

## Workplace equality: Not there yet

Anita Hill says things are better for women in the workplace than they were in 1991 when she got grilled at Clarence Thomas' Supreme Court confirmation hearings

By Joel Mills of the Tribune

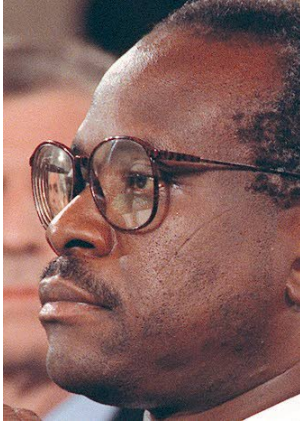
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Anita Hill chats with Carmento Floyd (at left) prior to speaking at the Womens Recognition Luncheon at Washington State University Wednesday.



Anita Hill in 1991



Clarence Thomas

PULLMAN - When Anita Hill testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee's confirmation hearing for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas in 1991, she knew she was in for it.

"They were all white and all wealthy and all out of touch with women's workplace experiences," Hill told a packed ballroom at Washington State University Wednesday.

And even today, the committee has only one female member, Sen. Dianne Feinstein of California.

Now a law professor at the Heller Graduate School at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass., and a visiting professor at Wellesley College, Hill headlined the 12th annual WSU Women's Recognition Luncheon at the Compton Union Building.

Hill, 52, said things have gotten much better for working women since the judiciary committee treated her like a criminal for alleging Thomas sexually harassed her when they worked together. But much work remains to be done, she added.

"Every day someone is confronted with some form of sexual harassment in the workplace," she said.

Perhaps only 10 percent of actual cases are reported, she said. And even when lawsuits are pursued and won, victory can be empty when faced with a drawn-out appeals process.

Even when the righteousness of a case seems patently obvious, as with the Lilly Ledbetter suit against the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co., victory is not assured, she said, because of the conservative slant of the courts.

Ledbetter alleged Goodyear systematically paid her less than her male counterparts, and sued for back wages. Her case went all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled against her on the grounds that she hadn't filed her claim within the statutorily required 180 days from the start of the discrimination.

Hill said the court "contradicted precedent and our better history" with its 2007 ruling. This year, Congress passed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act to reverse the effect of the Supreme Court ruling.

"This decision ignores the reality of the workplace," Hill said, noting Ledbetter went through her entire life savings to fight her case. "The reality is, you're not going to know you're the victim of pay discrimination."

And Hill complained the Supreme Court has lost ground in recent years in terms of gender representation. "We can do better than that, and for the next generation, we ought to do better," she said.

Women make up only a quarter of the sitting federal judiciary, she said. She called on the Obama administration to help fill its 67 vacancies - including 10 in the West's 9th Circuit - with women.

"We need to think about equality and equity and representation for women," she said.

Hill noted former Associate Justice Sandra Day O'Connor once said people will lose confidence in a system not perceived as representing their interests. And she challenged the more than 500 people in attendance to assert their principles in the face of authority, rather than sit back on accepted protocol.

"If you have the information and the ability to share it, you have to share it," she said. "Don't let others define what is in your best interests."

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