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What's Good for Women is Good for Wal-Mart

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It would be easy for me to ridicule and demonize Wal-Mart for [falsely suggesting](#) that yesterday's Supreme Court ruling in the *Dukes* case "pulls the rug out from under the accusations made against Walmart over the last 10 years."

But I do not come here to bury Wal-Mart but to praise and further inspire it.

But First, the Problem

To remind our readers of the gender inequity evidence the Supreme Court decided couldn't be addressed in a class action, I quote from the Ninth Circuit opinion affirming certification.

[Plaintiffs'] [largely uncontested, descriptive statistics](#) . . . show that women working in [Wal-Mart](#) stores are paid less than men in every region, that pay disparities exist in most job categories,

that the salary gap widens over time even for men and women hired into the same jobs at the same time, that women take longer to enter into management positions, and that the higher one looks in the organization, the lower the percentage of women.

Specifically, while women comprised seventy percent of all hourly Wal-Mart employees, they “ma[d]e up only 33 percent of management.”

Now that Wal-Mart has prevailed in the Supreme Court on a technical procedural ground, it can go back to doing what it does best – engaging in the kind of executive and managerial leadership that has made it the largest private employer in America.

WWSD – What Would Sam Walton Do?

Life-long activist, author and business consultant, [Gloria Feldt](#), knew Sam Walton’s wife and family. She believes Sam would have embraced the *Dukes* controversy as a spring board to create a workplace culture in which everyone has a “fair shake” in pay, promotion and opportunities for advancement.

“I know they believed in fairness and equality in theory,” says Feldt, even though [Wal-Mart has often been demonized](#) as vigorously opposing unions, obtaining its goods from sweat shops and paying its employees so little that many fall beneath the poverty line.

Whether or not Wal-Mart’s founder believed in the core American principles of fairness and equality of opportunity in theory *and* in practice, the litigation has forced its current management to do the right and wise thing in any event.

A Blunt Instrument for Social Change

According to fellow ForbesWoman writer [Kay Hymowitz](#), [a decade ago, when *Wal-Mart v. Dukes* was first filed, 86% of Wal-Mart store managers were male](#). Since *Dukes* was certified in 2004, Wal-Mart

- set up an executive women’s council that offers guidance to the top leaders of Wal-Mart’s foreign operations on everything from training and development to promotions;
- created specific training and mentoring programs to help prepare women for opportunities at all levels in the company; and,
- developed a training program that helps women develop negotiation skills to aid them in dealing with peers and suppliers.

As a result, Wal-Mart represents that the percentage of entry and midlevel women managers has increased to 41.2 percent. [Senior management, however, remains male dominated](#) with only 27% of senior managers being women.

Despite the failure of the *Dukes* case to pass Supreme Court muster, its very existence (and the significant costs of its defense) have done part of the job the action itself was meant to do – change Wal-Mart’s corporate culture in a way that gives women a better chance of success.

What’s Good for Women is Good for Wal-Mart

Sam Walton was a brilliant entrepreneur. Like any good business executive, he’d be shocked and appalled that Wal-Mart’s first-year attrition rate is 70%. He’d be even more disturbed to hear that Wal-Mart itself fixed that loss of human capital on the company’s failure to provide recognition and adequate pay to its employees.

What then, would Sam do?

He'd not only create programs and procedures that encouraged a fair wage, decent benefits and promotional opportunities to all women, he would make sure Wal-Mart's women's initiatives continue to create the change we need to remain a world economic power.

Feldt takes the principles articulated in her must-read book [*No Excuses – 9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think About Power*](#) and applies them to Wal-Mart itself.

1. **Employ every medium to tell the story** about Wal-Mart's efforts to change its corporate culture to one that is woman-friendly, acknowledging that its success is based upon its women employees and customers, both of which form by far the largest percentage of its hourly workers (70%) and consumers (85%);
2. **Let controversy be its teacher** – Take the opportunity the media coverage now affords Wal-Mart to publicly commit itself to becoming a leader in the effort to smash the glass ceiling for women and to achieve, not simply promote, gender equality within the next five years.
3. **Teach its women to recognize, appreciate, embrace and enhance their own value** which will naturally result in their becoming better customer representatives as well as the backbone of a loyal and engaged workforce.
4. **Capture the talent** - Almost every woman begins her career by taking an hourly job somewhere – some of these women stay in low-paying positions for years but others come and go – working to support themselves through school or to obtain technical training. Provide women with a career-enhancing first job, along with benefits such as paid sick days to make work and family life simultaneously possible, and you will have her heart and her mind forever.
5. **Create a scorecard.** If you don't measure your results, you aren't likely to achieve them. Without the accountability of measures that are internally and publicly reported, the effort to achieve goals stalls and fails.
6. **Fund your women's initiative.** Without sufficient monies to create relevant, powerful training programs, your women's initiative will simply be part of your PR campaign to attract customers and employees. Walking the talk means putting your money where your mouth is. If you're committed to diversity, you will adequately capitalize training, mentoring and sponsorship programs.

I'm going to be talking about solutions for gender disparities all week so stay tuned.

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