

Women add varied views to Arizona's legislative process



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CAROLINA MADRID
Cronkite News Service

PHOENIX - Linda Lopez didn't hesitate to proofread her 37-year-old son's paper for a writing class when he called her Senate office recently.

You never stop being a mother, even as a state lawmaker, Lopez said, just as being a woman influences her decisions and actions at the Capitol.

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"Women change the dynamics in a room," said Lopez, a Tucson Democrat who joined the Senate this year after four terms in the House. "Men focus on the end goal while women focus on the journey."

Twenty-eight of the 90 members of the Legislature this session are women. While the total is down from 31 last year, the state still has one of the nation's highest percentages of female representation.

That diversity benefits Arizona, said Rep. Kirk Adams, R-Mesa, the House speaker.

"I think women add a wonderful, egalitarian dimension to the Legislature," Adams said.

"Women bring a natural perspective that might not be there otherwise."

At 31.1 percent, Arizona ranks 10th in the nation in its share of women legislators, according to the Center for American Women and Politics, a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. The national average is 24.2 percent.

The state fell from sixth place last year but has yet to rank out of the top 10 since the center began keeping track in the late 1970s. However, it would have dropped if Rep. Anna Tovar, D-Tolleson, hadn't been appointed to replace Democrat Steve Gallardo, who opted not to take his House seat.

Gilda Morales, the center's project manager for information services, said Arizona's rank might trace to the history of progressivism in the West.

"There's always been that sense - to build together, and it continues to exist," she said. "The South has always been more conservative, and women there tend to see politics as being

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Sen. Linda Lopez, D-Tucson, is one of members of the Arizona State Legislature, Arizona ranks 10th in the U.S. percentage of women in legislatures.

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On the Web

Center for American Women and Politics
www.cawp.rutgers.edu

Women legislators

Here are states with the highest representation of women in their state legislatures:

- Colorado, 39 percent
- New Hampshire, 37.7 percent
- Vermont, 37.2 percent
- Minnesota, 34.8 percent
- Hawaii, 32.9 percent
- Washington, 32 percent
- Nevada, 31.7 percent
- Connecticut, 31.6 percent
- Maryland, 31.4 percent
- Arizona, 31.1 percent

Source: Center for American Women and Politics

dirty."

Morales noted that Colorado, Washington, Hawaii and Oregon also rank in the top 10.

Whatever the reason, Lopez said that having women represented at the Capitol provides a focus on family, children and the home, something she said her male colleagues sometimes forget as they debate legislation.

"We've always been the primary caregivers, so we're naturally more likely to consider these types of issues," said Lopez, who has two daughters in their 30s in addition to her son.

Women occupy 12 of 30 Senate seats and 16 of 60 seats in the House of Representatives.

Rep. Nancy K. Barto, R-Phoenix, said it's important to have lawmakers who reflect the general public.

"Moms need to be part of that variety of outlooks and perspectives," said Barto, who has three grown daughters.

Rep. Patricia V. Fleming, D-Sierra Vista, said women increase teamwork and tend to be more analytical.

"We see more sides to an issue," Fleming said. "We see more than just a one-sided conversation."

Barbara Norrander, a University of Arizona political science professor, said the fact that Arizona has a part-time Legislature was once seen as a possible reason for the representation of women in the Legislature, as the schedule is more accommodating to caregivers and homemakers.

"That's not so much true anymore, though," Norrander said. "Now we're seeing indications that women who have younger children are running for office."

Sen. Rebecca Rios, D-Apache Junction, who has a 4-year-old daughter and a 13-year-old son, said seeing women in Arizona's leadership positions, including four female governors, the most of any state, inspires women to seek public office.

"There are no major barriers for women anymore," said Rios, the Senate's assistant minority leader.

Lopez pointed to TV shows such as "24," in which the president is a woman.

"Seeing a woman in that role provides a good role model, and women didn't have that before," she said.

Morales, from the research center, said the recent presidential election will only fuel that interest.

"For the younger women growing up, seeing Hillary Clinton run for president and Sarah Palin run for vice president creates a message of, 'Oh, I can do that, too,'" she said.

Senate President Bob Burns, R-Peoria, said many women have helped the state by serving in the Legislature.

"I tell my granddaughters they can do anything they set their minds to," Burns said in an e-mail interview. "They have only to look at Arizona to see how so many women have been successful in the workplace, with their families and in any way they choose."

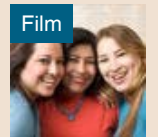
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