

EMPLOYMENT / Occupations
Office Work

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The Women's Center

Women (file)

Women
" **The ~~Girls~~**
In The Office:
the economic
status of
clerical
workers "



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The other day, a client came onto the floor where I'm a receptionist, looked around, then looked directly at me and asked, "Isn't anyone here?"

--Receptionist, sales office

Clerical workers, as this testimony emphasizes, are in many ways an invisible workforce. They constitute the essential underpinning of business, the workers who keep offices running so smoothly that they themselves are often overlooked. Despite the fact that they are the largest occupational group in the country, the conditions under which they work continue to go largely unnoticed and unchallenged.

Most of the public attention paid to clerical workers comes in the form of newspaper and magazine articles announcing the impending replacement of clericals by advanced office machinery, computers and other forms of new technology. In fact, U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) statistics show that far from being phased out, clerical jobs are growing faster than any other category. In 1978, 18.2% of all employed women and men were classified as clericals, a total of 16.6 million workers. That percentage is expected to rise to 19.4% by 1985, a dramatic increase since 1960 when clericals were 14.5% of the total workforce.

Table 1

PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT BY MAJOR
OCCUPATION GROUP, PROJECTED TO 1980 AND 1985

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>1960</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1985</u>
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
White Collar	43.1	51.1	51.5	52.9
Professional & technical workers	11.0	15.6	15.7	16.8
Managers & admini- strators	11.2	11.0	10.5	10.3
Sales workers	6.4	6.3	6.6	6.4
Clerical workers	14.5	18.2	18.7	19.4
Blue Collar	36.3	32.5	33.1	32.3
Craft & kindred	13.3	12.9	12.8	12.8
Operatives	17.3	15.1	15.6	15.1
Nonfarm laborers	5.7	4.4	4.7	4.4
Service Workers	12.7	13.7	13.3	13.2
Private household	3.0	1.3	1.3	1.1
Other	9.7	12.4	12.0	12.9
Farm Workers	7.9	2.7	2.1	1.6

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

CLERICAL WORKERS AND THEIR ECONOMIC STATUS

The majority of the "invisible workforce" is female. As of August 1978, women accounted for 79% of all clerical workers, compared to 67.9% twenty years ago. Of 13 million women in clerical positions, approximately 1.5 million are minorities, over one-fourth of all minority women who work. (This constitutes a substantial increase over the past twenty years; in 1960, more than half of all minority working women were classified as service workers, primarily in private households.) Three and one-half million men are in clerical jobs, accounting for 21% of the total.

The number of clerical workers is substantial, but their wages are not. In 1978, the average weekly salary for clerical workers nationwide was \$175

(\$9100 annually), reflecting a range from \$130 per week for file clerks to \$240 per week for executive secretaries. In fact, average wages for clerical work are the lowest of any white-collar category.

Table 2

AVERAGE WEEKLY EARNINGS FOR
WHITE COLLAR JOBS, MAY 1978

<u>Job</u>	<u>Average Wages (May 1978)</u>
Managers & administrators	\$ 323
Professional & technical workers	294
Sales workers	232
Operatives, except transport	191
Clerical workers	175

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

The average wages of office workers in Chicago fall within the national ranges, from \$133.50 per week for file clerks to \$218.50 for secretaries.

Table 3

MEDIAN WEEKLY EARNINGS OF OFFICE WORKERS,
CHICAGO METROPOLITAN AREA, MAY 1978

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Number of Workers</u>	<u>Median Weekly Earnings</u>
Secretary	20,934	\$ 218.50
Stenographer	3,332	207.00
Typist	7,349	160.00
Messenger	3,916	140.00
File Clerk	2,597	133.50

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, BLS, Chicago Area Wage Survey, 1978

In addition, average raises for clerical workers have been low in comparison to other job classifications. For the period 1967-1978, clericals received an average annual percent increase of 6.2%. For clericals, who earn low wages relative to other occupational groups, this meant that the average annual raise for clerical work in the past decade never exceeded \$11 per week, compared to \$22 per week for professionals and technicals, \$24 for managers and administrators, and \$27 for sales workers.

Table 4

ANNUAL AVERAGE PERCENTAGE INCREASES IN MEDIAN WEEKLY
EARNINGS, BY OCCUPATION, MAY 1967 - MAY 1978

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Annual Average % Increase</u>	<u>Median Weekly Increase</u>	<u>Highest Weekly Increase</u>
Professionals & technicals	6.6%	\$ 16.50	\$ 22.00
Managers & administrators	6.4	14.00	24.00
Sales workers	6.8	10.00	27.00
Clerical workers	6.2	8.50	11.00
Craft & kindred workers	7.1	15.50	23.00
Operatives, except transport	8.2	11.00	20.00
Transport operatives	8.6	17.00	18.00
Nonfarm laborers	6.9	9.00	20.00
Private household workers	5.7	7.00	11.00
Other service workers	6.6	7.50	11.00
Farm workers	8.3	7.50	16.00

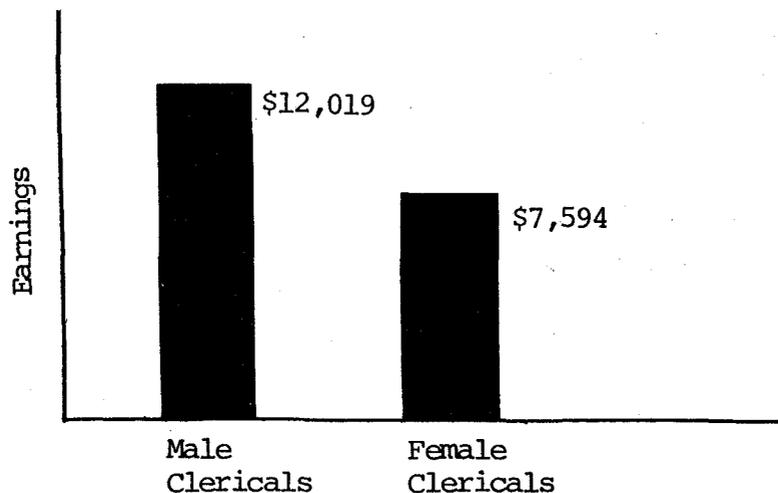
Source: U.S. Department of Labor

THE CLERICAL WAGE GAP

Within the generally bleak picture of clerical wages, women fare substantially worse than men. On the average, male clericals earn \$12,019 annually, while female clericals earn only \$7594 - a wage gap of over \$4400. In fact, one of the sharpest drops in women's earnings relative to men's has occurred in the clerical field. Twenty years ago, female clericals made 72 cents for every dollar male clericals made. Today, women make only 63 cents for every dollar men make in clerical occupations.

Table 5

MEDIAN ANNUAL EARNINGS IN 1975 OF
CLERICAL WORKERS BY SEX, MARCH 1976



The commonly accepted explanations for this wage gap--that women are not "breadwinners," that women don't work as long or as regularly as their male counterparts, or that men are better educated and can therefore obtain better jobs--are simply not supported by the facts. First, more and more of the women now in the clerical workforce are primary "breadwinners." Currently, 45% of all women workers are either single, widowed, divorced, or separated. Another 20% have husbands who earn less than \$10,000 annually. Given the current rate of inflation, the rest are working to maintain the family's standard of living. Female clericals work out of the same necessity that men do. The fact that women may leave the workforce temporarily to bear children is an insufficient explanation for the pay disparities that exist. The number of women who are absent from the workforce for extended periods to raise children is declining, and the vast majority of those who leave return when their children reach school age. Finally, as the table below indicates, educational background has no impact on the gap. A female clerical worker with a college degree earns almost \$3,000 per year less than a male clerical who has not completed high school.

Table 6

MEDIAN EARNINGS IN 1975 OF CLERICAL WORKERS
BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND SEX

	<u>All Clericals</u>	<u>Less Than 4 Yrs. H.S.</u>	<u>High School Only</u>	<u>College 1-3 Yrs.</u>	<u>College 4 or More Yrs.</u>
Male	\$ 12,019	\$ 11,145	\$ 11,936	\$ 12,231	\$ 13,110
Female	7,594	6,784	7,463	7,934	8,295
\$ Gap	4,425	4,361	4,473	4,297	4,815

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

OCCUPATIONAL SEGREGATION AND UNEQUAL PAY

The old myths about women workers do not explain the widening wage gap between male and female clericals. In fact, the clerical wage gap is the result of two major factors: occupational segregation within clerical occupations and

lack of equal pay for equal work. First, occupational segregation persists within the clerical field in the same way that it persists in the workforce as a whole. Women are concentrated in the lowest paying clerical classifications: bookkeeping and billing machine operators, keypunch operators, secretaries, stenographers, and typists; men are concentrated in relatively higher paying job categories: computer and other equipment operators, insurance clerks, shipping and receiving clerks.

Table 7

MALE/FEMALE DISTRIBUTION IN SELECTED
CLERICAL OCCUPATIONS, FEBRUARY 1978

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>
<u>Female-intensive:</u>		
Typists	5.8%	94.2%
Stenographers	6.6	93.4
Secretaries	2.4	97.6
Keypunch operators	10.6	89.4
Calculating machine operators	9.2	90.8
Bookkeeping/billers	10.4	89.6
<u>Male-intensive</u>		
Computer and other equipment operators	70.8	29.2
Insurance clerks	74.4	25.6
Shipping and receiving clerks	85.7	14.3
Stock clerks and other clerks	77.6	22.4

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

And current trends indicate that increasing numbers of women entering clerical fields are most likely to be typists, stenographers, secretaries or bookkeepers. Related to this problem is the absence of unionization of clerical jobs in which women are concentrated. Although few clericals are organized in comparison to many other technical fields, clerical jobs held primarily by women are less likely to be unionized than clerical jobs held primarily by men. In 1977, only 11.8% of female clerical and kindred workers were unionized, while nearly 33% of male clericals and kindred workers were unionized.

The second factor which contributes to the wage gap is the lack of equal pay for equal work, that is, equal wages for males and females within the same clerical occupations. In Chicago, the principle of equal pay for equal work does not apply to women in many of the clerical categories for which comparative wage data were available. The table below shows, for example, a \$54.00 a week disparity between the wages paid to a male order clerk and a female order clerk.

Table 8

AVERAGE WEEKLY EARNINGS OF OFFICE WORKERS,
BY SEX, CHICAGO, MAY 1978

<u>Office Occupation</u>	<u>Weekly Earnings</u>	
	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
Messengers	\$148.00	\$147.50
Manufacturing	169.00	154.50
Non-manufacturing	143.50	145.00
Finance	135.50	132.50
Services	141.00	140.00
Order Clerks	238.00	184.00
Manufacturing	239.50	179.50
Class A	242.50	206.50
Class B	214.50	176.00
Accounting Clerks:		
Manufacturing	249.50	210.50
Wholesale Trade	220.50	178.50
Finance	180.00	170.50
Payroll Clerks,		
Manufacturing	229.50	201.50

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, BLS, Chicago Area Wage Survey, 1978.

All of these persistent patterns result in serious economic disadvantage for women. Despite growing demand for clerical workers, particularly those with special skills, they continue to face low pay, occupational segregation, and unequal pay.

PROFIT AND PREJUDICE

The problems of low pay and the factors which cause the clerical wage gap are rooted in the twin problems of profit and prejudice. Because of

prejudice against women workers, employers undervalue clerical work both in terms of wages and in terms of preparation for other higher-paying jobs. Clerical workers are acutely aware that the work they do is undervalued because it is stereotyped as women's work and saddled with all the myths about women workers. When clerical work was primarily a male occupation, it was considered to be the "ground floor," a training position from which individuals would rise to higher levels of the company. It was considered the first step of a career path, and in fact, men still enjoy upward mobility from clerical positions far more often than women do. Now that the field is female-dominated, prejudice against women workers forms a significant basis for corporate policies toward clerical workers. "Women's work" is assigned automatically lower wages, training for clerical workers is almost non-existent, and few companies offer opportunities for job mobility. Because corporate policy based on prejudice virtually ignores the needs and potential of clerical workers, that work force has become "invisible."

Profit is directly related to the persistence of prejudice against women workers, despite the fact that the myths about women workers have long since been disproved. In the face of rising costs, employers are economizing at the expense of the lowest paid employees--clerical workers. Through employer associations and trade organizations, corporations cooperate to keep clerical wages low, even in the face of rising demand. Instead of compensating skilled clericals adequately, the current trend seems to be in the direction of breaking down clerical jobs into components requiring lower skill levels, and hiring from less skilled ranks at still lower salaries. Or in some cases, employers prefer to simply overburden the skilled clericals they employ, without adjusting their rates of pay. Profit is also the reason for employers' stiff resistance to the unionization of clericals. Currently, wages for unionized clericals are 29% higher on the average than wages for non-union clericals, so employers have a substantial economic interest in fighting efforts to organize.

SECRETARIES—A CASE IN POINT

The current secretarial shortage provides an illustration of how firmly entrenched profit and prejudice are in corporate policy. The shortage is becoming more severe, yet corporations are firmly resisting offering higher wages to retain or attract secretaries.

According to the U.S. DOL, approximately 295,000 secretarial and stenographer jobs are now opening every year, more than for any other job classification. Further, this rate of openings is projected to continue at least through the mid-1980's. The current shortage of secretaries is estimated at 20% or about 60,000 positions per year. If the shortage continues at the anticipated rate, it will reach 600,000 openings by 1985. Commenting on the growing shortage, the Chicago Tribune recently reported that a competent secretary with good shorthand skills is in greater demand than a college graduate with a liberal arts degree. According to the article, companies are responding to the shortage with higher entry-level salaries, bigger raises, and better working conditions to lure qualified individuals.

According to conventional wisdom, the "natural dynamics" of the labor market--i.e. supply and demand--should result in higher wages to attract more workers to secretarial work and to retain those now in the field. However, statistics show that average wages for secretaries are not increasing enough to keep pace with the rate of inflation much less respond to a shortage. Overall, secretaries received average raises of 6.5% last year, lower than the 7.4% average for all clericals, and substantially lower than raises in professional and blue-collar categories. In the face of a documented shortage, 1978 salaries for executive secretaries remained unchanged from one year earlier, while salaries for lower paid secretaries rose only 3%.

Table 9

AVERAGE WAGE INCREASES IN
SELECTED FIELDS, MARCH 1978

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>% Increase</u>
Directors of personnel (March '77-78)	10.0%
Attorneys (March '77-78)	9.1
Chemists (March '77-78)	9.0
Engineers (March '77-78)	9.0
Computer operators (March '77-78)	8.5
Accountants (March '77-78)	8.3
Blue collar workers (Sept. '77-78)	8.0
Buyers (March '77-78)	7.8
Clericals (includes typists, acctg. clerks, file clerks, etc.) (March '77-78)	7.4
Professional & technical (Sept. '77-78)	6.9
Secretaries (March '77-78)	6.5

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

Apparently, the law of supply and demand operates to raise wages when shortages occur in male-dominated fields, but not in female-dominated fields. For the entire four-year period 1974 to 1978, the average wages for a secretary increased a total of approximately \$1800. During the same period, average wages for engineers, a male-dominated occupation in short supply, increased close to \$6300--nearly \$4500 more than for secretaries. Over just the last two years, computer operators' average pay rose \$1500--\$400 more than secretaries' pay rose.

Taking these statistics into account, it appears that the corporate response to the secretarial shortage is primarily a public relations program designed to encourage applicants for secretarial positions. In fact, the secretarial shortage is due to the fact that secretaries are as underpaid and overworked today as they have been in the past. Employers are simply refusing to pay decent salaries to women workers, particularly clericals. Because of profit and prejudice, employers will continue to cooperate to keep secretarial wages low and resist the law of supply and demand.

THE FUTURE

The corporate response to the secretarial shortage demonstrates that the extent of employer resistance to improving clerical jobs is enormous. Ingrained prejudices against women workers and profit at their expense stand in the way of needed changes. Employers continue to pay low wages and offer minimal raises to clerical employees; they segregate women into the lowest paying clerical occupations, pay lower wages to women than to men within the same job categories, and deny them even minimal opportunities for training or job mobility. Corporate policy continues to ignore the basic rights and aspirations of what is, ironically, the largest occupational group in the country. As long as the offices are functioning—letters typed, phones answered, papers filed—the growing force of clerical workers remains invisible.

The problems these workers face are substantial, especially in light of the fact that corporations resist providing clerical workers with decent wages and working conditions. The solutions, however, are very straightforward. The Women Employed Fair Employment Program outlines seven basic policies that recognize the basic rights of clerical workers and provide for fair treatment on the job:

1. A FAIR SALARY SCHEDULE, based on work performed and years of service, with regular, annual increases.
2. PARTICIPATION IN SETTING OFFICE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES, and the elimination of petty and arbitrary rules.
3. SPECIFIC TRAINING PROGRAMS, affording all employees the opportunity to grow and develop in their work.
4. WRITTEN, ACCURATE JOB DESCRIPTIONS, which reflect the work we really perform, and which place a reasonable limit on "other duties as assigned."
5. JOB POSTING AND PROMOTION PROGRAM, notifying employees of all openings and establishing objective criteria for advancement.

6. GRIEVANCE PROCEDURE, an orderly system for solving problems and resolving complaints.
7. EQUAL PAY FOR EQUAL WORK, and the end of all forms of employment discrimination.

These standards are based on a simple fact that employers refuse to accept—that clerical workers, like other workers, want dignity and respect, decent wages and working conditions, and the chance to move up.

Ultimately, these standards must be guaranteed and enforced through collective bargaining. Contracts which include the elements listed above will not only improve day-to-day conditions, eliminate pay discrimination within job categories, but will enable clerical workers to obtain the dignity and respect they deserve.

Through the efforts of Women Employed, an organization of working women committed to achieving rights and respect in the office, women are beginning to win improvements in office policies, wages, and working conditions, and beginning to examine the possibilities for unionization to guarantee and institutionalize basic rights of decency and fairness in the office. The organization's six years of experience demonstrates that the growing force of women clerical workers may be invisible in terms of corporate attitudes and policies, but it will no longer be silent.

APPENDIX A: LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Today, approximately 51% of all women, nearly 43 million, work. Since 1965, nearly 60% of the net growth in the U.S. labor force has been due to women, who now account for approximately 42% of the entire U.S. workforce.

Of the 43 million women workers, 5.4 million are members of minority groups. Fifty-two per cent of all minority women are now in the labor force—a percentage which has remained relatively stable over time. In 1948, the proportion of minority working women was 46%.

APPENDIX B: OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYED WOMEN

(ANNUAL AVERAGES)

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>1950</u>	<u>1960</u>	<u>1970</u>	<u>1978</u>
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Professional & technical	12.5	12.4	14.5	16.3
Managers & administrators	4.4	5.0	4.5	6.1
Sales	8.7	7.7	7.0	6.9
Clerical	27.8	30.3	34.5	35.0
Craft	1.5	1.0	1.1	1.6
Operatives	19.6	15.2	14.5	11.5
Nonfarm laborers	0.8	0.4	0.5	1.1
Service, except private household	12.4	14.8	16.5	17.6
Private household	8.7	8.9	5.1	3.0
Farm	3.6	4.4	1.8	0.9

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

APPENDIX C: MAJOR OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS OF EMPLOYED MINORITY WOMEN

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>1960</u>	<u>1970</u>	<u>1978</u>
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Professional & technicals	6.9	10.8	14.3
Managers & administrators	1.8	1.9	3.0
Sales workers	1.5	2.5	3.0
Clerical workers	9.3	20.8	27.3
Operatives	14.1	17.6	15.1
Private household workers	35.1	17.5	8.0
Other service workers	21.4	25.6	26.3
Other occupations	10.0	3.1	3.0

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

APPENDIX D: DISTRIBUTION OF CHANGES IN EMPLOYMENT
FOR WOMEN, 1970 - 1985

Employment Increase (in millions) - 7.6

Percent Distribution of Increase:

Professionals & technicals	8.2%
Managers & administrators	3.6
Sales workers	10.1
Clerical workers	44.4
Craftsmen & foremen	3.4
Operatives	7.4
Service workers	23.9
Laborers, except farm	0.1
Farm occupations	-1.1
Total	100.0

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

APPENDIX E: INCREASES IN AVERAGE PAY RATES IN THE CHICAGO AREA, MAY 1978

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>% Increase May 1977-78</u>
Clerical workers	7.1%
Secretary	7.6
Stenographer	9.2
Typist	7.0
Messenger	3.7
File Clerk	2.7
Computer related jobs	7.6
Skilled maintenance trades	8.6
Unskilled plant workers	8.7
Industrial nurses	8.7

Source: U.S. Department of Labor; BLS, Chicago Area Wage Survey, 1978

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