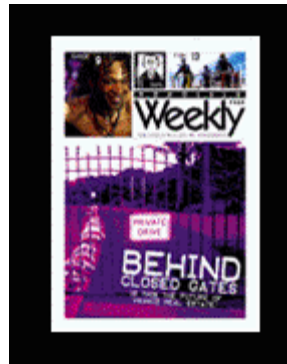


Building consensus

Emergency contraception tops the Women's Caucus' agenda at the Legislature this year.

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Effecting critical change is the aim of the Women's Legislative Caucus, whose legislative package this year is dedicated to the memory of Rep. Patsy Mink. The 21-member caucus includes all female state legislators; it opens up a forum in which women consider matters affecting them: education, family planning, marriage, children, equal opportunity.

Politically, the caucus sometimes works as a voting bloc. Any bill or resolution submitted to the caucus for its imprimatur must be agreed upon by at least 75 percent of the caucus. At the beginning of each legislative session, bills are presented for consideration, for inclusion in its "package." Many of the bills are generated by the nonpartisan Hawai'i Women's Coalition, a diverse group of 300 private and professional groups, government agencies and individual activists.

"We talk about what the emerging issues are, and we look at how we can address them in a meaningful way," said HWC co-chair Annelie Amaral, who chaired the caucus from 1988-'94 during her term as a state representative.

"The dynamics of the package we put out each year change with the diversity of the members, but what stays constant is that the people who bring an issue to the table have passion about it. That commitment stays there through the legislative session." HWC members debate the issues, hammer out the kinks and come to a consensus before submitting their package to the caucus.

"We operate by consensus-building. In general, that's how women work. Sometimes it takes longer, but it's worth it," said Allicyn Hikida Tasaka, executive director of the Hawai'i State Commission on the Status of Women. The commission, part of the Lieutenant Governor's Office, facilitates the HWC and works closely with the caucus.

One of the caucus' most successful and innovative projects happened in 2001 as a reaction to federal welfare reform. The Bridge to Hope program is a joint effort by the University of Hawai'i and the state Department of Human Services to promote economic self-sufficiency through education. Bridge to Hope's funding of \$150,000 annually pays for on-campus employment (throughout the university system) for welfare recipients who are participating in full-time, post-secondary education. The students meet their work requirements — 20

hours a week including 12 hours of school — without having to forfeit time with their families.

“When women attend college, their earning capacity goes up. Bridge to Hope is the most effective means to leave welfare for good,” said program coordinator Teresa Bill. She credits the women’s caucus for making it happen.

On divisive issues like family planning and Death With Dignity legislation, dissension forces the members to find common ground in order to advance the greater cause. “You can only move forward when you find areas of common ground,” said caucus co-chair Rep. Hermina Morita.

An example of a current sensitive issue is House Bill 123, designed to increase access to emergency contraception (EC) by allowing pharmacists to dispense EC directly, in collaboration with physicians. The measure came out of the caucus with bipartisan support.

Emergency contraception pills, also called “morning after pills,” contain hormones that reduce the incidence of pregnancy after unprotected intercourse. The pills are only effective if taken within 72 hours after unprotected sex.

“Sometimes you can’t get an appointment with your doctor so immediately,” Amaral explained. She is also spokesperson for Planned Parenthood of Hawai’i.

Increasing availability and timely access to emergency contraception is critical, particularly in Hawai’i, where, Amaral said, 52 percent of pregnancies are unintended.

When the caucus considers controversial issues, comity can yield to partisanship; measures that don’t pass muster with the caucus sometimes get adopted by individual legislators and introduced separately.

Such is the case with HB189, another bill related to emergency contraception that would require hospital emergency rooms to make EC available to sexual-assault survivors. The bill, unacceptable to over one-fourth of the caucus, was introduced by a handful of legislators including Morita, Cindy Evans, Marilyn Lee, Colleen Meyer, Corinne Ching, Cynthia Thielen, Tulsi Gabbard Tamayo and Helene Hale. Advocates of the measure argued that EC is the standard of care prescribed by the American Medical Association and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, and it should be available in all emergency rooms.

In Hawai’i, there were 346 forcible rapes reported in 2000. According to a study done by Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, 90 percent of Hawai’i emergency rooms do not offer EC, and 23 percent have no clear policy. Lawmakers are still wrangling over a conscience clause that allows exemptions for churchoperated hospitals.

A resolution signed by many caucus members, but not adopted by the caucus because it’s only a resolution, advocated the end of the

global gag rule, by which the U.S. refuses to fund nongovernmental organizations that provide accurate information about — or perform — legal abortions. Created by President Reagan in 1984, and reimposed by President Bush in January 2001, the suppressive policy effectively limits familyplanning options around the world, leaving millions of women with little choice but to search out illegal and unsafe abortions.

Honorary caucus co-chair Rep. Marilyn Lee justifies the mission of the caucus quite poignantly: “People don’t realize what can be lost — all those years of work women all over the world have dedicated to ensure our health and well-being. People don’t remember the days when there wasn’t ready access to contraception, when women didn’t have the same opportunities. We have to realize how fragile these rights are.”

Other key measures being pushed by the caucus — and still alive — this session include:

- HB133, providing immunity from prosecution for leaving an unharmed newborn at a hospital;
- HB122, requiring the Department of Human Services to provide QUEST coverage to Medicaid-eligible pregnant women;
- HB135, allowing persons who utilize international matchmaking services to access criminal conviction and marital history information about prospective spouses;
- HB134, requiring parity for female inmates by equalizing corrections programming for men and women.

Through the caucus, Rep. Mink’s legacy of legislative activism lives on. Progress for women takes time: For example, in 1971, according to the U.S. General Accounting Office, 291,015 girls participated in high school athletics. Today, over 2.7 million girls participate in high school athletics. The 847 percent increase is, by and large, owed to Title IX, the law prohibiting gender discrimination by federally funded institutions — today called The Patsy Takemoto Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act.
