

From the time she got her job at Pace Membership Warehouse in Roseville, Calif., in 1993, Claudia Renati was determined to advance. Her husband had been injured and couldn't work, and the housing market plummeted in the early '90s, hitting them hard. "I needed steady income to keep our house," she recalls.

[When Sam's Club, a warehouse retailer owned by Walmart, bought Pace in 1993, Renati was optimistic. The orientation materials described how high-performing employees could take part in the manager-in-training (MIT) program, a prerequisite for shifting from hourly roles to salaried management. She dreamed of running her own store.

"I worked my butt off year after year with excellent reviews," she says. Renati kept asking for promotions. Instead, other people—"the white-boy frat," she says—were put in the positions she sought, and she had to train them. Many didn't have Renati's experience; one was a microbiologist.

At one point, Renati says, a district manager told her that to get into the MIT program, she would have to move to Alaska. She pointed out that she had trained plenty of men who had gotten promotions without uprooting to Alaska and that she was willing to move to other Sam's Clubs in their area to do her training. But this boss wouldn't budge.

Eventually she watched more than a dozen men get promoted over her. She developed depression, anxiety and high blood pressure, all of which she attributes to the stress of what she went through. "A part of you is torn out every time you applied and they never gave you a chance," she says. Each time, she'd come home and cry. "And then I'd get up the next day and go to work."

Renati is hardly the only woman who believes she's been mistreated by Walmart. Women across the country are lodging complaints against the company. From a former employee at a Kentucky store to a current one who has worked at

four different locations in Virginia, the allegations are remarkably similar: the women earned less than men in similar roles, were told that the men needed the money to support their families, were less likely to be promoted, had to train the men who became their supervisors and had their advancement restricted by policies that didn't seem to apply to their male co-workers.

Renati, who left Sam's Club in 2002, says she plans to file suit later this month in California accusing the retail giant of gender discrimination. When she does, she will join several hundred women in at least a dozen states who have filed complaints since the end of last year or will be doing so soon, according to Joseph M. Sellers, an attorney at the law firm Cohen Milstein who has worked on these cases since the 2000s and is coordinating among local counsels.

Walmart says it treats women fairly. "The allegations from these plaintiffs are more than 15 years old and are not representative of the positive experiences millions of women have had working at Walmart," company spokesperson Randy Hargrove wrote in an email. "We've said that if one of these plaintiffs believes they have been treated unfairly, they deserve to have their timely, individual claims heard in court."

That women might earn less than their male counterparts is unsurprising considering that American women still make 20% less than men, with the gap widening for women of color. But the discrepancies in retail are particularly bad: female salespeople made just 74% of what men did in 2017, and female supervisors made 72%, according

to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

As the world's largest private-sector employer, Walmart "is kind of a billboard for what employment practices should or shouldn't be," says Ariane Hegewisch, program director of employment and earnings at the Institute for Women's Policy Research. But while it matters that it's Walmart, "also what matters is really the in-your-face discrimination."

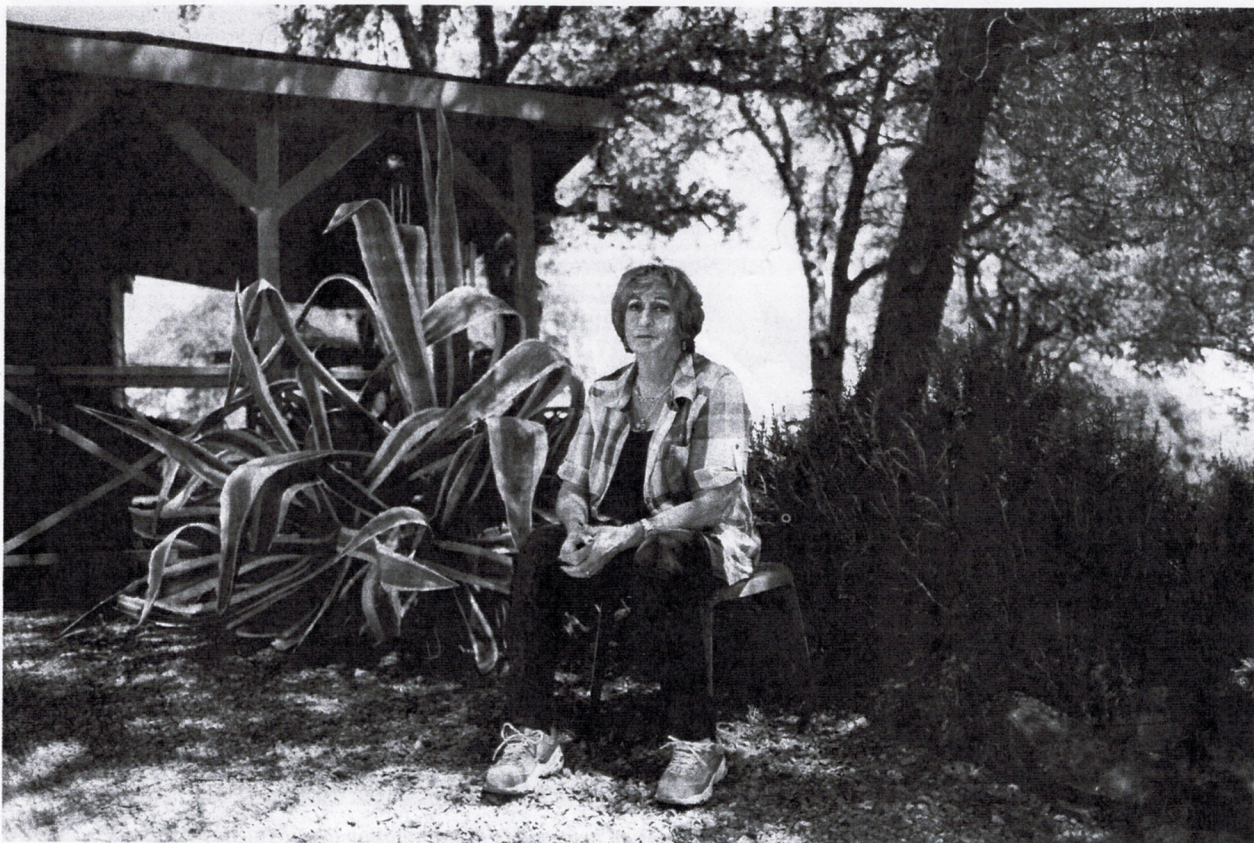
The current political landscape may also heighten interest. After the election of President Trump, the confirmation of Justice Brett Kavanaugh, the cascade of #MeToo accusations and other events that, for many women, highlighted the injustices they have faced for far too long, there's a widespread desire to fight back in the name of a more equitable society.

"If these women are successful in bringing their claims and having their rights vindicated, it's another thing that continues to push us forward at this time that feels in some ways so difficult," says Sarah Fleisch Fink, general counsel and director of workplace policy at the National Partnership for Women & Families.

Even if they aren't, they're likely to add "fuel to the fire," she says. "And I think it's a bigger deal because it's Walmart."

[**THESE CLAIMS** against the world's largest retailer do indeed stretch back two decades. In 2001, a Walmart greeter in Pittsburg, Calif., named Betty Dukes filed a class action, calling the company "an industry leader not only in size, but also in its failure to advance its female employees." Renati was among the first women to join and submitted a declaration to the court detailing her claims.

In a motion for class certification filed



Renati says she wasn't given opportunities to advance at Sam's Club, a Walmart-owned retailer

in 2003, the plaintiffs' attorneys laid out a pattern of discrimination. "What is striking about their stories," they wrote, "is that, even though they worked in different stores, in different states, and in different departments, they experienced the same discriminatory policies and suffered the same adverse effects." They cited an analysis conducted on behalf of the plaintiffs finding that in 2001, women made up 67% of the company's hourly workers but only about 14% of store managers; their ranks thinned at every step up the company's hierarchy.

According to the motion, there was no official system for applying for promotions and open positions weren't posted anywhere; instead, people were promoted by getting tapped on the shoulder, allowing managers' preferences to outweigh experience. Managers likewise had broad discretion about pay, which meant women kept finding out that men in the same jobs were making more. Walmart also had a policy that employees had to be willing to relocate in order to train for a management role—a deal breaker for many women with families. And, the motion says, women were consistently placed in so-called "soft line" departments like cosmetics or clothing, while men oversaw "hard lines" like

sporting goods, electronics and gardening, which were higher-grossing and better positioned them to move up. A later analysis would find that similarly qualified men were three to four times as likely to be promoted as women and that women were paid less than men across stores, even when controlling for experience, performance and position.

Discriminating against female employees has been illegal since the 1960s, when the Equal Pay Act barred unequal pay for equal work and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act banned discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. Under these laws, women still have to file lawsuits and prove they've been mistreated. Former Goodyear employee Lilly Ledbetter, for example, didn't find out she was being underpaid until she had worked at a tire plant for almost 20 years. The Supreme Court ruled in 2007 that she had run out of time to file her lawsuit under Title VII. But the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, signed by President Obama in 2009, gave women more time to file claims. Democrats in Congress have also repeatedly introduced the Paycheck Fairness Act, which they say would close loopholes in the Equal Pay Act and promote pay transparency but opponents

argue would be a gift to trial lawyers.

In the Walmart case, the women claimed the company had violated their rights under Title VII. Lower courts certified the Dukes class, but in 2011 the Supreme Court ruled that the plaintiffs—as many as 1.5 million female employees—did not have enough in common to be considered a class.

"That was just a blow," Renati says. "It was just overwhelming sadness that nothing happened for me, that I didn't get my day in court ... It left an open wound that's never healed."

Originally the plan was to regroup the claims into regional classes. Then in 2018, the Supreme Court ruled in an unrelated case that after a class action is struck down, the subsequent lawsuits have to be brought individually, not as smaller classes, to be considered timely.

It was yet another setback but not one that would cause the women to abandon their complaints. After all, attorneys for the plaintiffs point out, the courts haven't ruled on the actual claims. So far, their hurdles have been procedural.

While they can no longer band together in a single lawsuit, the women believe there's still value in coordinating with one another. A united front delivers