

# Women in danger of losing important gains

By Sandra J. Theunick

Today's young women are in danger of slipping through the cracks.

That might be easy to overlook as Hawaii is poised to send potentially three women to the United States Congress, but those of us who prepare women leaders for the next generations see perilous shifts.

After three decades of educating young people, I ponder how much further there is to go. Some facts:

>> A Princeton University study found that more women are graduating from college, and with higher grades, but there's been a decline in female students assuming top leadership in university activities.

>> Hawaii is unique in sending women to Congress, including incumbent Reps. Colleen Hanabusa and Mazie Hirono. Hawaii's Patsy Mink was the first Asian-American woman elected to Congress in the 1960s, and Patricia Saiki served in the House a quarter century ago. Former Gov. Linda Lingle is challenging Hirono for Daniel Akaka's U.S. Senate seat, and Tulsi Gabbard is seeking Hirono's House seat.

Still, the number of women in the U.S. House and Senate has been relatively static and decreased in the last cycle: 17 percent of senators and only 16.8 percent of the House are women. Only three of the nine Supreme Court justices are women; just six of the 50 states have female governors.

>> The U.S. ranks 71st in female legislative representation — behind Bangladesh, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates.

>> In their book "Women



STAR-ADVERTISER

**Taking an active role in the affairs of our community, more than 100 Girl Scouts from kindergarten through 12th grade descended on the state Capitol in March to urge legislators to support early childhood learning in Hawaii.**



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and Leadership," Deborah Rhode and Barbara Kellerman note that a third of the women in management have MBAs, but only 2 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs, 6 percent of top earners and 16 percent of board of directors and corporate officers are women.

"We have fallen into what I call 'the 16 percent ghetto,'" said Debora L. Spar, president of Barnard College. "If you look at any sector, be it aerospace engineering, Hollywood films, higher education, to Fortune 500 leading positions, women max out at roughly 16 percent."

Our children are inundated with images from our always-on technology. They see, 24/7, many misrepresentations of women. We need more focus on women

such as the Olympians who brought us to our feet for incredible accomplishments as athletes and human beings; on women achievers in science, technology, the arts and peace.

"You can't be what you can't see," said Marie Wilson, founder of The White House Project, which advances women in business, politics and media.

Forbes Magazine says 35 percent is the "tipping point" at which a minority is no longer a "token" but rather seen as "individual." Where are the women in your organization? How close are they to tipping past 35 percent?

Important women in your life need to know that you see them as strong, independent and powerful. Parents need to value their

daughters more for who they are than how they look. Fathers are an especially important influence in raising confident daughters.

Gender-specific schools are about raising capable women; but since coeducation tends to be the norm, in that mixed setting we must assure young women can "see so that they can be." In every setting, let's applaud images of strong women; give our girls the opportunity to attend Girl Scouts or the YWCA.

As for the images projected by the media — please be vocal in your rejection of those you know demean a girl's sense of the depth of her potential.

A Pew Research Center study in 2008 found women rated higher than men in seven out of 12 leadership traits necessary for public office. Still, 51 percent said "Americans simply aren't ready to elect a woman to high office."

If, like me, you find that unacceptable, it's up to us to help change it.

*Honolulu Star-Advertiser Sunday 9/16/12*