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Integrating Women's Voices into Public Policy

BY MOLLIE HOBEN

Women are Minnesota's greatest untapped resource. Despite significant growth in the visibility of women in public life, the talents and contributions of Minnesota's female citizens are not yet being fully utilized. In this last decade of the century, the state faces policy challenges in human services, the environment, the economy. To most effectively meet these challenges, we need to find ways to integrate women's voices more fully into public policy.

Meeting this challenge is in everyone's interest for several reasons. For one thing, it will make our public endeavors more equitable. Any society that makes decisions for all based on the experiences of a minority (white males, by and large Minnesota's decision-makers, constitute about 47 percent of the state's population) is depriving itself of a critical data base that would enrich those decisions. It is human nature to notice and respond to what you have personally experienced, and even well-meaning men may overlook implications of decisions they make for the lives of women or children. Further, because women don't have the same investment in "the system" as those who have always viewed themselves heirs to its rewards, they may be able to see and articulate new ways to frame ideas, new approaches to implementing these ideas, new standards for measuring their success.

An infusion of women's voices and perspectives into the various decision-making bodies and processes of our state is important for another reason, too: It promises greater possibility for transforming and enriching our public policy. Women will bring perceptions and priorities to the public arena that are missing or muted now. Integrating what are generally seen as "female values," such as nurturance and cooperation, into our public policy and our cultural norms increases chances for a more respectful, equitable, and humane society for all.

Benefits of Integrating Women's Voices

At its most basic level, the "women's movement" of the past 25 years has been about women finding their own voices, learning to trust them, and daring to go public with them. In those years, Minnesota's women have made heartening strides in entering and becoming key players in the public arena. And the evidence shows that when women's voices are part of the public discussion and the decision-making, good things happen.

In the legislative process, for example, having more women involved in writing laws has meant that some important topics are receiving more attention than they used to. Analyses of Congressional voting patterns have shown

that while female legislators come in all political stripes, just as men do, they tend, on the whole, to put more priority on children, women, and family issues than men.

"Women [in the Minnesota Legislature] do not vote together on issues as a block," wrote Judy Corrao, observer of the Minnesota political scene and active member of the Minnesota Women's Political Caucus. "A common thread, however runs through [their actions]. All the women in the Legislature are concerned about needs of families, women, and children. Women want to give our kids a good start."

In government offices, as well, women have made a difference. From her position as Lt. Governor, Marlene Johnson, for example, promoted her children's agenda, which has kept issues related to children in the public debate to an extent they had not been before. Minnesota was the first state in the country to establish a system of pay equity for public employees. This was achieved by the strong voices and hard work of women in positions of influence, most visibly Commissioner of Employee Relations, Nina Rothchild.

The same dynamic has been at work in other institutions of our society, such as the courts, education, media, churches, business.

In the courts, the influence of women has been key in changing attitudes about women and the crimes that happen to them, the crimes they commit. It is no coincidence that the task force on gender fairness in the courts, which made major recommendations for how courts can become more receptive and fair places for women, was led by two women—Supreme Court Justice Rosalie Wahl and Rep. Ember Reichgott.

In the schools, too, women have taken the lead, pushing for gender-fair curricula that integrate women's experiences into both the content of what is taught and the process of how it is taught. A long struggle, in which key players were women, resulted two years ago in establishment of a state rule that requires every district to adopt a plan for gender-fair curricula. Minnesota was the first state to enact such a requirement. As schools slowly move toward this goal, educators find that changes they achieve in content and approach make education stronger for all students. Learning more about what educator/philosopher Jane Roland Martin calls the three Cs—caring, cooperation, and connection—begins to be recognized as necessary as learning the three Rs.

In the media, both locally and nationally, adding women's perspectives to news reporting has meant expansion of the definition of "newsworthy." As the National Women and Media Collection at the University of Missouri School of Journalism reported, "Women communicators have brought subjects into the national conversation [such as] nutrition, families, values, child abuse, incest, wife beating."

In the churches and synagogues, as more women enter the pastorate, the definition of ministering expands. Women are

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more likely to see that ministering is needed not only from the pulpit and the pastor's office, but out in the community. Language becomes more inclusive, helping all worshippers enlarge their awareness of the nature of spirituality and the divine.

Progressive businesses have been realizing that approaches typically seen as "female"—with emphasis on communication, collaboration, personal managing—mean good business. The increased presence of women in the workforce (in Minnesota more than 60 percent of all women work for pay outside the home) is pressuring businesses to recognize that family issues are workplace issues, affecting the morale and productivity of workers. Meanwhile, much of the energy and growth of entrepreneurship is being fueled by women these days, with women starting new businesses at a rate five times that of men.

In each of the institutions of society, when women's voices begin to be heard, the institutions begin to become more responsive, more inclusive, more relevant. This is not because women are better decision-makers or policy setters than men, but because, as Harvard psychologist and ethicist Carol Gilligan has shown, women tend to speak "in a different voice" than men do. The voice is the expression of experience, and women's and men's experiences in this society are, in some significant ways, very different from each other. This difference becomes especially significant when it comes to questions of values, which, of course, are what undergird our public-policy decisions.

Slow changes

Despite the obvious benefits that accrue for society when we hear more women's voices in public discussion and policy setting, the progress is slow. Numbers don't tell all the story, but they show us that despite positive changes, the volume of women's voices still is far too low. Consider:

- Women comprise 21 percent of the State Legislature. In public bodies, they are best-represented on school boards, where they are 27 percent of school board members. Only 10 percent of county commissioners in the state are women. At the national level, women fill five percent of Congressional seats, and no women represent Minnesota in Washington. The first and last woman elected to Congress from Minnesota was Coya Knutson in 1955.
- Women fill less than five percent of public school superintendencies in Minnesota. They still sit in only a small number of principals' offices. The gender-fair curriculum rule faces ongoing resistance; last year the deadline for implementing it was pushed back again.
- The offices of CEOs of major corporations in Minnesota all are filled with men, and of major officers and management positions, only 7.5 percent are women.
- While women's presence in seminaries and theological schools is increasing, women pastors and rabbis are still the exception. There continues, of course, to be no women priests in the Catholic Church.
- Women sit as judges on less than 15 percent of the state's benches.
- Coverage of women's voices and experiences in the media is still the exception. A study by the Minnesota Women's Press in 1988 found that in the Minneapolis and St. Paul daily newspapers, women comprised 18 percent of the sources or subjects of the news. Similarly, a study last year by the Women, Men and Media Conference showed that in 10 major U. S. newspapers, 11 percent of

people quoted were women, 24 percent of photos showed women, and 27 percent of front page bylines were women's. Women are 6 percent of newspaper publishers in this country, 3 percent of TV presidents and vice-presidents; they comprise 14 percent of newspaper editors and 10 percent of TV editors.

What are the barriers to change?

To understand the barriers to change, consider, for example, the efforts of a St. Paul woman to bring about change in electoral politics. Shirley Nelson recognizes that the changes that effect most people's day-to-day lives are created by local officials—those who sit on city councils, county commissions, school boards. Women, she believes, must be equal partners in the decisions those agencies make. Further, she believes, the best chance for getting numbers of women elected to the highest state offices is to have large numbers gaining experience at lower-level offices.

Five years ago, Nelson created, and still coordinates, the Women Candidate Development Coalition, a cooperative effort of 10 women's organizations. The coalition's goal is to increase the numbers of women running for and elected to office in Minnesota. It provides technical assistance, moral support, and networking for women around the state who are thinking about running for office.

More women *are* running for elected offices around the state, but the numbers still are small. Here are some of the obstacles Nelson encounters: many talented women believe they are not well enough qualified to run for office; women are more likely than men to feel responsible for family emergencies and needs and to put them before campaign needs; voter prejudice against women as candidates still exists in many parts of the state; female candidates have a harder time raising money than their male counterparts; political parties still are run largely by "old boys" (including a few women), who resist letting power spread outside their own network.

Variations on these themes are at work in every area of society where women are pursuing greater participation. Although adding women's perspectives to the debate and conduct of public policy brings benefits, it also threatens. It reduces men's privilege. It adds new priorities to be considered. It changes the cast of characters. It distributes power more widely.

These consequences can blind some to the benefits that will ensue for all. While legal or otherwise overt barriers to women's sharing of power largely have been removed, there still remain effective ways to discourage women from raising their voices in public. Women can be ignored (what Nancy Woodhull, president of Gannett News Services, describes as "symbolic annihilation"), their concerns and experiences can be defined as only personal issues (the way childcare issues were regarded by policymakers for so long), their work can be valued less (women still earn 69¢ to every dollar for men), they can be encouraged but only to a point (the "glass ceiling" in business). These are the more polite approaches. Ridicule and trivialization, harassment, intimidation also can be effective. Some observers, indeed, see a link between women's increasing public and personal power and increased violence against women.

Promoting change

What steps can Minnesotans take to more fully utilize the talents and contributions of women? First, women them-

selves can—and will—continue individually and collectively to make their voices public, to work for more and larger roles for themselves in the places where decisions are made and policies set.

Collaborative endeavors to promote these efforts will continue—endeavors such as women's professional associations, in which women support one another's aspirations; the Minnesota Women's Consortium, where 150 organizations combine forces in the cause of change agency; the endowed Minnesota Women's Fund, which is more than halfway to its \$10 million goal and makes grants to projects designed to create systems changes for women and girls. On an individual basis, those women who already have achieved positions of influence will reach back to help others' voices be heard, too.

The muffling of women's voices, however, is not just a "women's problem." It is a problem for all Minnesotans, because it impoverishes public discussion. This means that in addition to women's efforts on their own behalf, men's efforts are needed, too. Wise public policymakers and business leaders recognize this need already.

Many of the gains achieved by women have been assisted by the active support of men in positions of power. The task force on gender fairness in the courts, for example, was established and promoted by Chief Justice Peter Popovich; likewise, the task force on sexual violence against women was given public prominence by Attorney General Skip Humphrey. The majority of the women judges now sitting in Minnesota were appointed by Gov. Rudy Perpich. State Human Rights commissioner Stephen Cooper has been a clear and active public voice deploring discrimination against women in the workplace.

In addition to moral support, institutional support is needed. We need to find ways to build women's voices into our institutions. The more widely we institutionalize opportunities for women's voices to be raised and heard in our public forums, the less such opportunities remain personal issues, vulnerable to old prejudices and views of the world.

Some good steps have been taken. Minnesota's gender-fair curriculum rule, for example, does this, with its requirement that each school district develop plans for assuring inclusion of women's experiences (as well as experiences of people of various cultures) into the curricula. Recommendations of the study of gender fairness in the courts, if implemented, will involve specific changes in policy and procedures to help ensure that women's voices aren't silenced in the judicial process.

Other steps can be taken, as well. Departments of state government, for example, can be used to create hiring and training models that private business can emulate in striving to ensure greater participation and leadership by women. School boards can set goals of hiring equal numbers of female and male administrators. The Legislature can require, as Iowa's already has, that half of all political appointments be women.

The more we are willing, as a society, to honor women's voices, the richer we will become. The steps we take to ensure women's equal role in setting directions for our state and its institutions are not only a matter of equity—they also are a matter of our own best self-interest and a valuable legacy to create for our children.