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2011-2012 Status of Women and Girls in Maine

Permanent Commission on the Status of Women

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2011- 2012
Status of Women
and Girls in Maine



About the Report

The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (Commission) is pleased to present this initial report on the status of women and girls in Maine. We hope the report initiates a conversation among policy makers and the general public about the opportunities and challenges that exist for women and girls in Maine. The report focuses on **five dimensions** that contribute to the quality of life and opportunity for women and girls: Education; Economic Security; Health; Safety and Well-being; Leadership and Public Life. The report provides selected data to highlight the status of women and girls in each dimension and to provide an overview of where women and girls in Maine stand relative to their male counterparts, peers in neighboring states and the nation. The report draws on and makes reference to more in-depth studies and data on specific topics within each dimension.

Our goals in preparing the report are:

- To define the areas that have the most impact on opportunities for women and girls to succeed;
- To identify data that helps us understand how women and girls are faring in Maine;
- To identify gaps in the data that may limit our understanding and ability to improve opportunities for women and girls in the State;
- To point towards changes in public policy that may contribute to improving the lives of women and girls.

The vision of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women is that all women and girls in Maine fulfill their highest potential as individuals and contribute to their community.

Next Steps

This report provides a broad overview of the status of women and girls in Maine with regards to five specific dimensions and points to areas for both maximizing progress and for improving the lives and wellbeing of females in Maine. However, this report is in no way comprehensive. Specifically, the opportunities and challenges for subpopulations of women are not included, most notably females representing diverse racial and ethnic communities including Native Americans. The usefulness of this report is hampered by these limitations. Additional data, research and analysis is needed to more completely understand the full picture of women's status in Maine. Future efforts should concentrate on discovering the finer differences among women including racial diversity, people with disabilities, women in the military, and women as leaders at all levels of government, public life, and the private sector.

Executive Summary

Recognizing the importance of understanding, supporting and enhancing women's role in American society, President Obama created the White House Council on Women and Girls in 2009. In March 2011, this Council released a statistical report summarizing the status of women and girls in America. The report highlighted five domains of women's lives and provided a broad summary of trends within these five domains, including continuing areas for improvement. This report made clear that while women have made significant progress in some areas over the past twenty years, such as educational attainment and labor force participation, they continue to experience considerable inequality in income and wages, and high rates of poverty. Addressing these challenges often requires state-level solutions through public policy and services, generating the need for a better understanding of how women and girls fare in specific states.

In 2011, the Permanent Commission on Women and Girls in Maine undertook a similar statistical review, to gain an understanding of areas for opportunities and challenges in women's lives in the State. The data was organized into five primary dimensions: Education, Economic Security, Health, Safety and Wellbeing, and Leadership in Public Life. Though there is clear overlap between these dimensions, this categorization provides a foundational framework for future research and facilitates the identification of areas for strengthening the status and wellbeing of women and girls in Maine.

Maine is a rural state, ranking only 38th in the United States for population density, and is estimated to be the 'oldest' state in the Union by 2020, based on the percentage of state residents over the age of 65. Just over half (51.1%) of the State's 1.32 million residents are female, with 14.3% of Maine's female population under the age of 25 and 17% 65 years or older, compared with 15% of the male population under 25 and 14% of males being 65 years or older.

Education

In Maine, on average, females consistently seek education, stay in school, and graduate at post-high school levels at greater rates than males. As young as fourth grade, girls in Maine are reading at higher levels than boys, though they rank last compared to neighboring New England states in the percent that are at or above reading proficiency for their grade level. Fifty-seven percent of Maine women over the age of 25 have some college education, and the University of Maine System campuses graduate more females than males, almost 2:1, at all degree levels. Unfortunately, mirroring national trends, women in Maine continue to pursue educational programs that lead to traditionally female-dominated occupations, with historically lower pay scales and fewer non-monetary benefits. Conversely, females represent far less than a half of post-high school students in higher-paying disciplines such as Math (34%), Physical Sciences (42%) and Engineering (9%).

Economic Security

Women's participation in the labor force in Maine has risen steadily over the past twenty years. In 2010, females made up just under half (49%) of Maine's overall labor force while 61% of females 16 years and older were working, slightly higher than the national average (59%) for this age group. While women have experienced lower unemployment rates than men in recent years, more women are employed part-time often in jobs lacking benefits such as health insurance, sick leave, or retirement savings. Rates of poverty, homelessness and unemployment have not diminished with women's increasing participation in the labor market. In Maine, the wage gap based on gender is 78.5%, almost two percent higher than the national average. The largest earning differences are between men and women with graduate degrees, a difference of almost \$19,000 in annual median earnings.

Women and girls in Maine also face unique challenges and opportunities maintaining economic security, specifically due to age and lifespan. Women are over-represented in every age group over 35 years old. Seventeen percent of women are 65 years or older, compared to only 14% of men who are 65 years or older. Women also live approximately 5 years longer, on average, than their male counterparts, creating the need for income longer and exacerbating the challenges caused by earning less over a lifetime. Women also continue to be the primary caregivers of both children and aging parents, and are more likely than men to be the single heads of household. Ten percent of all households in Maine are run by single mothers, compared to less than 5% that are run by single fathers. These households experience more and deeper levels of poverty, and most report having very young children; 40% of single mothers in Maine live in poverty.

Health

Maine has made important strides with regards to improving the health of women and girls, and all residents, over the past twenty years. Maine's adolescent pregnancy rate has decreased 48% since 1988, making it one of the lowest in the nation. Approximately 40% of births in Maine were unplanned, compared to the 50% national average. Heart disease mortality and hospitalizations for depression and related mental health issues among women have been declining since 1999. Only 12% of Maine women do not have health insurance, ranking the state 11th best in the country. Maine also has a strong and consistent history of implementing anti-tobacco programming, ranking 7th best in the nation in 2010 for preventing youth from taking up smoking. However, funding for these programs have been cut in recent years and approximately 1 in 4 (25%) of young women in the state smoke, compared to approximately 20% for the nation. Obesity rates in Maine have increased steadily over the past fifteen years, with approximately 30% of all residents reporting being obese and almost 60% of women reporting being overweight or obese. These factors of course contribute to increased risk for other health issues, including anxiety, heart disease, and substance abuse.

Safety and Well-Being

Maine has some of the most comprehensive and thoughtful laws in the United States regarding domestic violence, sexual violence, and stalking. In 1991, Maine enacted first in the nation legislation requiring employers to post notices and conduct training on preventing sexual harassment in the workplace. In 1999, Maine created a first in the nation law requiring employers to provide unpaid leave for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking to attend court proceedings and seek medical treatment. Maine was one of the first states to include animals in domestic violence protection orders.

Despite Maine's strong public policy infrastructure, these crimes continue to be the most pervasive threat to the safety of women and girls in the state. Stalking, domestic and sexual violence and sexual harassment significantly impact Maine women and girls across economic, ethnic, racial, and age spectrums. As is true nationally, Maine women and girls report being victims of interpersonal violence at significantly higher rates than males. More than 40% of all Maine homicides each year are related to domestic violence or child abuse; domestic violence is the leading cause of homicide for females. Sexual violence rates among women are similarly high. In 2011, 86% of victims who called Maine's sexual assault crisis and support line were female. In a recent statewide study, 32.1% of Maine women surveyed and 5.3% of Maine men surveyed reported experiencing rape or sexual assault at some point in their lives.

Specific populations may be at heightened risk for domestic and sexual violence. Domestic violence victims are among the five primary subpopulations of homeless Mainers, with 12% of shelter clientele reporting domestic violence as the primary reason for their homelessness. Approximately 44% of homeless women surveyed had experienced rape or sexual assault since becoming homeless.

The consequences of these crimes jeopardize Maine women and girls' economic stability and health, often resulting in long-term emotional, social, and economic problems for individuals and communities. Victims of interpersonal crimes are more likely to experience other crimes as well. Stalking victims are twice as likely to be a victim of property or violent crime (34%) as opposed to those who have not experienced stalking (13.3%). The effects of violence against women are interconnected with poverty, homelessness, and other forms of victimization.

Leadership and Public Life

Maine has a rich history of women's participation in leadership and public life, an important indicator of women's overall status and wellbeing, and takes credit for a number of national 'firsts' in this arena. The trend begins early with high percentages of school-age girls engaging in community-oriented and civic leadership activities. In 2009, 48% of high school and 51% of middle school girls in public schools in Maine reported feeling as though they mattered to their community. Approximately, 50% of middle school girls also spend time outside of school engaged in club or service activities. Unfortunately, participation and enthusiasm wanes as girls age. While three of Maine's four Congress-people are female, in 2010 women only made up 28% of the State's legislature and had lost ground from the almost 30% of positions they held in 2008. Maine is also one of 24 states in the country, and one of two (along with Rhode Island) in New England, that has yet to elect a female governor.

We are grateful to the voluntary efforts of those who contributed to this report. They include:

- Members of the Commission, Report Subcommittee: Denis Culley, Karen Keim, Robyn Merrill, Karen Raye, Elizabeth Ward Saxl, Eloise Vitelli, Megan Williams
- Alyra Denisovitch, student intern, for assistance in data gathering and fact checking.
- Anna Melbin, whose writing skills significantly moved the project forward by providing a narrative framework for the report.
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The Commission, established by statute in 2010, is charged with researching and reporting on the status of women and advocating for improving the opportunities afforded them. We look forward to further editions of this report and welcome comments and questions as we seek to improve and expand upon this work.

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**For more information about the Commission and its work,
please visit: www.maine.gov/sos/womens-comm.htm**