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Female Lawmakers Playing Larger Role in the N.C. General Assembly

Female lawmakers -- aided by a sharp increase in numbers -- are playing a larger role in the N. C. General Assembly, according to the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research. The Center says more women than ever served in 1993, and the result was more influence on a broad range of issues.

"The number of women in the General Assembly is beginning to move in a direction more consistent with their numbers in the general population," says Ran Coble, the Center's executive director. "And this is likely to increase the legislature's attention on issues affecting women and children -- such as child care and child support, domestic violence, and health care. Increasingly, what are now seen as women's issues will be seen as people's issues."

A record 31 women served during the 1993 session, pushing their numbers to 18.2 percent of the legislature. Women comprise nearly 52 percent of the state's population. No more than 25 women had served in any previous session of the General Assembly. And of 51 women who sought election to the 170 seats in the legislature in 1992, 61 percent won.

Freshman Sen. Linda Gunter (D-Wake) learned about stereotypes of legislators firsthand prior to the 1993 session when she stopped at the security booth in the legislative parking garage to get the key to her office. When she identified herself as a newly elected senator, the guard seemed skeptical. "You don't look like a legislator," he told her.

"You have this stereotype of what a senator is," says Gunter, a 44-year-old high school teacher. "In my generation, women were secretaries, nurses, and teachers."

The Roots of Female Representation

North Carolina's first female legislator, Buncombe County lawyer Lillian Exum Clement, joined the General Assembly in 1921. Clement defeated two men for the nomination in 1920 -- the same year the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave women the right to vote. But the phenomenon of women serving in the General Assembly in substantial numbers is a fairly recent one.

The North Carolina increase is part of a national trend in which female lawmakers have increased their numbers five-fold since 1969. However, North Carolina still ranks only 30th nationally in percentage of female lawmakers, trailing only Maryland and Arkansas among the Southern states. The state of Washington ranks first, with women comprising 39.5 percent of its legislators.

The Center analyzed the impact of increased numbers of female lawmakers in the latest edition of North Carolina Insight in an article by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Betty Mitchell Gray of Washington, N.C. Gray, who covered the 1993 General Assembly part-time for The Virginian-Pilot, was the only female print journalist who regularly covered the legislature.

A Major Legislative Victory: Repeal of Marital Rape Exemption

In their most resounding legislative victory in the 1993 session, women banded together to repeal the marital rape exemption, which prevented a husband from being prosecuted for raping his wife if they lived under the same roof. "The women legislators played a key role in the passage of not only the governor's program but in a variety of issues," says Jim Phillips, Gov. Hunt's legislative liaison during the 1993 session.

Diversity among female members kept them from flexing their political muscle even more. Due to partisan differences, the Women's Legislative Caucus chooses only a handful of issues on which to exercise influence, says Rep. Bertha Holt (D-Alamance), the caucus chair. An example of an issue that did get the backing of the caucus in 1993 was the marital rape legislation, which had the support of all 31 female lawmakers.

Women also have been able to win increased funding for domestic violence centers, legislation requiring insurance companies to pay for mammograms and Pap smears, and a bill to ban demonstrators from obstructing access to abortion clinics. However, there are many issues -- such as state funding for abortions for poor women -- on which partisan differences prevent agreement. The Women's Legislative Caucus is about one-third Republican. "That we can pull together on even one or two issues has helped," says Holt.

Still, several past and present female lawmakers said that men still control the purse strings, and through the purse strings, the General Assembly. Men chair all of the legislature's money committees -- the House and Senate appropriations committees, which decide how to spend money, and the finance committees of the two chambers, which decide how revenue is raised.

Three women co-chair appropriations subcommittees in the House: Rep. Ruth Easterling (D-Mecklenburg), Human Resources; Holt, Justice and Public Safety, and; Rep. Mary McAllister (D-Cumberland), Transportation. All Senate appropriations committees and subcommittees are chaired by men. Sen. Lura Tally (D-Cumberland), a 20-year legislative veteran who has served in both chambers, says, "The Senate has been much slower in taking on women, but the Senate has traditionally been more conservative."

Of 52 chairmen or co-chairmen of standing committees or subcommittees for the 1993 session, House Speaker Dan Blue (D-Wake) appointed 11 women,

or 21 percent. Of 31 potential appointments in the Senate, President Pro Tempore Marc Basnight (D-Dare) appointed four women, a 13 percent appointment rate. Women represent 20 percent of the House membership and 14 percent of the Senate membership.

Only two females in either chamber are officers -- House Speaker Pro Tempore Marie Colton (D-Buncombe), who plans to retire after this session, and Senate Minority Whip Betsy Cochrane (R-Davie). In Alaska, by contrast, women hold the offices of House speaker, majority leader, and minority leader, and Senate Finance Committee co-chair.

More Numbers May Bring More Clout

Women likely could increase their clout in the General Assembly by increasing their numbers even more. Although the class of 1993 represented the largest contingent of females ever, some say it wasn't large enough. "Thirty-one women is just not enough out of 170 legislators," says Anne Mackie, director of the Women's Agenda Program for N.C. Equity, a Raleigh non-profit advocating for women's issues. "We need equity."

The number of female legislators actually dropped from 31 to 30 following the 1993 session. Three female legislators resigned their House seats -- Rep. Judy Hunt (D-Watauga), Rep. Peggy Stamey (D-Wake), and Rep. Peggy Wilson (R-Rockingham) -- and two of the three were replaced by males. One male Senator, Ralph Hunt (D-Durham), resigned and was replaced by a female. The net result was 30 female legislators. Three more female legislators have announced their retirement at the end of the 1993-94 session: Speaker Pro Tem Colton, Sen. Mary Seymour (D-Guilford), and Sen. Lura Tally (D-Cumberland).

Still, some barriers faced by women seeking public office seem less formidable than in the past. Fundraising is one such area. Successful female House candidates raised more money for their 1992 campaigns than did their male counterparts -- an average of \$17,975 compared to \$17,375 for winning males. In the Senate, successful female candidates did even better than their House counterparts -- raising an average of \$35,177 for their campaigns, compared to \$30,379 for men.

Rep. Connie Wilson (R-Mecklenburg), a Charlotte banker, says her business background has helped her raise money. "I'm used to working with people and their money," she says. "A lot of politicians -- not just women -- are afraid to ask, but I'm not afraid to ask."

In recent years, statewide political organizations such as the Pine Needles Network, N.C. NOW (National Organization for Women), the Women's Political Caucus, and Women-Elect have become more active in contributing to female candidates. The Pine Needles Network was founded in 1990 with the specific goal of helping elect women to the state legislature.

One female lawmaker, Sen. Betsy Cochrane (R-Davie), says she sees one other advantage for female candidates. They are viewed as more issue-oriented and sincere than their male counterparts. "The public perceives women less negatively," says Cochrane, "and they are not smeared with that brush that says politicians are bad."

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit corporation created to study public policy issues facing North Carolina and evaluate state government programs. The Center receives general operating support from the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundations, 120 corporate contributors, and about 870 individual and organizational members.

In addition to publishing North Carolina Insight magazine, the Center has conducted studies on ways to increase voter participation, overcrowding in the state's prison system, and how the University of North Carolina system evaluates and rewards excellent teaching. It also publishes a citizen's guide to the legislature, rankings of the effectiveness of all 170 legislators, and rankings of the most influential lobbyists.

Copies of the issue of Insight magazine containing the Center's research on women in the legislature can be obtained from the Center for \$6.00 plus \$2.50 for tax, shipping, and handling. To order, call (919) 832-2839, or write the N.C. Center, P.O., Box 430, Raleigh, N.C. 27602.

For more information, call Ran Coble at the Center at (919) 832-2839.

Table 1. Number and Percentage of Women in the North Carolina General Assembly, by Chamber, 1971-1993

	1971	1973	1975	1977	1979	1981
Senate	0	1	2	4	5	3
House	2	8	13	19	17	19
Total Number	2	9	15	23	22	22
Total Percent	1	5	9	14	13	13

	1983	1985	1987	1989	1991	1993
Senate	5	4	4	4	5	7
House	19	16	20	21	20	24
Total Number	24	20	24	25	25	31
Total Percent	14	12	14	15	15	18

Sources: *Article II*, the biennial guide to the legislature published by the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, 1989-1990 and 1993-1994 editions, p. 236 in both editions.

Table 3. Percentage of Women in State Legislatures and Ranking Among the 50 States

State	Percent of Female Legislators	Ranking Among the 50 States
Alabama	5.7%	49
Alaska	21.7	21
Arizona	35.6	2
Arkansas	9.6	46
California	23.3	18
Colorado	34.0	3
Connecticut	25.1	13
Delaware	14.5	38
Florida	17.5	31
Georgia	17.4	32
Hawaii	23.7	16
Idaho	30.5	7
Illinois	23.2	19
Indiana	19.3	27*
Iowa	14.7	37
Kansas	29.5	8
Kentucky	4.3	50
Louisiana	6.9	48
Maine	31.2	6
Maryland	23.4	17
Massachusetts	23.0	20
Michigan	19.6	26
Minnesota	27.4	9
Mississippi	10.9	44
Missouri	19.3	29
Montana	19.3	27*

State	Percent of Female Legislators	Ranking Among the 50 States
Nebraska	20.4	23
Nevada	27.0	11
New Hampshire	33.5	5
New Jersey	12.5	41
New Mexico	19.6	25
New York	16.1	35
North Carolina	18.2	30
North Dakota	16.3	34
Ohio	21.2	22
Oklahoma	9.4	47
Oregon	26.7	12
Pennsylvania	9.9	45
Rhode Island	24.7	14
South Carolina	12.9	40
South Dakota	20.0	24
Tennessee	12.1	42
Texas	16.0	36
Utah	13.5	39
Vermont	33.9	4
Virginia	11.4	43
Washington	39.5	1
West Virginia	16.4	33
Wisconsin	27.3	10
Wyoming	24.4	15
National Avg.	20.4%	

* Denotes a tie that affects ranking. States in which ties are due to rounding rather than to exact percentages are ranked according to exact percentages.

Source: Center for the American Woman and Politics, Rutgers University.