WASHINGTON -- Two Democratic senators are pressing for legislation that could mean higher pay for women in the work force.

Sens. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., and Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, this week introduced the Paycheck Fairness Act and 2007 Fair Pay Act bills, respectively, to address salary inequities and create more training programs for women.

Evelyn Murphy, president of The WAGE Project Inc., said women make 77 cents for every dollar that a white male earns.

"Women don't see that because it comes off as little nicks in her paycheck," she said at a hearing of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee.

Clinton's bill would ban employers from retaliating against employees who disclose their salaries and would allow women to sue for punitive damages when they feel they face wage discrimination. Harkin's bill would require employers to provide equal pay for jobs that are comparable in skill, effort, responsibility and working conditions.

Murphy, who earned a doctorate in economics at Duke University, said a high school graduate will make $700,000 less than her male counterpart throughout her career, college graduates would earn $1.2 million less, and a woman with a graduate degree would earn $2 million less throughout her career.

Mary Paterson, president of the Chapel Hill chapter of the American Association of University Women, said there should no longer be pay differentials between genders.

"In my own experience I was not compensated as much as men were and I resented that deeply," she said. "I was of the generation that went gladly out to work because we felt liberated. Now day care is extremely expensive and a lot of times that takes up a large part of the woman's income."

She said single women raising children need that extra money to support their families.

Philip Cohen, associate professor and director of graduate studies at UNC, said lower pay for women equates to higher poverty.

"The economic, social and political engines of gender equality in this country seem to have lost steam in the last 10 years," he said. "The benefits of the equal pay for women are far reaching."

Nearly 23 percent of children in Durham County from birth to age 5 live below the poverty line, according to the Durham Partnership for Children's Web site.

At a Senate committee hearing, Sen. Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., said employer discrimination is not the only factor contributing to wage inequity.

"Just as we should be wary of government intervention to manipulate wage rates that are the function of individual choice, we must be aggressive in pursuing initiatives that eradicate wage disparity through training and education," Enzi said.

Harkin said the government needs stricter penalties for companies that do not pay equally for equal work.

"Individual women should not have to do battle in order to win equal pay," Harkin said. "We need more inclusive national laws to make equal pay for equal work a basic standard -- and a legal right -- in the American workplace."