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WOMEN: A STATUS REPORT

In her world

Unprecedented central Ohio report shows females making strides but still facing hurdles

With help from the Columbus Foundation, the Women's Fund of Central Ohio commissioned an unprecedented review of the status of women in Franklin and the six surrounding counties. In a four-part series beginning today and continuing the next three Sundays, The Dispatch summarizes the report and reveals a few of the many faces behind the numbers.

By Kelly Lecker
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Women in central Ohio join the workforce at a higher rate than women in the state overall and contributed more than \$5.8 billion in one year to the economy from businesses they own, according to the first-ever report on the status of women and girls in the area.

Still, they make 70.5 cents for every dollar earned by men. And single mothers, who face a high rate of poverty, struggle to find enough affordable child care — a factor that child advocates say keeps many of them from higher-paying jobs.

"If her child has a fever, she has to take the day off," said Dana Wilkie, director of Center for New Directions, which helps women find careers. "A lot of employers aren't that flexible."

Being released today, the report — "Count on Her! The Status of Women and Girls in Central Ohio" — was designed to focus on the assets of the region's 805,184 women and girls and to suggest untapped potential in that community.

The Women's Fund of Central Ohio, a philanthropic group working to empower women, wanted to know how the population is doing and where help is needed.

But there was no single place to look.

With the Columbus Foundation, the Women's Fund commissioned a comprehensive report on women and girls in Franklin County and the six surrounding counties.

The results are alternately predictable and provocative:

- Girls have higher graduation rates than boys and far fewer disciplinary problems.
- Women vote in greater percentages than men.
- More than 401,700 women work, including two-thirds of mothers with children younger than 6.
- Median hourly wages for women rose 8.3 percent in 12 years, compared with 1 percent for men.

The review also revealed opportunities for change, said Sharon Steele, who leads the Women's Fund. Among them:

- The poverty rate for elderly women is double that of elderly men.
- Affordable child care is severely lacking.
- Three women a day were raped in 2002.
- Girls are more likely than boys to be depressed or have emotional problems.

► **A closer look at the Women's Fund | A4**

Such reports, said TaKeysha Sheppard, highlight the need to focus on issues specific to women and girls.

Sheppard is program director of the Leader Institute, which helps middle- and high-school girls build self-confidence, develop problem-solving skills and gain access to female role models.

The assets can help them — and, in turn, their careers and future families.

"It's so important to have that data so we can answer why it is important that we serve only girls," said Sheppard, whose group has received grants from the Women's Fund. "We feel like we give them the skills and experience they need."

The statistics tell a story of how childhood issues such as poverty and mental health affect girls as they age, become women and mothers, and enter the work force.

"Terms that are thrown around today — *working poor* and *the aging population* — those are women's issues," said Roberta Garber, executive director of Community Research Partners, which compiled the report. "I do think you have a progression of root causes."

The \$25,000 report begins with the basics, breaking down the numbers into categories such as age, ethnicity, marital status and employment.

Sheryl Fenderson said the research will help highlight ways to support women so they can give more to the community.

A divorced mother of four, she once faced poverty and depression, and couldn't afford child care.

Her plight inspired A Cup of Joy, a Christian-based organization founded by Fenderson that helps single mothers find resources and emotional help. It, too, has received financial support from the Women's Fund.

"There is still a stigma attached to divorce for women," she said. "It's important people realize how big these issues are. And it's important for funding."

Garber said the Women's Fund considered doing its own research and focus groups but instead used available data from public and private agencies, including the U.S. Census Bureau and the Ohio Department of Health.

The last study on the status of local women, in 1988, covered only Franklin County and fell far short of this effort.

The "Count on Her" report highlights available statistics and speaks generally to some areas for which few numbers are available, such as issues concerning lesbians, immigrants and refugees.

Such data is important, Steele said, because those women and girls might have different needs.

"Those who are invisible are really invisible," she said. "If this is intended to provide a portrait of women and girls in central Ohio, there are certainly pieces missing."

The women who worked on "Count on Her" for 18 months said they couldn't help seeing themselves in its pages.

"I think every woman who reflects on her life cycle will see herself," said Sandra Smith, program officer for the Columbus Foundation.

The compilation will be available to social-service agencies to measure needs, foundations considering requests for funding, and lawmakers setting public policy.

"This is a first step," Steele said. "It all goes back to, 'How do we improve the lives of women and girls?'"

"If it really does start that dialogue, then you get that exponential effect of 'We'll change the world.'"

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