

Columbia Breaches Pay Equity Agreement

Graciela Chichilnisky *should* feel vindicated. She has been a tenured professor at Columbia University since 1979, has held numerous academic positions at notable institutions around the globe, served as a UNESCO chair, and is well recognized in the fields of economics and mathematics. When Chichilnisky had to contend with the prestigious university once before for sex discrimination and pay inequity, she came away with a substantial settlement agreement. But the economics professor has had a difficult time achieving a sense of vindication in the years following the settlement, and now she's suing the institution again: this time, for failure to keep the promises it made under the agreement.



Chichilnisky filed the second lawsuit in New York state court on March 1, 2000, alleging breach of the settlement agreement, retaliation, and sex discrimination. The filing came on the heels of an incident that occurred just days before, when Columbia began aggressively dismantling the office space of its Program on Information and Resources, of which Chichilnisky was the director. When she entered the offices on Feb. 28, she found three workstations destroyed and six computers that contained critical records and research disconnected, stacked precariously, and rendered inoperable. This episode was the culmination of numerous retaliatory incidents that occurred since the initial settlement agreement in 1995.

The basis of her first suit surfaced in 1984, when she became aware of a gross disparity between her salary and those of her male counterparts. About a year later, she obtained information revealing that she earned roughly 30 percent less than the median salary of her male colleagues at the same rank in her department. After futile

attempts to remedy this salary discrepancy, in 1991 Chichilnisky filed suit in federal district court as the lead plaintiff in a class action lawsuit against university. The complaint alleged that Columbia had violated both Title VII, which outlaws sex discrimination in employment, and the Equal Pay Act by maintaining a policy of compensating female faculty members considerably less than their male counterparts. The class action portion of the suit was eventually dropped, and the suit was ultimately settled in Chichilnisky's favor. The terms of the settlement agreement are confidential.

Despite Columbia's promises in the settlement agreement to provide Chichilnisky with certain resources for herself and the programs she directs, the promises have been either unfulfilled or retracted. In her lawsuit, Chichilnisky says the instances of retaliation and breach of the settlement agreement intensified in 1999, when Vice Provost Michael Crow was appointed interim head of the Earth Institute, the umbrella unit that administered Chichilnisky's program. Following Crow's appointment, the school froze research funds intermittently and withheld payments to Chichilnisky and her staff and consultants, increasingly hampering her program's ability to function. In 2000 Columbia announced that it would dissolve the UNESCO chair—the position Chichilnisky held.

Since filing her second suit, Chichilnisky agreed to mediation and engaged in a number of discussions with Columbia and her attorneys regarding enforcement of the settlement agreement, all of which have proven unsuccessful.

In November 2002 the LAF Board of Directors awarded Graciela Chichilnisky \$10,000 plus an additional \$5,000 from a Rockefeller Family Foundation grant. ■

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