



Debra Fitzpatrick is director of the Center on Women and Public Policy at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs. (Staff photo: Kevin Featherly)

For supporters, WESA win was a long time coming

By: Nancy Crotti June 4, 2014 0

State Sen. Sandy Pappas has seen many organizations push legislation for what she calls "feel-good projects." But this year, with Pappas' help, the Minnesota Women's Foundation and several partners challenged the economic status quo at the Legislature and came away with a win.

The St. Paul DFLer authored three of the nine bills that became the \$2.46 million Women's Economic Security Act, which was introduced in both houses Feb. 25 and ultimately passed with bipartisan support. Gov. Mark Dayton signed it into law on Mother's Day. The law:

- Expands family leave and provides reasonable accommodations for pregnant and nursing employees.
- Decreases the gender pay gap by recruiting, training, placing and retaining women in high-wage, high-demand, nontraditional work.
- Allows employees of state contractors to discuss pay inequities without employer retaliation.
- Requires equal employment treatment for pregnant women and parents under the Minnesota Human Rights Act.
- Increases the minimum wage to \$9.50 per hour.
- Appropriates \$500,000 to help nonprofit organizations create and expand women-owned businesses.
- Addresses the economic consequences of domestic violence, stalking, and sexual assault through expanded unemployment insurance eligibility, sick leave and housing protection.
- Requires a study of a possible state retirement savings plan for those without an employer-provided option.

A broad base of support

Founding members of the coalition behind the act included the Minnesota Women's Consortium, WomenVenture, the Center on Women and Public Policy at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs, GenderJustice and AARP. An additional 37 organizations signed on as backers, as did nearly 60 individuals.

Funding from the Women's Foundation and others helped marshal support for the bill. A White House push for women's pay equity combined with data on Minnesota women's economic insecurity also helped.

White women in Minnesota earn 20 percent less than their white male counterparts, according to Debra Fitzpatrick, director of the Center on Women and Public Policy. The gap widens to nearly 40 percent for African-American, American Indian and disabled women. For Latinas and women who have been in the U.S. fewer than 10 years, the gap exceeds 40 percent.

"It's really been stuck there since about 2000," a state of affairs that has "huge ramifications" for women, their families and society, Fitzpatrick said. "We're really coming at all the factors that contribute to the pay gap."

Those factors include segregation into traditionally female (and lower-paying) jobs, less time in the workforce due to family needs, and "good, old-fashioned sexism," said Lee Roper-Batker, president and CEO of the Women's Foundation.

"Part of the reason this legislation was able to pass is because it was data-driven," Roper-Batker said.

Years of ground work

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Although the bill passed in one short session, the foundation had been laying the groundwork for years. It contracted with Fitzpatrick in 2009 to do the research, and together they assembled working groups of elected officials, academicians and nonprofit leaders to study the data.

"As we look at this data together, we're simultaneously saying, 'What are some structural barriers or some policy implications that we need to take action on?'" Roper-Batker said.

One barrier was the poverty level. In the past 12 years, the number of low-income, single-parent families in Minnesota increased by 64 percent, she noted. Women head 90 percent of those households.

Another was employers' policies against workers discussing their wages. Sixty percent of Minnesota employers forbid such discussions, and business lobbyists fought hard against the portion of the bill that would allow them, Fitzpatrick said. Women who told her they were earning less than men in comparable positions feared they would be fired for speaking up at work.

With the Paycheck Fairness Act stuck in Congress since last year, Minnesota's action helped move the national conversation on the topic, according to Fitzpatrick.

"Minnesota is now really looked to as a national leader and model around this comprehensive act to help build pathways for women's prosperity," Roper-Batker added.

That work did not end with this session. Fitzpatrick and the foundation want to continue pushing parts of the original bill that they had to drop in order for the rest to pass.

One such provision would eliminate the waiting list for the state's Basic Sliding Fee child care funding program. Currently, many working poor families do not qualify for this aid, according to Fitzpatrick.

"We know that having reliable, high-quality child care is not only important to children, but it's really important to women being able to keep a job," she said.

Another key issue is paid sick leave. Forty percent of Minnesota's workers, many in the service industry, do not have this benefit, Fitzpatrick noted. They risk their jobs by taking time off when they or their children get sick. This not only harms families, but also has public health implications, according to Pappas.

"Every time you go into a restaurant, you should ask if they have paid sick leave," she said. "Those part-time jobs that are minimum wage are exactly where we need paid sick leave, where we have that kind of exposure to the public."

Pappas also worked with the Women's Foundation on its anti-sex-trafficking campaign, MN Girls Are Not for Sale.

"It just really shows how cutting-edge the Women's Foundation of Minnesota is," Pappas said. "I'm also very proud of them in kind of taking on the tough economic issues that are so controversial."

She admires Fitzpatrick's work, and uses her data when giving presentations.

"It's really good material," Pappas said. "It's really clear."

Fitzpatrick worked in Senate

Fitzpatrick started her career in 1987 as a legislative assistant at the state Senate, then became administrator of the Senate education committee. She wanted to combine policy and research, and pursued a master's degree at the Humphrey School.

She left the Legislature in 1992 for a six-year stint as a project administrator at the U's School of Public Health, followed by nine years at the Humphrey School's Center for School Change.

Becoming a mother radicalized her around women's equality issues. Fitzpatrick made a mid-life decision to combine her quantitative research skills with that passion.

"Often, younger women don't really think gender is an issue until they have children," she said. "That is really the face of gender discrimination today. It really is more about motherhood than it is about being a woman."

The Fitzpatrick File

Name: Debra Fitzpatrick

Job: Director, Center on Women and Public Policy, Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota

Age: 50

Grew up: Kenosha, Wisconsin

Lives in: St. Paul

Education: B.A., political science, M.A., public policy, University of Minnesota

Family: Spouse, Lisa Miller; daughter, Thryn, 17; son, George, 14

Hobbies: Watercolor painting, biking, kayaking, volunteering

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