

Regional

Inequalities for women take a toll on everyone

On its surface, 2012 might have looked like a banner year for women around the world. For the first time in history every country participating at the London Olympics had at least one woman representative. And in this country, a record number of women were elected to both the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. Yet, as shown by the statistics below, problems persist.

1. Women earn 78 cents for every dollar a man makes.

2. Women hold only 17 percent of seats in Congress.

3. One out of every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime.

4. One out of every six women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime

5. 48 percent of law school graduates are female, but women make up only 22 percent of federal-level judgeships.

6. Even in the 10 top paying jobs for women, they earn less than men.

7. America's top female CEOs earn, on average, 33 cents for every dollar earned by a male CEO.

8. Nothing in the U.S. Constitution or any other legislation guarantees women the same rights as men.

9. The United States refuses to support an international bill of rights for women that has already been signed by nearly every other nation on earth.

10. The U.S. ranks 31 in the world in gender parity.

So, why have women not achieved full equality after all these years? And, more importantly, what needs to be done in order for women to reach the same status in society as men? To discuss these issues we gathered a panel of successful women professionals: Julie Furst-Bowe, chancellor of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville; Catherine Seltzer, associ-



From left: Drs. Furst-Bowe, Seltzer, Klein, Oberweis and Love.

ate professor of English language and literature and director of the women's studies program at SIUE; Nicole Aydt Klein, associate professor and program director of health education at SIUE; Trish Oberweis, associate professor in the department of sociology and criminal justice at SIUE; and Mary Sue Love, associate professor in the department of management and marketing at SIUE. Furst-Bowe began the conversation by stating what she believes must happen to make sure that gender is no longer an issue in the work environment

"We need to go back and look at policies that are intentionally or unintentionally sometimes disadvantaging women or disadvantaging parents in general from advancing in the workplace," she said. "One of those policy areas is maternity leave. I often think we need to create a culture where people aren't afraid to take the leave if it's entitled to them. You can say you're entitled to leave but if you

perceive if you do it that you won't look as capable as the next person, then we have got to have a culture where people can take advantage of the flexibilities we put in place." And then there is the issue of professional stereotypes, which Klein said that she sees as a widespread problem in her field.

"In the world of health there is a stereotype that nurses are females and doctors are males," Klein said. "It seems that this is a stereotype that boxes women into certain professions." Will this change in the foreseeable future? "I would say so much of this doesn't get broken down unless you do look at breaking down the gender box for both men and women," she added. Some say that just by increasing female representation in the work force, a more equitable society can be built. According to Oberweis, however, such gender correlations are not always predictable.

"Just because women may be more

likely to recognize the difficulties they face doesn't mean they will be willing to act or intervene in the face of those difficulties," she said. "The same way that you progress through your career and you make it through certain struggles and then your assumption is, 'I did it, you should have to do the same thing. I don't want to make it easier for you.' Having women in those positions may make it more likely that we can have change, but at the same time it makes it equally likely to keep things the same in the way that if I did it, so can anybody else." Sometimes women are not really aware of the inequalities that they face in society.

"My friends who are now in their 60s promised me that things were going to be fine, and now here I am now just realizing that things aren't fine, things aren't equal. I had to make some tough choices and a lot of sacrifices, and I was luckier than most because academia gives us

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more flexibility than any other career opportunity," said Love, who was a first-generation college student. Sometimes, added Seltzer, these inequalities take subtle and unexpected forms.

"Publishers often lump female interest novels into what is called 'chick lit.' Regardless that many of these fiction books are very well written and bring up a lot of very important issues for women," Seltzer explained. "I think it really speaks to the industry more than anything else. I don't think it speaks to authorial intent or what's going on in terms of women writers that are producing enormous work and very important work. But that sort of bias is rampant throughout the publishing industry."

There is no question that part of the reason why women are becoming more prominent in areas of society traditionally dominated by men is their access to education, but education is not enough. Until legislatures, corporate boardrooms and other organizations start representing more accurately the proportion of women in society, women will not achieve the necessary share of power they need in order to make a more just society for everybody.

After all, women's rights are human rights.

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.

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