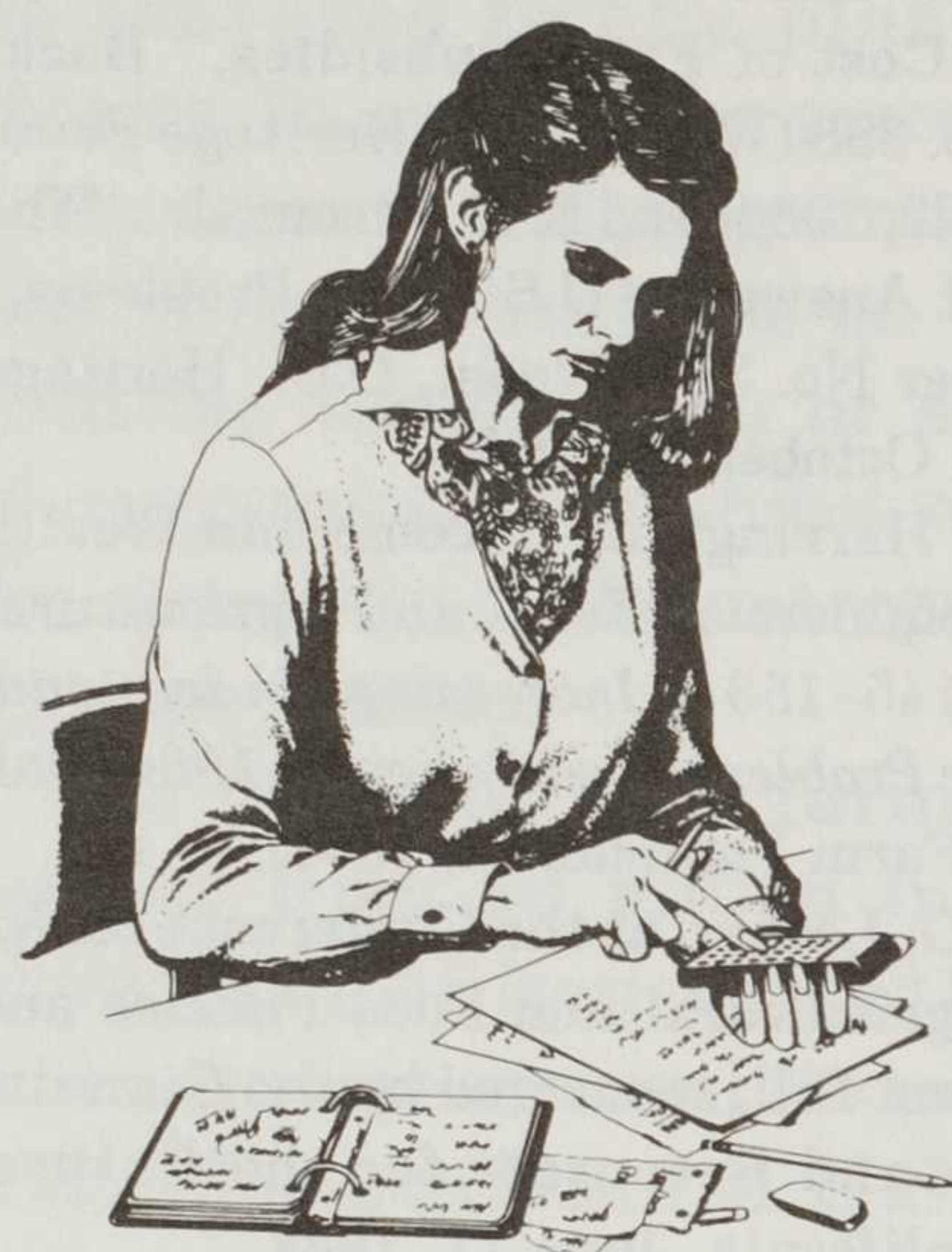


Jane M. Orient



Comparable Worth versus Civil Liberty: Are Feminists Pro-Choice?

THOUGH enshrined in the 1984 platform of the Party of New Ideas, the comparable worth concept was both proposed and demolished in 1928 by George Bernard Shaw. "To Each What She Deserves" was the title of its chapter in his book *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism, and Fascism*. Shaw's discussion might be especially helpful to those who confuse the idea with the fundamentally different issue of equal pay for equal work.

"Well think it out," he says. "The clergyman . . . is able to read the New Testament in Greek; so that he can do something the blacksmith cannot do. On the other hand, the

blacksmith can make a horseshoe, which the parson cannot. How many verses of the Greek Testament are worth one horseshoe? You have only to ask the silly question to see that nobody can answer it."

Shaw also discussed an alternate but similar notion: "Since measuring their merits is no use, why not try to measure their faults? Suppose the blacksmith swears a good deal . . . ! Everybody in the village knows this; but the parson has to keep his faults to himself." And if the parson were discovered to have the fault of distorted values (say that he preferred fashionable society to religion), would that make him "as bad as the blacksmith, or twice as bad, . . . or only half as bad?"

A system that paid prizefighters so much money had to be absurd, Shaw concluded. "But to suppose that it

Jane M. Orient, M.D., is in the private practice of medicine in Tucson, Arizona. She is also adjunct assistant professor of internal medicine at the University of Arizona College of Medicine.

could be changed by any possible calculation that an ounce of archbishop or three ounces of judge is worth a pound of prizefighter would be sillier still."

Proponents of comparable worth make exactly that supposition. A scale devised by the Hay Study in San Jose assigned points on the same scale to 231 different jobs, taking into account skill, effort, responsibility, and working conditions. For example, the position of puppeteer was given 124 points, equivalent to offset press operator, engineering technician I, or street sweeper operator. A maintenance worker I was considered to be worth 140 points, a senior recreation leader 158 points, and a stage hand 178 points.

At first glance, such a scale looks perfectly objective. After all, what could be more objective than a number? In reality, the numbers simply codify the subjective values of the consultant. Rather consistently, such job evaluations tend to place a higher value on college education than employers do. Similarly, they seem to award points for social worthiness. The raters then presume to impose their values on everyone, through the legislature and the courts. Not only do they determine conversion factors—how many horseshoes equal a Greek verse—but they pretend that these are as precise as the factors that convert centimeters into inches, at least to three significant digits.

Of course, individuals *do* place values on horseshoes and Biblical translations. The values differ with the individual, and with his needs (and resources) at the moment. The person who has seen horses only in B-grade Western movies would prize them less than would a farmer in an underdeveloped nation, who depends on them to transport his produce to market. A person studying for the ministry would probably appreciate Greek scholars more than a manufacturer of semiconductors would.

Subjective Values

Economic values are subjective and variable. Comparable worth challenges both the legitimacy of voluntary exchange in the marketplace, and the values represented in the wages and prices thus determined. Paradoxically, this attack on economic pluralism is led by defenders of the right to choose alternative lifestyles, even those considered morally reprehensible in the recent past.

Comparable worth is promoted as a moral or civil rights issue. The moral imperative arises from the perceived injustice in the present system. The "59 cent gap" (the average woman earns 59 cents—now 61 cents—for each dollar earned by the average man) may be grounds for suspecting unfairness, though it does not constitute a *prima-facie* case.