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Connecticut Women's News Analysis (Week of Jan. 2, 2008)

News events and related policy decisions -- whether made on a national or a local basis -- affect the lives of all women in Connecticut. The Connecticut General Assembly's Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) tracks these news events weekly and offers this brief analysis on the impact on women in the short-term and across the span of their lives. We concentrate on those events and policies that fall into the PCSW's three primary areas of concern regarding women's issues: 1) economic security; 2) health & safety; and 3) sex discrimination.

PCSW Executive Director Teresa C. Younger is available to comment on the following news item(s). Please reach her directly at 860/240-8441; teresa.younger@cga.ct.gov.

Issue: The Connecticut Science Center and Women in STEM Careers

The state is gearing up to unveil its new Connecticut Science Center later this spring, and much is being made of the need to engage Connecticut's children in the process. (*cf: Rick Green, columnist, "Hoping Science Center Helps Create Scientists," Hartford Courant, Jan. 2, 2008, pg. 2*)

But lost in the discussion is any specific focus on young girls, who must be encouraged to engage in science and technology. Data bear out the fact that girls are not encouraged to gravitate toward the sciences; consequently, too few women enter high-paying careers in the science and technology fields.

Analysis/Comment

The dearth of girls who become engaged early with in the sciences means a subsequent paucity of women in the so-called STEM careers (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math). This disparity deprives women of the opportunity to take full and equal advantage of initiatives such as President-Elect Obama's Economic Stimulus plan, in which engineering and "green" technology jobs will figure prominently.

Here in Connecticut, as Gov. M. Jodi Rell prepares a roster of "shovel-ready" engineering and construction projects eligible for federal funds, policy-makers must ensure that women have a seat at that table when contracts are being awarded and job rolls are being filled. According to the Connecticut Office for Workforce Competiveness (OWC), Connecticut is not succeeding at attracting students from vulnerable and underrepresented communities into the STEM fields. OWC states that "women...students may need specialized assistance, but their full participation is essential to the economic health of Connecticut."

Pertinent Data

- In Connecticut, women comprise 10% of engineering occupations, 29% of computer and math occupations and 45.5% of life, physical and social science occupations.
- Women constitute 45% of the U.S. workforce, but hold just 12% of science and engineering jobs in business and industry;

Pertinent Data (Cont'd.)

- The current STEM workforce is 82% white and 75% male, and nearing retirement—creating policy space to make changes in the demographics of the STEM workforce;
- In 2003-04, engineering graduates had the highest average starting salaries of all bachelor degree recipients;
- While some fields such as biology have made progress in bringing more women into the field, others such as computer science and physics have remained at a constant low;
- While women now earn more than half of the bachelor's degrees in the biological sciences, they earn just one-fifth (21%) of all bachelor's degrees in physics.
- Some evidence suggests that pre-college programs incorporating hands-on activities, role models, internships, and field trips tend to increase self-confidence and interest in STEM courses and careers.
- The disparity between the number of engineering degrees awarded to men and women has not changed significantly during the last 10 years; for every woman who receives a degree, five to six men receive a degree. This ratio becomes even worse for doctoral degrees. Chemical and agricultural engineering have a slightly better ratio, while electrical and mechanical engineering show the greatest gender gaps.
- One year after graduation, women who work in computer science, earn over 37% more than do women who are employed in education or administrative, clerical, or legal support occupations.

Quote from Teresa C. Younger, PCSW Executive Director

“Sparkling girls’ interest in math and science must start early. Once that spark is lit, it has to be sustained and fueled throughout their education so that, as adult women, they have the option of entering highly paid careers. Girls need early exposure to science and math concepts and their practical application. This introduction must then be reinforced by women working in those careers who become strong role models, encouraging the girls – through their own life decisions – to continue to study in those fields. That way, they’ll eventually enter the careers with the most room for advancement and the highest potential for economic self-sufficiency.”

Other Contacts

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About the PCSW

Created in 1973 by the Connecticut General Assembly (General Statute Sec. 46a), the non-partisan Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) is charged with conducting “an ongoing study of all matters concerning women (and shall) inform leaders of business, education, state and local governments and the communications media of the nature and scope of the problem of sex discrimination with a view to enlisting their support in working toward improvement; and serve as a liaison between government and private interest groups concerned with services for women” as well as promote more participation by women in government and assess the practices of State agencies as they affect women. In all its work, the PCSW is charged with promoting a deeper understanding of the roots of gender bias and bringing to light the steps necessary to eliminate it.

