

Women advance ever so slowly, study shows

By IRIS M. SAMSON, Assistant Editor

Are Jewish women today equal members of the community? Are we "where we want to be" in Jewish life?

According to a recent survey released by the American Jewish Committee and the National Council of Jewish Women, women have begun to make strides in becoming the decision-makers and power brokers within Jewish communal life, but in most cases, almost imperceptibly.

The desire-and right-for Jewish women to be a more visible and vocal voice in the community was the topic of heated debate and discussion last week when the Pittsburgh Jewish Women's Forum presented "A Bigger Slice of the Pie," an assessment of our position within the Jewish community today, both as volunteers and Jewish communal professionals.

The newly-formed Women's Forum evolved as a result of the AJC/NCJW study and through the interest of the two co-chairwomen of the AJC's Women's Issues Task Force. Eileen Lane and Barbara Aaron felt a need within the community for a network of Jewish women--both professionals and lay people--who could identify and demand a "bigger slice of the pie."

When the AJC first conducted a study of the position of the Jewish woman within Jewish communal organizations seven years ago, it found female participation sorely lacking at the top rungs of the community's leadership. Women who had achieved positions on major boards and committees were primarily relegated to the "traditional" female roles of recording secretary, corresponding secretary, head of



education, social events and programming.

The top "power" and decision-making positions--president, executive director, vice president, heads of budgetary and financial committees--were dominated by men. In 1980, the AJC and NCJW called for greater participation in top spots by women; it suggested a series of reforms be undertaken by Jewish organizations to rectify the traditional discrimination against women.

The recommendations also called for a follow-up study five years down the line, to gauge the progress of women, to see if the community had elevated them to more powerful positions. That 1985 study, published this month, was the basis and impetus for the formation of the Jewish Women's Forum and the recent program.

What were the results? Did five years make a difference? According to Eileen Lane, "although women are actively involved in the community, we do not have equal representation with men. Since 1980, there has been no statistically significant increase in the number of women in leadership roles in the community," Lane told the 70 seminar participants.

"In the positions of chairman and officers, there are two times as many men as women. We are not the 'power brokers' in the Jewish community."

The news, however, is not all bleak. Lane reports that five organizations in 1985 reported having a woman president; in 1980, there was only one. She points to the congregational community as making the biggest strides in providing equal access to power to women as men. "Many Reform and Conservative congregations have women presidents, and they have also elevated women to heading committees traditionally held by men--budgetary and financial in particular," Lane asserts.

Two other areas were addressed by the survey; single women within the Jewish community and Jewish women professionals. These areas were found sorely lacking.

"Single women are still not accorded the same status as married women, according to the results of the survey," Lane admits. The community still has to find a place for the single Jewish woman on volunteer committees.

Women, who constitute the majority of Jewish communal workers, were also found to have experienced "no change" in five years in both the areas of pay equity and position. "We are at the lowest end of the pay scale; the highest paid positions are still largely held by men," Lane reports of the survey results. "And while six women held key staff positions in 1985, the data alone show there have been no great advances in the past five years."

Subtle changes may be

occurring, she adds, "but they are not measurable. It may be that more women are on the 'ladder of leadership,' working their way into more visible and powerful positions in the community. The size of the organization, religious affiliation, all seem to be factors. But, according to Lane, "women have seemed to reach a plateau. The number of women making strides appears to remain constant."

Why should Jewish women demand a "bigger slice of the pie?" According to Susan Weikers, national chairman of the Women's Division of Israel Bonds, "women are making historic strides nationwide. The influx of women into the labor force has provided the most powerful drive for change in this century."

Weikers, who keynoted the Forum's seminar, adds that "we must be aware that one-half of all Jews in the world are women. We are joining the labor force at rates of over two million every year, entering nearly every occupation, at rates almost twice as fast as men."

"Today, more than half of women between the ages of 18-64 are in the labor force." Women, she asserts, have made substantial contributions in the growth of the economy, and have changed the family structure dramatically.

"The 'typical' family--with the male wage-earner--is now only one out of 28 families," she reports. "There are women in corporate offices, women in government. Are we paid properly? Absolutely not. Are we selling ourselves short? Absolutely yes. But we want to get our foot in the door."

While women have made

inroads professionally, Weikers admits that within religious organizations, change is not as forthcoming. "We serve on cultural boards, in the arts, civic affairs, but this service is usually based on wealth," she explains. "But the top spots have evaded us in the area of religious activities. We are not recognized properly for our participation and contributions."

To alleviate this, Weikers suggests that women take credit for financial contributions, standing up as a "couple. But in many cases, women have risen for the wrong reasons--tokenism or because they just couldn't find a man for the job."

"What we do when we attain higher positions within the community should be what matters. We must encourage open forums, be more vocal about our money and contributions."

Weikers also suggests that women professionals join with volunteers in networking. "We must support each other; it doesn't dilute one's importance to help another rise in the ranks," she exhorts. "And we should be grooming women for leadership positions based on merit and intelligence."

The seminar broke up into small group sessions to discuss primary concerns. Most noted that they associate power with money. "Often, philanthropic contributions go hand in hand with power," participants remark. "There is a widespread perception that those who control the money also exercise the power within the community. Men are often the purse string holders, and they already know how to deal with the power structure."

In addition to concerns

over philanthropy and position, many said they would like to work on nurturing their leadership skills.

"Strategies must be developed," says one participant, "and this must be communicated to the community and advocated for a sense of awareness and action."

Other concerns voiced by the attendees included balancing a career, marriage and children; apathy among "younger" women; volunteers and respect--or lack of it--from professionals, and the needs of single women.

Not everyone was pessimistic about women's gains. One participant points to the "concrete reality, that while we may have not made it yet, we are arriving. There are far greater numbers of women active in 1987, and women are heads of important committees in many organizations. In the Federation," she continues, "half of the officers are women; one day there will be a woman president."

The survey, seminar and comments of participants all indicated that Jewish women feel they have much to contribute to the community, and that the community must become more responsive to our needs. While there is an increased awareness of the roles women can play much more needs to be done.

"We must remember," Eileen Lane concludes, "that we must remain a united group to affect change. We don't need to fight with each other, we need to band together, to do even more."

Lane adds that the Women's Forum will hold further discussions and programs. She urges those interested to contact her through the AJC office, 683-7927.