

Report: Bad news for state's women

RUPA SHENOY
Minnesota Public Radio

ST. PAUL — A new report shows wide disparities still exist for women in Minnesota when it comes to income, leadership positions, economic status and health.

The research by the Women's Foundation of Minnesota and the University of Minnesota's Center on Women and Public Policy found Minnesota women on average are paid \$11,000 less each year than men with the same jobs. The gap exists in every occupation, including those dominated by women, the report said.

Among women of color, the disparities are more extreme, with some making 56 cents for every dollar earned by a white man.

Among the occupations with the biggest wage gaps is the health-care field, where women earn 62 cents on the dollar. In legal occupations, women earn 53 cents for every dollar earned by men.

Lee Roper-Batker, the president of the Women's Foundation of Minnesota, said economists cite three reasons for the income gap. She said women often choose careers that pay less and employers sometimes punish women who take time off to have children. The third reason is "good old-fashioned sexism," she said.

The report said Minnesota women are clustered in low-wage jobs.

Families headed by single women are most likely to live

under the poverty line. On an average night, women and children make up two-thirds of the state's homeless population.

That statistic is played out every day, said Liz Kuoppala, the executive director of the Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless. She works on the Iron Range.

"We talk to homeless women in rural areas who are staying up in a tent," she said. "Up in my part of the state, they climb down steep embankments to mine dumps, where there's access to water."

The research shows girls and women also live in danger of assault. It said one in every three women in Minnesota will be the victim of sexual or physical assault by middle age.

According to the Women's Foundation of Minnesota, that adds up to 250,000 women at any given time, a population that could fill the Metrodome four times.

"It has become so normalized that many of our young girls believe it is inevitable," said Suzanne Koeplinger, executive director of the Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center in Minneapolis.

Indian women have the highest rate of sexual assault in the state — 42 percent of Indian women are victims.

The study also found women and girls in Minnesota have poorer health than men and boys.

A majority of the state's women are now considered obese or overweight and women in Northeastern Minnesota have disproportionately high cancer rates.

Finally, the report said, the state needs to increase the number of women in leadership positions. It said that although Minnesota is a national leader in its number of female legislators, that progress has stagnated over the past few years. Women make up about a third of the Minnesota Legislature.

State Rep. Tina Liebling, DFL-Rochester, said women may be holding themselves back.

"Women ... tend to look at how self-assured people are on the outside and believe that they are uniquely self-doubting on the inside," she said.

Liebling said the state would benefit if more women ran for office.

"I think they can focus on the issues ... and are less likely to be focused on personal attack or political game-playing mode than many men would be," she said.

While the report could be seen as a barrage of bad news, Lee Roper-Batker of the Minnesota Women's Foundation said the bleak picture for women can all change sooner than people might think.

"You look at this in aggregate, and it's pretty overwhelming and shocking," she said. But that's why it's important that each woman "step up and know that we can create a different world and a different reality," she said.

Her organization plans to tour the state over the next few months to educate the public about the report and encourage those steps.

