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Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women Lawrence Public Hearing

Report

*On October 18, 2000,
the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women
held its third public hearing
in Lawrence, Massachusetts,
at the YWCA of Greater Lawrence.*

*The purpose of this hearing was to
listen to the concerns of
women, girls, and organizations in the Lawrence area.*

*The Commission hopes that the
comments, feedback, and input of the participants
will help us focus on some of the most pressing concerns
facing women and girls in our state.*



Attendees

Commissioners

Minosca Alcántara
Beth Boland
Kathleen Casavant
Clare Higgins
Frances Hogan
Roseanna Means
Susana Segat

Staff

Priscilla Golding
Melixza Gonzalez
Heidi Kruckenberg

Elected Official

Senator Sue Tucker

Participants from the Community

Alida Alcantara
Lisa Alecci, League of Women Voters
Dr. Lillian Arleque, Arleque & Associates
Ashley, YWCA of Lowell
Jan Burkholder, Office of Senator Sue Tucker
Felicit Camerero, Latins United for Justice
Andy Chandonnet, YWCA of Lowell
Casey Coburn
Linda Comeau, YWCA of Greater Lawrence
Vanessa Conea, Teens in Control
Jacqueline Cooke, Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor
Delanna, YWCA of Lowell
Suzanne deLesdernier, YWCA of Lowell
Christine Doherty, YWCA of Greater Lawrence
Jenifer Duryea, Cape Ann/North Shore NOW
Betsy Dunn, Abortion Access Project
Heidi Elsinger, Girls Inc./NOW
Beverly Enos, Town of Georgetown
Felicia, YWCA of Lowell
Ellen Ferlend, YWCA of Greater Lawrence
Veronica Flores, Teens in Control
Katie Galvin, Malden YWCA
Continued on next page



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Participants from the Community, Continued

Nitzy Gonzalez, Women's Resource Center

Becky Hall, YWCA of Greater Lawrence

Karen Hanley, YWCA of Lowell

Rosemary Hernandez, Merrimack Valley Project

Janee, YWCA of Lowell

Jasmine, YWCA of Lowell

Katherine Lambalot, YWCA of Greater Lawrence

Robin Leal, Town of Georgetown

Margot LeSage, Lawrence Eagle-Tribune

Ann Levy, LPNDC

Pam Meister, Attorney General's Office

Mary O'Brien, YWCA of Greater Lawrence

Suzanne O'Brien

Judith Perkins, Mayor Dowling's Office

Rachel, YWCA of Lowell

Peg Roberts, United Way of Merrimack Valley

Chief John Romero, Lawrence Police Department

Annely Rosen, Teens in Control

Anna Rossi, YWCA of Greater Lawrence

Samantha, YWCA of Lowell

Laureen Seibinico, Malden YWCA

Reena Singh, Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts/Coalition for Choice

Enid Thuermer, League of Women Voters

Sharon Vanderheiden, North Shore Community College

Alejandra Vargas, Lawrence Teen Coalition

Anne Wiehe

Lee Woodbury, YWCA of Greater Lawrence

Opening Remarks

Welcome and Introduction by Commission Chair Susana Segat

Ms. Segat welcomed participants to the hearing and thanked the YWCA of Greater Lawrence for allowing the Commission to hold the hearing at their wonderful office. She then introduced Senator Susan Tucker, who represents Lawrence, Andover, Dracut, and Tewksbury.

Welcome and Introduction by Senator Susan Tucker

Senator Tucker welcomed participants to the area. She said that she shares the concerns exhibited in the survey results. Some of the issues Senator Tucker mentioned in particular were child support and housing.

Introduction of Commissioners

Commission Chair Susana Segat introduced the Commissioners in attendance. Those present were: Minosca Alcántara, Beth Boland, Kathleen Casavant, Clare Higgins, Frances Hogan, and Roseanna Means.

Ms. Segat then turned the floor over to Commissioner Roseanna Means, who was chairing the hearing.

Introduction of Ground Rules, by Roseanna Means

Ms. Means explained that the testimonies would be heard in the order people signed in at the registration desk. Each person would have two minutes for her or his testimony. There are also other ways to let your voice be heard, Ms. Means explained, such as submitting written testimony in the box at the registration desk or adding comments on post-it notes to the Issue Boards throughout the room.

Summary of Testimony

*Summaries based on: note-takers at the meeting,
staff listening to the audiocassette recording of the testimony,
and written testimony.*

Enid Thuermer

League of Women Voters

Ms. Thuermer spoke on behalf of the Massachusetts League of Women Voters and urged the Commission to report favorably on an Act to Prohibit Discrimination in Insurance Policies. She explained that “when the Equal Rights Amendment to the Massachusetts Constitution was ratified in 1976, a commission was established to bring Massachusetts laws into conformity with the amendment. After all these years only discrimination against women in insurance policies remains to be corrected.” The present discrimination in insurance policies means that women pay the same premiums for life insurance as men, but receive smaller pensions and payments.

Written testimony on file.

Reena Singh

Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts/Coalition for Choice

Ms. Singh is from the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts and the Coalition for Choice. She spoke about the health insurance coverage of prescription contraceptives. She explained that an August 1998 study found that insurers were nearly three times as likely to exclude coverage of the birth control pill than Viagra, the high-potency pill for men. Ms. Singh also pointed out that Massachusetts ranks 36th in the provision of contraceptive services to women in need. She urges the Commission to support legislation mandating the coverage of contraception and Hormone Replacement Therapy by health insurance policies.

Written testimony on file.

Betsy Dunn

Abortion Access Project

Ms. Dunn represents the Abortion Access Project. She spoke about the lack of hospital-based abortion services in Massachusetts. She also mentioned the lack of access to the “morning after pill,” also known as RU 487. Fifty percent of hospitals do not offer emergency contraception, and 20% do not even offer it to rape victims in the emergency room. Another concern Ms. Dunn voiced was the lack of trained health professionals in the state. Abortion training is not covered in the curriculum of three of the four medical schools in Massachusetts. Finally, Ms. Dunn spoke about legislative barriers to accessing abortion, primarily parental consent laws.

Alejandra Vargas**Lawrence Teen Coalition**

Ms. Vargas is from the Lawrence Teen Coalition. She talked about domestic violence. Ms. Vargas emphasized that many women experience higher costs than men for dry cleaning, car repairs, and haircuts.

Mary O'Brien**YWCA of Greater Lawrence**

Ms. O'Brien works at the YWCA of Greater Lawrence. She spoke about domestic violence; housing; violence as it affects teens, children, and adults; and the problems uninsured women face when paying for health care. Ms. O'Brien mentioned that adolescent mothers need legislative support.

Lisa Alecci**League of Women Voters**

Ms. Alecci is from the League of Women Voters. She spoke about domestic violence and suggested that the Commission sponsor a showing of the film "Tough Guise" which is about teenage boyhood violence. She emphasized the need for education for women and boys regarding domestic violence.

Heidi Elsinger**Girls Inc./NOW**

Ms. Elsinger spoke about what happens when Catholic hospitals merge with city hospitals. Most times the city hospital is bought out and the Catholic Church is permitted to impose its religious beliefs on the care that is offered at the hospital. Some of the religious beliefs implemented on the medical care are: no abortion services, no birth control services other than natural family planning counseling, and in some cases refusal to provide STD (sexually transmitted diseases or infections) testing to women who have been raped. People are denied medical care because they live in a city with a Catholic hospital. Ms. Elsinger thinks that "the state has an interest and an obligation to make sure that proper care is available to everybody regardless of who is funding the hospital."

Ashley, Janee, Jasmine, Rachel, Samantha, Delanna, and Felicia with Suzanne deLesdernier**YWCA of Lowell**

These seven young girls whose age ranged from 7 to 11 years, came to testify about what it is like to be a girl in Massachusetts. Each girl introduced herself to the Commission and audience. Some of the girls then elaborated on girls issues. Their adult leader, Ms. deLesdernier, shared information that the girls had talked about on their drive to the hearing.

One girl said that she thinks that girls should be treated by boys the way the boys want to be treated. She and another girl mentioned that girls in their school were hit by the boys while on the playground, in the hallways, and on the way

home. Ms. deLesdernier said that on the drive to the hearing the girls were mentioning that girls need a private place to play where they feel safe. These places might be in the corners of parks, with benches arranged so the girls can sit together and talk without being bothered by boys.

Annely Rosen and Veronica Flores
Teens in Control, YWCA of Lowell

Annely and Veronica testified about teen issues and date rape. The girls defined date rape as “when the guy wants to do something with the girl but the girl says ‘no’ but then the boy takes advantage of these young women and sexually harasses them and gets them pregnant.” Self-esteem education is necessary for young women throughout high school, not only in middle school because they teach those courses in the seventh and eighth grade. The continuation of this education is especially important during high school because that is when date rape occurs. When girls get pregnant as a result of date rape the guy leaves, the guy doesn’t care. He gets what he wants and goes on to another girl and tries to do the same thing. However, the young woman is faced with a baby and she might be only 15 or 16 years old. Annely and Veronica do not think that teenagers between the age of 15 to 20 should be having sex because it is too young an age and they could ruin their lives.

Annely and Veronica both had classes about date rape and sexual harassment when they were in middle school, but the education does not continue in high school. Both these girls know girls who have experienced date rape and some of the girls are teenage mothers because of it. Annely and Veronica said that although boys attended the date rape and sexual harassment classes, the teaching did not sink in. The boys tend to think they can have sex and force girls to have sex without facing any responsibility or consequences. When Commissioners asked Annely and Veronica what should happen to boys who date rape, Annely and Veronica said they thought that a couple years in jail was not enough punishment. The boys should be educated on the responsibilities they have to take.

Chief John Romero
Lawrence Police Department

Chief Romero said that domestic violence is a major problem. He spent 30 years in the New York City Police Department and they implemented many programs there to help battered women and men. Some of the worst crimes he has seen in his career have been crimes of domestic violence. In Lawrence Chief Romero is creating a Domestic Violence Unit at the Police Department. This unit will not only do victim advocacy and education, but will also work with possible perpetrators to let them know they are being watched by the police. The Lawrence Police Department is working together with the YWCA of Greater Lawrence on their domestic violence efforts.

Lee Woodbury***YWCA of Greater Lawrence***

Ms. Woodbury is the Associate Executive Director at the YWCA of Greater Lawrence. She is in charge of all the youth services at the YWCA. She spoke about three issues—child care, gender-specific programming, and funding.

In terms of child care, the YWCA serves 94 families at their early childhood center. One hundred percent of the children in those families are living in a single-parent household, most of which are headed by women. The concern is that these families are working poor—they are making between \$8-10/hour and receive no benefits. Almost all the families have no child support payments coming in. Ms. Woodbury emphasized that “mother-blame” is alive, well, and thriving. She underscored the fact that the community and public needs to be educated that “there are supposed to be two parents in a family, and even if they’re not living together, two parents need to be responsible for the upbringing of children.” She sees the issues of child care covering family support systems for single mothers who work all day and then start their evening shift of parenting. These mothers are tired and stressed—they need parental supports. Transportation is another issue that affects single-parents.

In regards to gender-specific programming, Ms. Woodbury mentioned that the YWCA has programs that are for both boys and girls, as well as programs that are gender-specific for girls. She emphasized that the difference between girls attending the gender-specific programs and the coed programs are enormous. Gender-specific programming is effective and ought to be pursued.

As far as funding goes, Ms. Woodbury stated that Massachusetts has done fairly well to fund gender-specific programs, and the YWCA has received grants for such programs. She hopes that funding will continue to support gender-specific programming.

Jenifer Duryea***Cape Ann/North Shore NOW***

Ms. Duryea spoke about the issue of abortion access, and more specifically the lack of access in Essex County. In all of Essex County—which comprises more than 700,000 people, 367,000 of who are female—there are only two facilities that offer abortion services. For most women in Essex County, having access to abortion services means going to Boston, which can be difficult if a person does not have a car or is not familiar with the city.

Young teenage women are indulging in dangerous and self-destructive behavior in attempts to induce spontaneous abortions (miscarriages) because of their fear and ignorance. Ms. Duryea was horrified to learn about these grim facts.

The other facet that Ms. Duryea addressed relative to lack of abortion access was the violence that providers face, sometimes daily. She sees the solution to be a simple one: If every hospital had a full service reproductive department there would be no place for fanatics to focus their assaults. If every OB/GYN was trained to provide abortions, no single doctor could be targeted by a “gun-toting zealot.”

Cape Ann/North Shore NOW actively supported Senator Montigny’s bill calling for a moratorium on hospital mergers, because time after time mergers result in the elimination of access to abortion choice.

Written testimony on file.

Peg Roberts

United Way of Merrimack Valley

Ms. Roberts is Senior Vice-President at United Way of Merrimack Valley. She testified about the feminization of poverty from two perspectives. The United Way is noticing an abundance of issues around the availability of food, which does not seem like it would be a problem in this economy. But, the food pantries are bare. Most of the children suffering from poverty come from families with a single mother and many of these children are hungry. In addition, with welfare reform and such a good economy people are working; however, they are the working poor and they are working two or three jobs. So, even though these women and families may be working, they run out of money and visit the food pantry for food.

The Massachusetts Retirement System for teachers represents the other perspective of the feminization of poverty that Ms. Roberts is interested in. If teachers take two years off teaching then their retirement money stops gaining interest. She sees this as a woman’s issue because many women go into teaching and then leave to raise their families and sometimes they go back into teaching and sometimes they do not.

Linda Comeau

YWCA of Greater Lawrence

Ms. Comeau is the Safe Start coordinator for the housing advocacy project at the YWCA of Greater Lawrence. There is a crisis of affordable housing for women, children, and families in Massachusetts. Ms. Comeau sees and talks to women every day in housing crises. Rent in Lawrence is \$945, and landlords expect first and last month’s rent as well as a security deposit. Women often cannot afford to pay this much money. The problem is exaggerated for battered women who must leave shelter and who do not have money for housing. They often return to their abuser in order to have a place to live.

Ellen Ferland***YWCA of Greater Lawrence***

Ms. Ferland is the director of Intervention and Prevention Services at the YWCA of Greater Lawrence. She is concerned for the safety of women who experience violence or domestic violence in the form of rape or sexual assault. Though Massachusetts has come a long way, there are still not enough shelters for battered women nor are there other appropriate housing options once these women leave shelter. Rape survivors have no shelter to accommodate them. Ms. Ferland asks the Commission to consider violence against women as a major concern in our Commonwealth. She concluded by saying that if we “fail to provide for the basic human need for safety and shelter, we are doing every one of our gender a great disservice.”

Anna Rossi***YWCA of Greater Lawrence***

Ms. Rossi works in the Oasis Project, a transitional housing program for women and children who are homeless due to domestic violence. Some of the things Ms. Rossi helps women through are the obstacles of child support, child care, transportation, and housing. In regard to child care, she sees a need for a “second shift” of child care for women who work later shifts. Transportation is a problem in Lawrence because after dark the buses do not run, which is difficult for many women’s work schedule. Housing is problematic because rents are high and women lose their housing vouchers and become homeless.

Mabel Pizzarro***Women’s Resource Center***

Ms. Pizzarro works for the domestic violence program at the Women’s Resource Center. She spoke about the housing issue in Lawrence. There are more abandoned buildings in Lawrence than there are subsidized housing, so the city may want to take that into consideration. Another concern Ms. Pizzarro expressed was about domestic violence and restraining orders. She thinks that criminal complaints should be taken seriously, rather than ignored.

Judith Perkins***Mayor Dowling’s Office***

Ms. Perkins works on the Housing Task Force in the Mayor’s Office. She receives numerous calls regarding the abandoned houses in Lawrence. There is a group of 25 abandoned houses that are referred to as the “Wall of Shame.” The Housing Task Force is trying to pressure the owners of these properties into improving them. Many people call the Mayor’s Office and want to know if they can buy those abandoned properties, but because the City of Lawrence does not own them they cannot sell them. Some of these property owners owe years of back taxes, and the City is attempting to make them pay. Some of the abandoned properties are in limbo due to foreclosure and distressed titles.

Nitzy Gonzalez***Women's Resource Center***

Ms. Gonzalez works at the battered women's shelter at the Women's Resource Center. Housing is a major issue for the women at the shelter because they find that the waiting lists for subsidized housing are seven and eight years long. This is discouraging, and when the woman's three months is up at the shelter, she must go to another shelter because she has not found housing. Some women end up going back to their abusers at this point. Ms. Gonzalez's opinion is that this lack of affordable housing has to do with lack of federal funding. There is a need for safe homes, too. The abandoned buildings in Lawrence are a resource that Ms. Gonzalez sees as a way to help battered women.

Restraining orders are broken and men are not arrested and this is wrong. Ms. Gonzalez sees the police force in Lawrence as not doing its job to enforce restraining orders. She also mentioned a personal experience in which a family member of hers was assaulted by her landlord. When the police was called, they refused to arrest the landlord because they did not see the violence occur. Ms. Gonzalez said that if the police in Lawrence would do their job, there would be less violence in Lawrence.

Rosemary Hernandez***Merrimack Valley Project***

Ms. Hernandez works for the Merrimack Valley Project, which works for social justice. She has been a teenage mother and on welfare. She has worked very hard to get herself out of poverty.

The issues from the Commission survey that Ms. Hernandez spoke about were: economic development/stability, housing, and child care. First, in relation to economic development/stability: there are many people who want to work, but cannot because they do not have the resources they need. Wages need to be higher and employees should not be overworked. Second, as far as the issue of housing, the subsidized housing property that Ms. Hernandez once lived in is now being torn down. The lack of affordable housing is a problem because affordable housing is a basis for people's journey out of poverty. Finally, without quality child care, Ms. Hernandez could not work. It is very important.

In conclusion, Ms. Hernandez stated that she thinks the education of girls is crucial. She also spoke about temporary workers who are told to report to work every morning and then the employer will let them know whether or not they are needed that day. This creates problems because these women pay for child care and transportation and spend time getting to work and may be turned away because there is not work to be done. Other temporary work problems include being paid illegally.

Robin Leal

Town of Georgetown

Ms. Leal is the Town Administrator in Georgetown. She began her testimony by thanking the Commission for coming to Lawrence for a hearing. Then she asked “Where are the men?” She spoke about a rape conference she attended at which there were only women in attendance. The speaker at this conference pointed out that rape is not only a “women’s issue.” Ms. Leal encourages the Commission to pay attention to the discourse around the issues it discusses so as to not frame everything as a “women’s issue” and thereby exclude men from the solution. These are the concerns of community, life, and family—not just women’s issues.

Also, Ms. Leal spoke about housing issues, particularly for women who have been married and purchased a house but then divorce. When these women want to purchase a home again (as a single woman), they are precluded from first-time homebuyers’ programs.

Additional Written Testimony

Maria Bartlett

League of Women Voters of Andover/North Andover

Ms. Bartlett was unable to attend the hearing, but submitted testimony to the Commission in her absence. She is president of the League of Women Voters in Andover/North Andover, a member of the Gender Initiative Steering Committee of the Andover Public Schools, and a member of the Merrimack Branch of the American Association of University Women. She urged the Commission to support the passage of S. 2043, which prohibits sex discrimination in insurance coverage and benefits. She also urged the Commission to support S. 733, which requires health insurance coverage of prescription contraceptives and Hormone Replacement Therapy to the same extent that other prescription drugs and devices are covered.

Ms. Bartlett also wrote about violence against women, particularly the greater incidence of domestic violence in the Lawrence area. She noted that: “sadly, local editorial commentary about these cases reveals a lack of awareness about the heightened risk for women when they decide to leave or end an abusive relationship. I have read a number of editorials and columns in the local press that ‘blame the victim.’” Ms. Bartlett also pointed out that more education is needed for young boys about nonviolent conflict resolution. These models of training are expensive and ought to be funded by the state. She suggested that the Commission sponsor a showing of a film such as “Tough Guise,” which increases awareness of the violent media’s influence on young boys’ behavior. In

conclusion, Ms. Bartlett emphasized the importance of programming to encourage middle-school age girls to explore math and technology careers.

Written testimony on file.

Susan Yanow

Abortion Access Project

Ms. Yanow was unable to attend the hearing, so she submitted written testimony to the Commission in her absence. She is the director of the Abortion Access Project. She stated that “there is a problem in Massachusetts with access to abortion and reproductive health services, a problem that unduly burdens low income, rural, and young women.” Four signs of this access problem are: lack of hospital-based abortion services, lack of access to emergency contraception (the “morning after” pill), lack of trained health professionals, and legislative barriers to access. Ms. Yanow and the Abortion Access Project urged the Commission to “include the provision of reproductive health care as part of its mandate to ensure the health of women in Massachusetts.” She would be happy to provide the Commission with more information about this issue at the Commission’s convenience.

Written testimony on file.

Issue Boards

Participants were invited to write anonymous comments on post-it notes and stick them to the appropriate Issue Board during the hearing.

*The topics commented on at this hearing were:
Girls' Issues, Health Care, and Violence Against Women.*



Girls' Issues

- Programs and safety for girls

Health Care

- Religious/secular hospital mergers
- Access to all health care options
- Find a way to put Catholic hospitals out of business if they deny women medically necessary reproductive services

Violence Against Women

- Where do children go for court ordered supervised visitation—all centers closed due to cut backs
- Work to end all types of violence against women and girls and humans
- Visitation and exchange center for parents under restraining orders. How can she protect herself and her children when Dad comes to get the children for court ordered visitation. She is not safe to have him pick up the children at home.

Media About the Hearing

from the *Wilmington Advocate* October 11, 2000

Commission to discuss women's issues

By **ROBERTO SCALESE**
STAFF WRITER

The Commission on the Status of Women was created last year to help the state better identify and respond to the needs and issues of women in Massachusetts.

To meet this goal, the commission has set up a series of hearings. With the next one slated at the Lawrence YWCA on Oct. 18. Organizations and individuals from Wilmington are urged to attend.

The commission is so new that there has not been a set protocol for dealing with the issues raised. Priscilla Golding, the commission's executive director, said she believes that is a strong point for the group.

"We'll look at all the ways we can make an impact," she said.

The commission has been holding hearings to find out what women across the state see as the potential problems and issues they face each day.

"We want people to come to these meetings and talk to us," said Commission Chairman Susana Segat. "We want feedback about what's important and what's not."

The idea is that women from all over the state will be able to affect policy, programs, and legislation drafted by the state. Segat points to the commission's authorities as an example of the wide range the group will cover.

"There are 19 of us (on the commission)," said Segat, "A quarter of us came from recommendations from the governor, a quarter from the Senate president, a quarter from the Speaker of the House, and a quarter from the Caucus of Women Legislators."

Segat said she feels that the diverse influences used to put the commission together keep the group more objective. Most states that have such a commission are usually pet projects of the governor's office, and are not effective, she explained.

The commission plans to hold about four hearings a year. The information and opinions gathered will be used to focus the group on key issues, and to research what methods would best help to resolve them.

"We have to look at what we can do to make a difference," said Golding. "We'll look at all the ways we can make an impact."

Some of the issues raised at previous hearings have included health care, day care and education, as well as separate issues that are specific to young girls and women.

The group will not necessarily focus on legislation. Golding used the example of day care to explain why. She said that legislation requiring mandatory day care would not be feasible, or would necessarily pass. Instead, other solutions could be found, such as programming.

Also, the group has held these regional hearings to see how women in the local areas have dealt with some of these issues. Golding said that the commission could use these regional plans as models for state-wide programs and solutions.

from the *Lawrence Eagle-Tribune* October 19, 2000

Worries: Housing, violence, abortion

By Margot LeSage
Eagle-Tribune Writer

LAWRENCE -- Seven-year-old Felicia from Lowell said the boys at her school need to stop picking on and hitting the girls on the playground and while walking home from school.

Felicia's concerns mirrored those of many women and girls at a public hearing yesterday at the Greater Lawrence YWCA sponsored by The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women.

The commission will use the comments at this and other public hearings throughout the state to shape programs and legislation for the upcoming year.

"We're bringing their (the audience's) voices back to the Statehouse," said Dr. Roseanna Means of Wellesley. The Women's Council is made up of 19 women from across the state who listen to women's needs and focus on the most pressing issues facing them.

Affordable housing, domestic violence and abortion and reproductive rights topped women's concerns in the Merrimack Valley yesterday with many saying living in Lawrence -- once known for affordable housing -- is unattainable for many single mothers.

Mary B. O'Brien, associate executive director of the Greater Lawrence YWCA, said women fleeing abusive husbands or boyfriends are among those who suffer the most because of the state's affordable housing crunch.

"We assist with more than 40 restraining orders a week in Lawrence District court ... and every three months 350 women need housing assistance and there is a waiting list at the battered women's shelter," Ms. O'Brien said. "There are no apartments in the city of Lawrence. We have mothers sleeping on floors with babies in boxes."

The lack of housing forces many battered women to return to their batterers, women repeatedly said yesterday, and those who work in shelters and crisis centers fear the worst.

"It hurts me to turn them down," said Nitzy Gonzalez, of the Women's Resource Center, who said she's fielded many calls from women needing a safe place for the night, but are forced to stay on the streets or return to their abusers because every shelter is filled to capacity.

Lawrence Police Chief John J. Romero said more intervention is needed to point out potential victims and perpetrators of abuse.

"When I started 31 years ago as a police officer, the response to domestic violence cases was walking the perpetrators around the block. Now if you see any redness (or signs of abuse) you make an arrest," Chief Romero said.

Senator Susan C. Tucker, D-Andover, said although great strides have been made in the past 20 years in protecting women from domestic abuse, more work still needs to be done.

"We still haven't gotten it right ... it's a very serious problem,"

Women also raised issue about the lack of rights women have when it comes to their own bodies, especially in the area of reproductive health care.

Reena Singh of the Planned Parenthood league of Massachusetts and the Mass. Coalition for Choice said many birth control methods and hormone replacement therapy are not covered by many health care plans in the state.

"Only 33 percent (of the plans) cover oral contraception," Ms. Singh said, adding that women, on average, pay \$7,000-\$10,000 more than men do over their lifetime for prescription drugs and other health care needs.

"Improved access to birth control will save money because it will prevent unwanted pregnancies," she concluded.

But, more startling is the lack of access to abortions in the Bay State.

In 1999, the Abortion Access Project surveyed all the hospitals in Massachusetts, said Betsy Dunn of the Abortion Access Project. Only 12 offer abortion services and many that do not, don't properly refer patients to clinics that do.

In addition, she said, only half the nursing schools in Massachusetts cover abortion in their curriculum and three of the four medical schools in the state cover abortion.

Choking back tears, Heidi Elisinger, who works for a rape crisis counselor in Lowell, said the takeover of non-Catholic hospitals by Catholic hospitals has greatly compromised women's health, especially where reproductive rights are concerned.

"The refusals are based on religious beliefs and not city or state ordinances," Miss Elisinger said.

In Essex County there are only two places women can get abortions, said Jennifer Duryea, of the Cape Ann/North Shore Chapter of NOW, the National Organization for Women, which is forcing many to resort to back alley abortion techniques popular before Roe v. Wade.

"I am not here to argue the issue of abortion. It is a legal right," Ms. Duryea said. "At the moment, however, women are being denied their legal right to choose by lack of access. That needs to be remedied."

[The text in this block is extremely faint and illegible. It appears to be a multi-paragraph document with several lines of text per paragraph. The content is not discernible.]

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