

Foundation Rips Status of Women in State
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By Carol Ness

California deserves a solid D when it comes to treatment of women and girls, according to a report card issued by the Women's Foundation.

"If my child brought this report card home from school, he'd be grounded," foundation President Patti Chang said as she, and a panel of progressive women's advocates, made the report public Thursday.

The report card, the foundation's first, evaluated women's progress -- or lack of it -- in five areas.

The only decent grade, a B, went to the category of women in politics. The education of women and girls earned a C-plus.

In the area of economic equality, the state earned a D. And for its treatment of immigrant women and the surging number of women and girls behind bars, California earned F's.

This adds up to a 1.2 GPA, or a solid D, Chang said. The report card was compiled from a wide array of statistics culled from government documents, newspapers, scholarly works and activist groups by the foundation, working with the Data Center of Oakland.

The Women's Foundation, entering its 20th year as the oldest and largest philanthropic organization for women in the West, issued the report card as part of a \$5 million, five-year, fundraising drive to resurrect the women's movement in California and provide training in policy action.

That would equal the amount of money the foundation has given about 500 nonprofit groups that have helped hundreds of thousands of women around the state over the past two decades.

"We thought it was time to assess not only where we've come from, but also where we need to go," said Chang.

Study's findings

Among the findings:

California women work a disproportionate number of minimum- and low-wage jobs.

They hold 59 percent of jobs paying \$4.75 an hour, and 70 percent of those paying \$5.15 an hour – in a state where \$12.46 an hour is deemed the level needed for an adult with two children to be self-sufficient.

California women earned an average of \$18,842 a year, compared with \$31,447 for men, in 1997.

Fifteen percent of California women live at or below the poverty line, compared with 13.7 percent nationally.

Ethel Long-Scott, executive director of the Women's Economic Agenda Project in Oakland, said the welfare cuts of 1996 may have pushed many families off the rolls – but not necessarily into jobs.

They've led to the "feminization of skid rows," she said.

"We've gone from one in five children in poverty to one in four, nationally," she said.

Fighting poverty

The problem goes beyond earning a living wage, she said. People need to be able to earn enough to lift themselves out of poverty – a level she put at \$15 an hour.

Immigrants, especially women and children, "are the poorest of the poor," said Martha Jimenez, of the Latino Coalition for a Healthy California and Public Advocates.

"Our state received a whopping F when it comes to immigrants," she said. "That F is not for fairness. It's for fear, frustration and failure."

The report says immigrants work in the most underpaid industries – as farm workers, garment workers and domestics.

Los Angeles is the largest garment-making center in the country, employing an estimated 160,000, mostly immigrants. Nationally, 75 percent of garment workers are women.

In California, the average hourly wage of women garment workers fell from \$6.36 in 1988 to \$5.62 in 1993, the report says.

The number of women in prison has increased more than 1,000 percent since 1981, from 1,010 to 11,505. Three-quarters are mothers.

Four-fifths are locked up for nonviolent crimes such as credit card theft, larceny and drug offenses.

The rise reflects the impact of welfare cuts and mandatory drug sentences, according to Robin Levi, of the Women's Institute for Leadership Development for Human Rights.

"More women have had to commit crimes of survival to feed their families," she said.

Behind bars, the women suffer gross abuse and neglect by mostly male guards. They're raped, beaten and routinely denied basic medical care, Levi said.

In education, the news was brighter. More than half of California women had more than a high school education, compared to the national average of 43 percent.

Half the students in UC's professional schools were women in 1996, the report says.

But over the past 10 years, the number of girls in math and science classes has hardly changed, the report said. Only one public school among 80 surveyed over the last four years was found in compliance with gender equity laws. And surveys from the early 1990s said sexual harassment of girls as young as 8 was rampant.

In politics, California women have fared best. Their number in the Legislature has increased from two in 1972 to 30 in 1999, 25 percent of the seats. That's ahead of the national average of 22 percent. Still, California lags behind all of its western neighbors.

REPORT CARD ON WOMEN

Among statistics in the 1999 California Report Card on Women's and Girls' Lives:

Politics

Percent of women legislators:

Washington 41% Arizona 36% Nevada 36% Colorado 33% Oregon 30%
California 25% National 22%

In 1993, only 15% of the 1,496 sitting judges in California were women.

Economic equality

* Wage gap between California women and men who work full time: 76.4%

* Percent of women among Californians earning \$4.75 an hour: 58.7

* Percentage earning \$5.15 or less: 70

* The self-sufficiency wage for an adult with two children: \$12.46 an hour

* Percent of working women in California who have children under 6 years old:

* 65

* Number of California children on a waiting list for state child care: 200,000

* Percent of income families below the poverty level spend on child care: 23.2

* Percent spent by families above the poverty line: 8.7

Education

* In 1996, the proportion of women among students in UC's professional schools: 50%; Among UC master's students: 48%; Among doctoral candidates: 41%

* The number of public school districts, among 60 surveyed since 1994, who met decades-old gender equity laws: 1

* From 1987 to 1997, amount by which enrollment of high school girls in first-year physics rose: From 3% to 4%; In chemistry: 8% to 10%; In advanced math: From 6% to 10%

* In 1992, girls ages 8 to 11 reported being harassed in school: 85%

Immigrants

* Immigrants among the 160,000 workers in Los Angeles' garment industry: Most

* Nationally, garment workers who are women: 75%

* Amount the average hourly wages of California garment workers dropped from

* 1988 in 1993: 74 cents from \$6.36 to \$5.62

* The number of Department of Labor investigations of California garment manufacturers in April, May and June 1998: 101

* The number of violations: 72

* Wages owed for just those three months: \$347,000

Women in prisons

* The rate at which women in California prisons has grown since 1981: 1,000%

* The proportion of women who earned less than \$2,000 in the year before they went to prison: 80%

* Proportion who earned less than \$10,000: 92%

* Proportion who are minorities: 62%

* Proportion who are nonviolent offenders: 80%