

Report card: Tri-State lags in status of women

By Gigi Verna

When it comes to the status of their female citizens, Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana recently brought home a report card that should have landed the region in the woodshed. The report card, "Status of Women in the States," was released Nov. 19 by the Institute for Women's Policy Research in Washington, D.C.

The IWPR, in a project funded primarily by the Ford Foundation, took a look at several factors that relate to women's overall well-being and graded and ranked each state. The organization used data from a variety of sources, mainly from federal agencies.

Ohio scored better than its two neighboring states, but its results were nevertheless not too stellar:

- D- in political participation. Only 66.3 percent of Ohio women registered to vote in 1998 and 2000 and only 52.2 percent actually voted in those years, giving the state a ranking of 43 out of 50. Between 1996 and 2000, the number of female elected officials in Ohio declined by more than 20 percent, while their numbers increased nationally.
- C- in employment and earnings. The IWPR said the median annual earnings for Ohio women employed full time were \$26,717 in 1999, ranking it 32nd among the states and the District of

Columbia. Women make up 31.1 percent of those in professional or managerial positions. In 2001 Ohio women earned 70.7 percent of what men earned, compared to U.S. women as whole, who earn 73.5 percent of what men do.

- C in economic autonomy. This was the state's best performance, ranking it 25th. Health insurance covered 87.5 percent of Ohio women in 2000, and 91.3 percent of Ohio women live above the poverty line, compared with 88 percent nationally. As of 1990, 14.4 percent of women in the state had four or more years of college.

- F in reproductive rights. This was based on several variables, including legal access to abortion, laws requiring contraceptive and infertility coverage by employers, gay-lesbian adoption rights and sex education.

- C- in health and well-being. According to the IWPR, Ohio women had above-average rates of heart disease, lung and breast cancer mortality, diabetes and chlamydia (a venereal disease). On the bright side, Ohio had rates of AIDS and suicide mortality that were much lower than the national average.

Amy Hanauer, executive director of Policy Matters Ohio, a Cleveland nonprofit concerned with economic policy and working people, said the results reflect the culture of the state.

"I think that Ohio does not value women in their roles," she said.

The fact that the state's economy is still focused on manufacturing plays a significant role in how women fare, Hanauer said. Women have a much harder time moving into management, and particularly CEO jobs, in manufacturing companies. On the other hand, she said, unionized manufacturers tend to provide good health benefits, which could be a reason Ohio women score better in health and well-being.

It could be worse, however. Kentucky's and Indiana's report cards make Ohio look good by comparison. In fact, both states were ranked among the "worst states for women" by the IWPR, with overall rankings of 49 and 43, respectively. Kentucky rated a D- in political participation, a D in employment and earnings, a D+ in economic autonomy, a D+ in reproductive rights and an F in health and well-being. Indiana received a C in political participation, a D in employment and earnings, a C- in economic autonomy, a C- in reproductive rights and a C in health and well-being.

The best states for women in the United States, according to the IWPR are Massachusetts, Minnesota and Vermont, which tied for first place. The organization rated Mississippi the worst state for women.

One bright spot for Ohio is the increasing number of women who are going into business for themselves. Ohio ranked 16th nationwide according to 1992 figures, the IWPR said.

Hanauer noted that while women-owned businesses tend to be smaller they are growing and, because most are in the service rather than the manufacturing sector, will help to move Ohio away from that concentration.

"It's going to be a very different economy," she said. "I think it's a great step forward."

A local entrepreneur, Vanessa Freytag, president of W-Insights Inc., agreed, but noted that the pace of change was what counted. The problem, she said, is that women-owned businesses have a tough time getting contracts from big corporations.

"I continue to hear from women that getting entree to a procurement office (is difficult)," she said. And women vendors are often the first to be cut when companies, to save money, decide to "roll up" their contracts and go with a smaller number of vendors, which invariably are the larger ones. That is also true of the federal government, she said, which says it wants to give more contracts to women and minorities but hasn't done so yet.

"A natural progression is happening," Freytag said of women's business growth, "but change has been so slow."

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