

Women's equality remains behind the curve

Foundation hoping
newest research will
lead to major changes

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WILLMAR — Minnesota women are moving forward in pay equality but progress is achingly slow, a new report issued by the Women's Foundation of Minnesota has found.

Lee Roper-Batker, the foundation's president and chief executive, thinks the state might actually be moving backward in reducing and preventing violence against women.

Women also continue to be underrepresented in corporate leadership and elected offices, and there's a persistent health gap for Minnesota's women of color and for rural women.

Although some of the statistics are discouraging, they also represent a chance for local communities to take action, Roper-Batker told an audience Tuesday in Willmar.

"We really hope this will catalyze some change," she said.

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The research findings on the status of women and girls in Minnesota were shared with some 30 community leaders Tuesday. Willmar was one of eight cities where the Women's Foundation is presenting its report and inviting local discussion.

"There's no doubt that women and girls have made great strides toward equality," Roper-Batker said.

But the research, which was gathered in a joint project with the University of Minnesota's Center on Women and Public Policy, indicates females in Minnesota continue to be short-changed on key measures ranging from income to personal safety, she said.

Some of the report's bleakest findings were reserved for violence and safety. One in three Minnesota women now experience a rape crime — including attempted rape — by the time they reach midlife, a record Roper-Batker said is "a failing grade" for Minnesota.

"It's enough to fill the Metrodome up four times over. It's pretty staggering," she said.

West central Minnesota has the highest proportion of rape crimes, 33 percent of the adult female population. The west central part of the state also is virtually tied with northeastern Minnesota for having the highest lifetime proportion of intimate partner violence.

Roper-Batker said that as she travels around the state, she hears about a rising tide of domestic violence. The recession likely plays a role, but the normalization of violence against women also may be to blame, she said.

"It just keeps getting worse," agreed Connie Schmoll, director of Shelter House in Willmar, which provides temporary safety for women and children in 18 counties in southwestern Minnesota.

"It's so frustrating," Schmoll said. "There are so many social things going on that add to the violence."

Funding for prevention is difficult to obtain, and state and federal funds for women's shelters are depleted, she said. "There's nothing."

Yet Schmoll said she also has seen women gain self-confidence when they can work with an advocate who believes in them. "Programs are important to doing good work," she said.

Roper-Batker said the Women's Foundation plans to produce its report each year so that it can more closely monitor change and progress.

"We hope it'll inspire action on a community level," she said.

Men also need to be enlisted to help, she said. "We really need men to be our allies and advocates, and most men I know want equality for women. ... I think all of us need to talk about how we can motivate more men to be our allies in this."

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Among the findings

■ Although women make up the majority of workers in Minnesota and earn the majority of post-secondary degrees, this has not translated into better economic status. Rural women on average earn \$10,000 less a year than men. "That wage gap over a woman's lifetime amounts to \$1 million," said Lee Roper-Batker, Women's Foundation of Minnesota president.

■ Households headed by females are the most likely to live in poverty.

■ Teen birth rates in Minnesota are higher among girls of color.

■ No Minnesota Fortune 500 company has a woman as its chief executive.

■ More than half of the county boards in Minnesota don't include women. One-fourth of city councils around the state have no women members.