The skinny pink paycheck syndrome

By E.J. Graff and Evelyn Murphy

If the courts aren’t looking, employers throw up every discriminatory hurdle they can to keep women out of a ‘man’s job.’

Fortunately, not anomalies. In 2000, two-thirds of U.S. working women were still crowded into 21 of the Bureau of Labor Statistics 500 occupational categories. The top 10 included receptionist, secretary, cashier, sales worker, registered nurse, elementary school teacher and nursing aide. Women still make up only 2% to 20% of all engineers, police officers, firefighters, mechanics and construction equipment operators, chefs and pastry cooks, and more.

Translation: Women remain ghettoized in jobs with skinny pink paychecks. Employers get away with flagrant violations of the law because there’s no public outcry — indeed, almost no public scrutiny at all.

How can we turn this around? Mayors should be held accountable for the overwhelmingly male police and fire departments. Governors for their state troopers, chief executives for bond traders, and so on. Instead of forcing women into costly and degrading litigation against their employers, let’s shame their bosses into complying with the law. One tough investigative article exposing a boss who preys over an overwhelmingly male workforce can do far more good than a private lawsuit.

So, hurry for San Diego’s Company 22. But let’s light a fire for every other woman who wants a decent job — so that, 40 years from now, women in firefighting are no longer front-page news.

EVELYN MURPHY, the former lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, is founding director of the WAGE Project. E.J. GRAFF is senior researcher at the Brenda Lee Institute for Investigative Journalism, and most recently collaborated on Murphy’s new book, “Getting Even: Why Women Still Don’t Get Paid Like Men — And What to Do About It.”

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