About half the gap is due to undetermined factors, and is attributed to discrimination. Half is accounted for by "human capital" factors: education, experience, and commitment to the labor force. Part of this difference between women and men may result from past discrimination, mandated by laws restricting women's conditions of work and, more powerfully, by unwritten custom.

Interestingly, past discriminatory practices were motivated by a concern for social justice. Labor unions, the Catholic Church, the social welfare movement, and even American socialist parties all belonged to a coalition supporting the "family wage." The "one-paycheck-per-family" idea was meant to protect those most vulnerable to competition, the men at the low end of the wage scale. Fair competition would have meant unemployment for some breadwinners (men), while their jobs were done by women, who were bringing in a supplementary income.[1] In addition, increasing the size of the labor force drives wages down, by the law of supply and demand. Keeping women at home helped men to command a "living wage."

Although past discrimination resulted from good intentions, yesterday's social justice has become today's unfairness. The values that our forefathers imposed on the economy were wrong, according to current thought. However, comparable worth advocates would follow the precedent of rejecting the free market and enforcing, by legislation or litigation, their own vision of what is right. They fear that too much freedom might lead to oppression.

On the one hand, it is argued that the market is too free—at least for employers. A representative of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees stated that freedom from bias was the only legitimate freedom of the marketplace.

A Question of Choice

On the other hand, it is claimed that women are not really free, but have been "herded" into the "pink collar ghetto," that is, segregated disproportionately into low paying jobs, more or less deliberately. But why do women settle for "unacceptably" low wages? Why do they not clamor to enter relatively well-paid, if humble, occupations, such as the skilled trades? When pressed, comparable worth proponents acknowledge that women *don't want to do those jobs*. They do not strive for upward mobility, except into positions of high status, as in medicine, administration, or government. They want to stay where they are, albeit with a raise in pay.

Clearly, this is an admission that "women's work" does have certain advantages. Compensation cannot be measured solely in terms of dollars and cents. Although the low salaries of librarians, secretaries, nurses, and teachers are no secret—and certainly not a recent development—women, and increasing numbers of men, still prefer these fields. The working conditions are pleasant, at least in comparison with bricklaying and plumbing; the hours are convenient; and entry to and exit from the work force are relatively easy.

Thus, the seeming ambivalence about freedom is explained: it is related to the definition. Comparable worth advocates are not concerned about freedom *to* make choices, but about freedom *from* the consequences of those choices. Their real grievance is that they do not control the market forces that determine what will be offered for each job. They resent the law of supply and demand, and are unhappy about the values that employers assign to various jobs.

Payment for Caring

Though conceding that people should be compensated for enduring the hot sun and other difficult conditions, comparable worth advocates indict our society for placing a low value on intellectual abilities and attributes such as "caring," which are required in traditionally feminine roles. How can a civilized nation show such slight appreciation (in monetary terms) for those who nurture and teach the young? What sort of society values a strong back more than compassion and a liberal education? The United States is no more advanced in that regard than the England of George Bernard Shaw.

Of course, increases in pay of professionals such as nurses and teachers have occurred, but in response to shortages rather than because of enlightenment. Likewise, comparable worth would not rely on enlightenment either, but would substitute legal compulsion for amoral market forces. Furthermore, it is in reality just as materialistic as the marketplace, since all admissible rewards are monetary.

It is easy to deplore the taste and judgment of the common man, as reflected in market values. The question is whether we can assume that an ad hoc, elite commission would distribute rewards any more fairly. Arguably, such a commission could be disinterested and able to consider factors beyond brute economics, whereas employers have a vested interest in the cost of production. Nevertheless, no group could claim to be immune to all bias, especially if it owed its very existence to a special interest group whose values differed from the prevailing ones.

Acknowledging that the compa-

[1] William Tucker, "Condemned to Liberation: the Woman as Breadwinner," *The American Spectator*, November 1984, p. 22.