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Chichilnisky v. Columbia University

Case adopted 11/02

Recent News (updated 7/08)

On June 26, 2008, after a 10 day trial, Chichilnisky settled with Columbia University for an undisclosed amount.

Case History

Graciela Chichilnisky, professor of statistics at Columbia University and UNESCO Professor of Math and Economics, sued the university for pay inequity, retaliation for complaining about pay inequity, and breach of settlement agreement in violation of New York state laws.

Chichilnisky has been a tenured professor at Columbia University since 1979. In 1991, she filed an action in federal district court as the lead plaintiff in a class action lawsuit against Columbia, alleging that the university had committed violations of both Title VII and the Equal Pay Act by maintaining a policy of compensating female faculty members considerably less than their male counterparts. (The basis for this suit surfaced years earlier, when Chichilnisky attained information revealing her salary to be roughly 30 percent lower than the median salary of her male colleagues at the same rank in her department.) The class action portion of the suit was eventually dropped, and the suit ultimately settled in Chichilnisky's favor. She subsequently entered into a settlement agreement in 1995 with Columbia.

Despite Columbia's promises in the settlement agreement to provide Chichilnisky with certain resources for both herself and the programs she directs, Chichilnisky alleges that the promises have been either unfulfilled or retracted. She claims that the instances of retaliation and breach of the settlement agreement intensified and became more frequent upon the appointment in 1999 of Vice Provost Michael Crow as interim head of the Earth Institute. (The Earth Institute is an umbrella unit under which the Program on Information and Resources (PIR), a program of which Chichilnisky is the director, is administrated.) According to Chichilnisky, following Crow's appointment, accounts of research funds were intermittently frozen and payments to Chichilnisky and the other staff and consultants of PIR were withheld, which increasingly hampered PIR's ability to function. Furthermore, in January 2000, Columbia announced that it would dissolve the UNESCO Chair, the position held by Chichilnisky.

Following an incident in late February 2000, when she argues that Columbia began aggressively dismantling the office space of the PIR, Chichilnisky filed the current suit against the university. The university filed counterclaims against Chichilnisky in March 2003, alleging that she breached a duty of loyalty to the university and violated the terms of the 1995 settlement agreement concerning certain teaching responsibilities. In February 2004, the court denied Chichilnisky's motion for summary judgment regarding these counterclaims.

Key Case Issues

Pay inequity, retaliation for complaining about pay inequity, and breach of settlement agreement in violation of New York state laws.

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