

GOP Scores Low On Women's Rights

By Mary Lynn F. Jones - The American Prospect

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Hundreds of thousands of women turned out for the March for Women's Lives on Sunday to rally in support of abortion rights. But while the Republican effort to scale back abortion-rights victories has been relentless, abortion is just one of the areas in which women's freedoms are under assault.

As Democratic Representative Jan Schakowsky told me, "There is almost a daily attack on the rights women have won over a really long period of time and programs ... we never expected to be under attack."

A new report from the National Women's Law Center outlines some of this, such as the abolishment of the Equal Pay Matters Initiative; the cut in funding for programs that advocate gender equity in education; the reduction in the number of children served by the Child Care and Development Block Grant, which helps low- and moderate-income families afford child care; and the proposal to fund support services for domestic violence victims at 26 percent below the authorized level.

"In ways both well-publicized and carefully hidden, glaring and subtle, the Bush administration is taking steps to roll back women's progress in every aspect of their lives - their opportunities to succeed at work and in school, their economic security, their health and reproductive rights," the report states.

Last month, all 41 Democratic women in the House sent a letter to President Bush criticizing his

proposed fiscal year 2005 budget, which would reduce funding for Women's Business Centers by \$500,000 (even as a report released in January by Representatives Carolyn Maloney and John Dingell showed that the pay gap between men and women managers increased between 1995 and 2000). The administration has also shut down several centers that track information on women's progress. "If you don't have the data, how do you know what's happening?" Maloney asked.

Additionally, Bush's budget would freeze spending for the Maternal and Child Health Block Grant and eliminate the Even Start Program, which supports early childhood education, literacy, and parenting education for 50,000 families.

Things on Capitol Hill aren't much better. Debate on welfare reform "turns into 'we need to promote marriage,' and tax cuts for the wealthy is a "twofer" because it allows the GOP to please its base and cut social spending, Schakowsky said.

"You really hope you're going to see some separation - [lawmakers are] much closer to the ground, dealing with constituent concerns on a daily basis - that there would be more sympathy," she added. But Schakowsky said it's rare for GOP lawmakers to go against the administration's wishes.

As Maloney told me, "They basically have the votes to do what they want."

A scorecard on Maloney's Web site shows that from Feb. 14, 1995, to July 29, 2003, Congress held 185 votes on abortion issues. Of those, 152, or 82 percent, were anti-abortion. As Maloney's scorecard notes, "Of the remaining 33 pro-choice votes, many are categorized as such not because a pro-choice measure was passed but rather because an anti-choice measure failed. That constitutes a far more modest victory for pro-choice members."

The scorecard also doesn't include the late-term ban and the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, both of which were signed into law and severely restrict a woman's right to choose.

Republicans are also loath to consider more moderate alternatives. In February, by a vote of

229 to 186, the House defeated Representative Zoe Lofgren's amendment to make it a federal crime to commit a violent assault against a pregnant woman that causes her to lose the baby. Instead, the House passed, by 254 to 163, the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, which gives legal status to the fetus. And Representative Nancy Johnson was the only GOP lawmaker to show up last week at a press conference to introduce legislation aimed at preventing unintended pregnancy, improving women's health, and reducing the number of abortions.

The situation in the states is also dire. As The Washington Post reported Sunday, 450 laws restricting abortion access have been passed by state legislatures in the nine years since the GOP took control of much of the government following the 1994 Republican revolution.

Women's groups are responding to the attacks by asking women to vote. On Sunday, the National Organization for Women and the NOW Foundation kicked off the 10 for Change campaign, which is aiming to increase registration and, therefore, votes. In March, the White House Project and Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues co-chairs Louise Slaughter and Shelley Moore Capito launched Vote, Run, Lead, which seeks to register 25,000 women to vote this fall and train 1,000 activists to become political leaders.

Maloney said she hopes Sunday's march has inspired women to do just that. "One election could change a lot of things," she said. "If one million [more women] would vote, we would win the election."