



Mo’Nique’s Plight is not Unique – Pay Equity and Race

Insights

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Tinseltown stars have always had a special place in our hearts. Their portrayals of characters brought to life from our favorite books or screenplays so often teach us lessons about ourselves, life, and those around us. What we hadn’t bargained for, however, is how much they seem to be showing us about employment law lately. The newest lesson—pay equity.

I recently wrote a post about the pay inequities of Mark Walberg and Michelle Williams for their reshoots for the movie, “All the Money In the World.” But the current conversation started by actress and comedienne Mo’Nique brings to the forefront another dynamic to the pay equity discussion—the impact of race and ethnicity. Pay inequities are not just about male vs. female comparisons. Often, pay inequities are more prevalent with women of color.

Last Equal Pay Day, it was reported that while women overall are paid 80 cents for every dollar men earn, the pay gap is far worse when broken down by race and ethnicity. Black women reportedly earn 63 cents for every dollar white men made, and Latinas earn just 54 cents. These statistics are sobering. Mo’Nique’s story drives this point home and touches on some of the real-world issues that can create pay disparities.

It began with Mo’Nique posting a video to her Instagram account asking for a boycott of Netflix. She claimed that she was offered \$500,000 to do a one-hour comedy standup special for the network. Meanwhile, Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock each earned \$20 million for their stand up specials, while Amy Schumer earned \$11 million for her special. To Mo’Nique, the disparity was attributable to both gender *and* race.

The internet—in its ultimate Monday-morning quarterbacking wisdom—jumped to several explanations for the disparity. These explanations were not too dissimilar from what you might hear in a traditional office setting regarding pay practices. Comparing how long it has been since Mo’Nique and Amy have had hit movies bears resemblance to concerns about gaps in employment for women. Reports of Mo’Nique’s attitude on set and reported run-ins with Oprah, Lee Daniels, and Tyler Perry sound remarkably like performance review discussions regarding employees who are no longer “team players.” However, these seemingly innocuous and neutral rationalizations could be burying a more insidious problem.

In a vacuum, it might be easy to dismiss Mo’Nique’s claims for any of the myriad reasons people

have mentioned. But she is not the only woman of color celebrity to speak out about pay inequities in the past few weeks. In response to the video, Wanda Sykes tweeted that she had only been offered less than half of Mo’Nique’s \$500,000 for her own special on Netflix. Taraji P. Henson recently categorized the pay she earned while working on “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” as “sofa change” compared to what Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett earned on the same film. Similarly, Octavia Spencer revealed that Jessica Chastain helped Spencer earn five times her normal salary by tying their contracts together in the negotiation process for an upcoming project.

The resumes of these women are nothing to sneeze at. Mo’Nique is an Oscar-award winning actress. Wanda Sykes has a recurring role on one of TV’s best comedies (“Blackish”), and is a tenured comedian still actively performing standup. Taraji P. Henson has won Best Actress awards at the Golden Globes and the Screen Actors Guild. Octavia Spencer has an Oscar, several Screen Actors Guild awards, and a Golden Globe. Given that such drastic pay disparities exist despite their highly acclaimed backgrounds, it is hard to think that race *isn’t* explicitly or *implicitly* in the discussion.

As with most things in Hollywood, these stories are an augmented version of our reality. So, what are employers to do when their workplace is not Tinseltown? What should you do when pay disparities are not as clearly evident, when you are comparing several thousands of dollars instead of several millions of dollars? What do you do when your policies seem like they are neutral on their face but may have a disparate effect on a certain population of workers?

The answer is basic in principle but can be difficult in execution. First, ensure that you are evaluating pay practices to ensure objective criteria are being utilized in determining wage rates. Second, be aware of the role that implicit bias can have on decision-making. Finally, regularly audit pay practices and pay rates in a way that looks beyond just gender.

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