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Women still have hurdles to clear

By ANNE MAIESE
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I really dislike Women's History Month.

Perhaps that's a surprising statement coming from someone who's worked for 15 years in the League of Women Voters, but it's true. Carving out one month to remember the monumental achievements of women highlights the fact that these achievements are still largely ignored by the people who write and teach history. It also reminds me of how far we have to go before we are simply part of THE history of our country, not a sidebar, a batch of footnotes, needing our own special month.

Our monumental achievements include winning the right to vote after some 90 years of fierce struggle, against daunting odds and life-threatening opposition. If you doubt or have forgotten how hard this was, I recommend you watch "Iron Jawed Angels," available on DVD. The achievements also include opening up the professions of medicine, law, journalism and finance to women. Labor unions, sports and the military had to be forced to allow women to participate and lead. At no point were the doors opened wide and women cordially invited in; they had to push and demand entrance and endure much discrimination and ill will in the process. They often still do.

As for politics, the prominence of a few female candidates in the last presidential contest belies the very limited influence women still have in this important arena. Only 29 states currently send women senators and representatives to the U.S. Congress. New Jersey is not one of them, despite having 13 House members and two U.S. senators.

Out of 50 governors, only seven are women, and within state legislatures, the highest ranking state, Colorado, only has 39 percent of its seats filled by women. (New Jersey is 12th, with 30 percent of the Assembly and Senate seats in Trenton held by women.)

These numbers are slightly higher than the year before, but at this rate it will be decades before Congress looks like the people it represents. After all, women are actually 51 percent of the U.S. population.

So, we women struggle on, fighting the good-ole-boy network of money and connections, with our incredible qualifications, brilliant minds and determined hearts mostly unnoticed. Although Women's History Month gives us a chance to highlight women's accomplishments, it also reminds us of how far we have to go "before we sleep."

My fondest desire is that one day this designation will be dropped because women are accepted as full participants and leaders in every aspect of life and our struggles and accomplishments are recognized every month of the year.

Additional Facts

ANNE MAIESE

The author is president of the League of Women Voters of New Jersey based in Trenton.
