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Women still not playing on level field

By Mike Leonard, Herald-Times Columnist June 27, 2004

Last spring, Bloomington City Clerk Regina Moore pondered the reasons why she's working with a city council occupied exclusively by men for the first time in more than 30 years.

She wondered if the "coarsening of politics" might have something to do with it.

And then, last week, Vice President Dick Cheney was overheard on the U.S. Senate floor telling Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., to "go f--- yourself," as if to underline the point.

There are plenty of other examples of salty language and mean-spirited invective being tossed around by prominent politicians, including Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch and presidential contenders George W. Bush and John F. Kerry.

But these incidents can hardly explain what appears to be a nationwide stagnation of female inroads into political representation. Last week, Stateline.org reported that the number of women serving in state legislatures has leveled off after more than 30 years of steady increases.

"Leveled off" does not mean that there is a level playing field. Nationwide, women occupy 20.9 percent of all state Senate seats and 23 percent of House seats. While that's a fivefold increase since 1971, Stateline reports, there has been virtually no change since 1999.

South Carolina, Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi and Oklahoma have the fewest women represented in their legislatures. Washington, Colorado, Maryland, Vermont and California have the most. Indiana ranks among the average.

It's encouraging to note that eight U.S. governors are women, and that's the highest number in history. If you do the math, however, that's a mere 16 percent representation among the 50 states.

Women fare better with lieutenant governor positions with 17, including Indiana's Kathy Davis. Davis was an appointee following elected Lt. Gov. Joe Kernan's ascension to the governorship after the death in office of Frank O'Bannon. Indiana is guaranteed to have a female elected lieutenant governor this fall, given that Democrat Davis and Republican Becky Skillman are the slated candidates.

Female representation in the U.S. Congress is even worse than in state legislatures, however. According to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, women occupy 74, or just 13.8 percent, of the 535 seats in the 108th Congress. There's a

surprisingly even split between the Senate and House, with women holding 14 percent of Senate seats and 13.8 percent in the House.

It's not like people haven't noticed. In Bloomington, a Women's Democratic Caucus has been formed to recruit, support and train female candidates for public office. At the state level, Sen. Richard Lugar sponsors "The Lugar Series" to do the same thing to encourage Republican women to seek both elected and appointed positions in local, state and federal government.

Moore, who helped start the Women's Democratic Caucus, had not heard about the Lugar Series but praised the wisdom behind the mission statement's inclusion of appointed positions as a means of advancing the number of women in politics and increasing their interest.

"It's kind of like boot camp, if you will, for folks to learn more about the way government is run and the interrelationships between governmental units," she said. "Women who might not think they'd ever run for elected office could change their minds after serving in an appointed position."

Moore said that slightly more than 30 percent of Bloomington's board and commission seats are held by women. "It's still not where we want to be in terms of representation," she said. "What we want is something that approaches equal. And we don't think that's too much to ask."

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