

**Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women
New Bedford Public Hearing**

Report

*On November 15, 2000,
the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women
held its fourth public hearing
in New Bedford, Massachusetts,
at the First Unitarian Church of New Bedford.*

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

*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

Sandra Jesse Carter
Kathleen Casavant
Roseanna Means
Jo Anne Thompson

Staff

Priscilla Golding
Melixza Gonzalez
Heidi Kruckenberg

Elected Official

Jane Gonsalves, New Bedford City Councilor

Participants from the Community

Gloria S. Alcolia
Rosaria Aoteaga
Anne Beaulieu, Community Foundation of Southeastern Massachusetts
Gail Brennan, Kennedy Donovan Center
Deborah Carreira
Maureen Curran
Denise C. Denault
Yvonne Drayton, YWCA of Southeastern Massachusetts
Irene Duprey-Gutierrez
Leona J. Fisher
Essjay Foulkrod
Geraldine D. Frates
Marilyn Greene, Inter-Church Council
Cindy Greentees, Fall River Family Resource Center
Diane Hitchcock
Donna Hunt-Rucker
Rev. Carol Z. Karlson, First Unitarian Church of New Bedford
Susan Megri, Bishop Stang High School
Patricia A. Mello, New Bedford Child and Family Services
Rebecca Mendes
Edith Nichols
Carmen Oliver, New Bedford Child and Family Services
Jaime Lopez Ortega
Jess Pabon, UMass Dartmouth Women's Resource Center
Juli Parker, UMass Dartmouth Women's Resource Center

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Participants from the Community, Continued

Jeanne Da Rocha Paiva Paslé-Green

Maggie Peirce

Marlene Pollak, Coalition Against Poverty

Pamela Pollock, YWCA of Southeastern Massachusetts

Andrea Reardon, New Bedford Child and Family Services

Kay Reis, League of Women Voters

Jean Rose

Brianna Rucker

Claire Russell, League of Women Voters

Washawn Thomas, Abortion Access Project

Anna Tomasello

Bethaney Touré, Fall River Rape Crisis Center

Catherine Varanese

Christie Walen

Jenna Walen

Patt Wampler

Opening Remarks

Welcome and Introduction by Commissioner Roseanna Means, M.D.

Dr. Means welcomed members of the community to the Commission's public hearing. She thanked the YWCA of Southeastern Massachusetts for their help in publicizing the hearing and thanked the First Unitarian Church of New Bedford for offering their space for the hearing. She introduced the Commissioners present: Sandra Jesse Carter, Kathleen Casavant, and Jo Anne Thompson.

After giving a brief overview of the history of the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women, Dr. Means talked about the ground rules for testimony. She 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, Dr. 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.*

Bethaney Touré

Fall River Rape Crisis Center

Ms. Touré works at the Fall River Rape Crisis Center. She wants to make it clear and understandable that domestic violence is not always sexual assault and sexual assault is not always domestic violence. The funding for the Fall River Rape Crisis Center was increased this year by the legislature; however, it was a tough fight to get more funding because some legislators said "we already gave domestic violence an increase in money." Ms. Touré thinks that this notion "leaves out a huge number of women who may have been sexually assaulted by someone who they were not in a domestic relationship with." Therefore, although sexual assault and domestic violence have the same connotation, they are not the same issue.

Ms. Touré explained that services for victims of sexual assault need to be more accessible, as well as services in the lesbian community. The access for lesbian women to domestic violence shelter is often limited, which makes it difficult for this population.

In conclusion, Ms. Touré addressed the fact that battered women who seek shelter and have boy children over twelve years of age are asked to place that boy child somewhere else. Ms. Touré stated that: "I find that to be a very difficult decision to ask a battered woman 'OK, leave your abusive relationship and we'll put you in shelter, but you'll have to give your boy child to someone else.' I think it is an issue that has gone on long enough within the sheltering system that needs to be looked at. We need to keep families together through that turmoil."

Jane Gonsalves
New Bedford City Council

Ms. Gonsalves is a City Councilor from New Bedford. She is one of two female elected officials in New Bedford and has been the only woman for the past five years on the eleven-member City Council. She is also on the Board of the YWCA of Southeastern Massachusetts. Several of the issues Ms. Gonsalves mentioned were: domestic violence, lack of educational and economic opportunities for women, child care, housing, public transportation, drug treatment facilities for women, and welfare reform. In conclusion, she said that she “would like to see more women running for office and more women getting elected to office.” There needs to be a better “farm” system to get women into elected office, that includes funding. She urged the Commission to “lobby those men in the legislature to address *our* issues and to take *our* side.” She said that “I hate to make it a partisan issue—partisan between men and women rather than parties—but the men in the legislature need to think like women more often because there aren’t enough women to carry a majority.”

Anne Beaulieu
Community Foundation of Southeastern Massachusetts

Ms. Beaulieu works for the Community Foundation of Southeastern Massachusetts, a newly-created community foundation (five years old) that covers all of southeastern Massachusetts. The Community Foundation receives proposals from every corner of the area and unfortunately there is not enough money to go around. She would like the Commission to look into two things related to her work: first, women’s philanthropic giving and second, finding ways to *solve* problems rather than continually *fund* the problems.

Marlene Pollak
Coalition Against Poverty

Ms. Pollak is associated with the Coalition Against Poverty, which operates in Fall River and New Bedford and with Treatment on Demand, which is a New Bedford-based organization. The first issue Ms. Pollak addressed was drug treatment programs. The drug felon opt-out situation means if a person has had a felony conviction because of drugs (even if that person is currently in a recovery program), he or she is no longer eligible for SSI, food stamps, subsidized child care, or welfare. So what happens is “people who could recover from drugs and live a productive life are not able to do that.” Legislation to change this situation has been filed several times, but Governor Cellucci has vetoed its passage.

Another issue that the Coalition Against Poverty works on is the humanization of welfare. Welfare reform assumes that every person is in the same situation, but in reality not everyone is. Ms. Pollak believes that the “State of Massachusetts is putting people at risk by automatically saying ‘two years and you’re out’.” Extensions should be more readily available.

Ms. Pollak explained that child care is another problem that affects welfare recipients’ ability to find a job as well as working parents’ ability to maintain their jobs. The Coalition fought hard to get an increase in minimum wage and although that helps, there is still a shortage of decent-paying jobs in Southeastern Massachusetts. Transportation is another problem because all buses stop running at 6:00 p.m. in New Bedford.

Finally, Ms. Pollak mentioned the MCAS test. She said that: “both my children went through the New Bedford public school system and I know there are a lot of areas of improvement and I think we need accountability. But do not punish the children, and that is what is happening. I don’t think the MCAS is a very good test, I don’t think it emphasizes critical thinking and enough of the things that we really want to see [as teachers]. Let’s have assessments and let’s not punish the children for whatever weakness is in the public school system.”

Irene Duprey-Gutierrez
New Bedford

Ms. Duprey-Gutierrez is a teacher who lives in New Bedford and represents herself. She said that “the issues that we’re hearing and the issues that we’re going to hear could pretty much be solved if we got more women into politics. We need support of every kind—encouragement, training, financial backing, PR, whatever is necessary.” She also emphasized that “we’ve got to do something about the MCAS.”

Catherine Varanese
Dartmouth

Ms. Varanese lives in Dartmouth and represents herself. She is a past victim of domestic abuse. She spoke to the Commission about a bad situation she had when buying her house. She believes that she was treated differently as a single woman buying the house than she would have been if she were a man or had she been married.

Maggie Peirce
member of the First Unitarian Church of New Bedford

Ms. Peirce is a member of the First Unitarian Church of New Bedford and also a member of the Women’s Center in New Bedford. She expressed the need for more child care, better child care, and late-hour child care. She also spoke about the need for more bilingual lawyers and social workers, not just translators. Ms. Peirce also pointed out that “social workers are leaving employment as social workers by the dozen, by the score, by the hundred. The reason is because they are not being paid enough.” This is a big problem.

Gail Brennan
Kennedy Donovan Center

Ms. Brennan works at the Kennedy Donovan Center in New Bedford, in the Healthy Family and First Steps Program. She sees a lot of teens who need teen living programs in their communities. There are teen living programs across the state, but many teens must relocate in order to go into the program and this leaves them without their support network of family and friends, which can be difficult. She also stressed the need for child care, especially for low-income working parents who have to wait for income-eligible slots.

Washawn Thomas
Abortion Access Project

Ms. Thomas is the Project Coordinator for the Abortion Access Project and is on the Board of Directors for the Eastern Massachusetts Abortion Fund. She stated that “there is a problem in Massachusetts with access to abortion and reproductive health services. It’s a problem that

burdens low income, rural, and young women.” The Abortion Access Project works to increase access to abortion in hospitals. Most women have abortions in clinics, but for many women clinics are not the best option—for example women on MassHealth. Another downside to clinics is that they are in urban areas. A survey conducted by the Abortion Access Project last year indicates that only twelve hospitals in Massachusetts provide abortion services. There is also a lack of access to emergency contraception (the “morning after” pill), a lack of trained health professionals, and legislative barriers to access (such as parental consent laws). Ms. Thomas concluded by explaining that “abortion should not be seen as a separate issue, but it should be a part of medical services, not just a special issue, but a part of general reproductive health services.”

Denise C. Denault
New Bedford

Ms. Denault lives in New Bedford and represents herself. She mentioned several issues: better health care, access to abortion, education in many fields, improved child care, better pay for child care workers, the MCAS, the need for programs to help teen mothers feel productive in society, and better pay for welfare and social workers.

In conclusion, Ms. Denault testified about the complicated and confusing system that welfare has become. She stated that: “You have to get involved with three or four different agencies before you get anything productive. It’s ridiculous. You go to one, and they send you to this one. And then you’re sent to another one.”

Juli Parker
Women’s Resource Center, UMass Dartmouth

Ms. Parker is the Director of the Women’s Resource Center at UMass Dartmouth. She addressed the issue of breast cancer in women, particularly its high occurrence in Southeastern Massachusetts compared to other parts of the state. She also spoke about the funding cuts in higher education, which meant a 30% cut out of the Women’s Center’s budget this year. Big issues that come to Ms. Parker’s desk from the college women she serves are: funding their education, finding jobs that relate to their field of study while they are in college, and body image and eating disorders because of the portrayal of the female body by the media.

Susan Megri
Bishop Stang High School

Ms. Megri is a teacher at Bishop Stang High School in Dartmouth. She spoke about the programs offered at Bishop Stang that help “empower young women to make good decisions.” The students are encouraged to “abstain from sexual relationships until marriage because then the child that is born has a mother and a father in the context of marriage.” In a required health course male and female students are taught anger management skills.

Jess Pabon
Women’s Resource Center, UMass Dartmouth

Ms. Pabon works at the UMass Dartmouth’s Women’s Resource Center. She spoke about the need for more support for high school students. In particular, there ought to be “support

through funding” for a young feminists group or clubs that address the needs of gay and bisexual students. She said “high school students need that support from their teachers and the teachers need that support from their supervisors.”

Geraldine D. Frates

Acushnet

Ms. Frates lives in Acushnet and represents herself. She spoke about domestic violence from a personal perspective. She stated that her son spent “two-and-a-half years in a house of correction over a restraining order indirectly that I feel was not exactly truthful.” She thinks that sometimes when people fight for equal rights and equality, some people go too far and thereby deny those on the other side their equal rights. More mediation services might be helpful in solving the problem of people taking restraining orders out on others without good reason. In conclusion, Ms. Frates spoke about a need for shelters for men who are asked to leave their houses due to domestic violence.

Essjay Foulkrod

New Bedford

Ms. Foulkrod is a member of the First Unitarian Church of New Bedford and it’s “Le’s be ‘an’s” group. Le’s be ‘an’s means “let’s be hands” which implies helping each other. This is a lesbian support, social, and discussion group. She is also a member of the YWCA’s gay and lesbian “Lavender Café.” Ms. Foulkrod is concerned about funding and publicizing these two important groups. She would like the Commission to help publicize lesbian services and support groups across the state.

Edith Nichols

New Bedford

Ms. Nichols is a small business owner from New Bedford. She stated that: “I’ve been a small business woman for 17 years in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and when I started out I was very naïve. I thought it was a level playing field. I thought as long as you worked hard, you were industrious, you applied what you had learned in schooling, that you would prosper and go ahead.” She addressed the issue of women as small business owners by explaining that women not only run their businesses but also their families, which is difficult. Sometimes grants for female business owners actually pit those women business owners against one another. Ms. Nichols also spoke about women’s involvement in politics. She believes that “politically, women are operating in the dark. We don’t know how to muster and support a political campaign. If we are smart enough to get men elected, we can work just as hard to get women educated and elected.”

Claire Russell

League of Women Voters, Marion

Ms. Russell represents the League of Women Voters in Marion. She spoke about discrimination in insurance policies. In 1978 the Equal Rights Amendment was passed in Massachusetts. Between 1988-1991 there was a ruling from the Commissioner of Insurance that eliminated all discrimination in insurance based on gender. Then in 1991 a case brought before the Supreme Judicial Court overturned the Commissioner’s ruling and discrimination was again allowed in insurance. The decision to eliminate gender discrimination is now up to

the legislature. For several years bills have been filed that would eliminate such discrimination. The League of Women Voters supports such bills and seeks the Women's Commission's support as well.

Written testimony on file.

Kay Reese

League of Women Voters, Marion

Ms. Reese represents the Marion, Mattapoissett, and Rochester League of Women Voters. She stated that the League thinks that "it is morally incoherent, brutally unjust and just plain stupid to have health insurance cover Viagra and not cover contraception." She testified about the need for contraception to be covered by health insurance and also about the need for access to abortion.

Maureen Curran

New Bedford

Ms. Curran represents herself. She stated that one of her concerns was the need for more sensitivity toward poor women. She addressed in particular the needs of poor working women in professions such as social work and teaching. One of the disadvantages women in these fields face is lack of access to the political connections that lead to promotions and sometimes even hiring. Ms. Curran said she would like to see more support for women in the arts and music.

Dr. Jeanne Da Rocha Paiva Paslé-Green

Mattapoissett

Ms. Paslé-Green lives in Mattapoissett and represents herself. She highlighted some issues that had been mentioned in other testimonies, but that she thought deserved more emphasis: poverty, housing, homelessness, welfare, child care, better wages, and domestic violence. She stated that "a lot of these are issues of poverty and we could solve a lot of them if somebody really threw a lot of money at us, you know. And genuinely, genuinely felt like this was a worthwhile expense rather just 'let's keep them happy.' And the other overview I'd like to give is that when I go down that list all of it is violence. We are experiencing a tremendous amount of violence from all directions, all the time, all through our lives." She sees this violence to be a hate crime. In conclusion Ms. Paslé-Green gave an example of a vision of a world where women's work was valued and cultural differences were celebrated.

Yvonne Drayton

YWCA of Southeastern Massachusetts

Ms. Drayton is the Executive Director of the YWCA of Southeastern Massachusetts. She spoke about the problems of unwanted children and of women not working well together. She concluded her comments by stating that the composition of the Commission is not representative of women across the state of Massachusetts.

Jean Rose

Rochester

Ms. Rose lives in Rochester and represents herself. She spoke about the need for Treatment in Demand, especially in New Bedford where "drugs are a big problem." She also testified about

the need to support teenage mothers. In conclusion Ms. Rose stated that “I just think it would be better if the state would try and fund a more diverse program so [welfare recipients] are getting training in all areas” rather than just low-paying health care jobs.

Patt Wampler
New Bedford

Ms. Wampler lives in New Bedford and represents herself. She spoke about her pro-life position. She testified that in many cases women are not as informed as they should be. She stated that: “You go to the women’s clinic and their strong recommendation is always abortion.” She sees the need for taxpayer money to go toward creating an “independent center other than a place where abortions are performed to inform these young people what the risks [of abortion] are and so forth.”

Jaime Lopez Ortega
New Bedford

Mr. Ortega lives in New Bedford and represents himself. He spoke about the need for men and women to talk to each other and find ways to solve the problems of sexism. He thinks that men are interested in knowing about women’s issues and are willing to help and become involved. He feels that men are not informed about women’s issues and that if they were, they would be interested in becoming involved in the movement.

Christine Walen
South Dartmouth

Ms. Walen is a resident of the town of Dartmouth and represents herself. She testified about the need for more, better, and less expensive public transportation between Southeastern Massachusetts and Boston. She personally faces problems commuting to Boston for work each day—it is time-consuming and expensive. The other issue that concerns Ms. Walen is the high rate of sexual assault in Southeastern Massachusetts. She is also concerned about prostitution, drug trafficking, violence in public schools, and domestic violence in the New Bedford area.

Jenna Walen
South Dartmouth

Ms. Walen is a high school student who lives in South Dartmouth. She spoke about how she thinks abstinence is best for teenagers. She explained that most of her friends are not virgins, which she thinks is “really sad.” She thinks that abstinence for teenagers should be supported and advocated.

Rosaria Aoteaga
New Bedford

Ms. Aoteaga lives in New Bedford and represents herself. She testified about child care. It is difficult to find quality, affordable, and flexible child care. There needs to be after- and before-hours child care. Ms. Aoteaga knows women who have lost their jobs because of child care problems. She also spoke about the issue of low-paying jobs that do not support families. Another problem she addressed was the fact that the welfare department will not hire clients, which seems like a disconnect.

Ms. Aoteaga spoke about the importance of agencies hiring and paying people as interpreters rather than having lower-paid clerks do the interpreting at no extra compensation. By compensating the clerks for their interpretation services those workers are treated more appropriately. Finally, Ms. Aoteaga mentioned the emphasis placed on college degrees, which emphasis she thinks is sometimes overrated. Many people are qualified to perform jobs but do not have college degrees and are therefore not considered for these positions.

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 covered by the Issue Boards were: Child Care, Economic Development/Stability, Girls' Issues, Health Care, Violence Against Women, and Other.



Child Care

- ⇒ We need better and more child care services available and to pay the child care providers better
- ⇒ We need people who really care about kids in the child care business and pay them well

Economic Development/Stability

- ⇒ More money is not the answer. Look for leaders in the community
- ⇒ Get rid of prostitution, drug trafficking and strip clubs. They demean women
- ⇒ Sensitivity toward poor women. As an unemployed certified teacher, all teachers require re-certification. Poor employed teachers receive no support in keeping their certification while employed teachers who usually have political pull not only get the courses to stay certified, but also get cruises and good meals in high quality restaurants.

Girls' Issues

- ⇒ Support, through clubs, for girls in Middle and High School addressing lesbian issues
- ⇒ Having groups to elevate our young's self-esteem so that drugs, sexual promiscuity, or eating disorders be a thing of the past, or at least reduced
- ⇒ Teach young girls to be proud to be girls and to care for one another
- ⇒ More support against eating disorders and depression of the youth in elementary, middle and high school. There should also be after school programs and clubs for all public schools to support the kids whose parents aren't there for them.
- ⇒ We need more ways to reduce violence in the schools. Promote better understanding between boys and girls in schools.

Health Care

- ⇒ A midwife in every town
- ⇒ More alternative health care choices
- ⇒ I want more preventative classes regarding good health

Violence Against Women

- ⇒ Having better shelters available to all who need them to have education on prevention and dealing with this issue also for the public to be accessible to

Other

- ⇒ Affordable housing
- ⇒ Support for organizations offering support and services to lesbians
- ⇒ Transportation I have a two-hour commute on both ends of the day to get to work in Boston. We need commuter rail.
- ⇒ There should be more support for higher education, in public schools, concerning morals and religion. Students should be subjected to all religions so they can expand on religious tolerance and also being able to study every religion available and decide for themselves what faith suits them to the point where they want and desire to be involved in it.