

State's First Lady is behind ERA's ratification

By CINDY HOOGLASIAN

Michigan's First Lady, Helen Miliken, believes it is one of her duties to assure all citizens, male and female, equal rights and opportunities.

"The Equal Rights Amendment," Mrs. Miliken said, "is deeply important in my life and in every citizen's life." Mrs. Miliken is co-chairperson of Michigan ERAmerica, an organization formed in 1976 to provide a vehicle enabling statewide organizations to unite to achieve national ratification of the ERA.

She spoke at a luncheon sponsored by Rochester Junior Women's Club on May 16 at Great Oaks Country Club. Janie Aagesen, chairperson of Public Affairs for the club, contacted Mrs. Miliken in January, requesting she address the group.

Mrs. Miliken has been involved with the Equal Rights Amendment since 1972, shortly after the proposed amendment was first ratified. Before then, she said, she had not been involved in women's issues and knew little about ERA. However, she is now well versed regarding the implications and history of the proposed 27th amendment.

Her lecture began by tracing the history of women's liberation activities, from the early days of our country's independence up to the present.

The first women's rights movement began in Seneca Falls, N.Y., in the early 1800s. Suffrage was the issue then. The 19th amendment was passed in 1920 granting women the right to vote.

ALICE PAUL INTRODUCED the first Equal Rights Amendment in 1923. Mrs. Miliken said. The proposed amendment was reintroduced before the US Congress for 49 consecutive years. An arbitrary seven-year deadline for ratification was issued in 1972, at the instance of U.S. Sen. Samuel Irwin. That deadline expired on March 22, 1979, but was extended until January 30, 1982.

The ERA needs the ratification of 38

states to institute it as law. Presently, 35 states have ratified, and efforts to assure ratification are at a standstill. Illinois has a simple majority in favor of passage of ERA, but they require a three-fifths vote for ratification," Mrs. Miliken said. "The South is a strong block against ERA because of deeply rooted social and cultural activities and attitudes. States with strong influences from the Mormon Church also block the amendment."

"The best hope for ratification exists in Florida, where two votes were switched in the Senate the last minute. Illinois is the next best hope. A change of 10 votes are all that's needed in 10 states for passage of the ERA," she said.

TJWC is interested in legislative issues affecting women. Ms. Aagesen said. The General Federation of Woman's Clubs resolved to support the passage of the ERA in 1944. This was reaffirmed in 1950 and amended in 1957.

"My hope is to inform the membership of Rochester Junior Woman's Club about this important legislation and its meaning in our lives," she said.

MRS. MILIKEN EXPLAINED that ERA will remove sex as a factor determining the rights of men and women. "The ERA will end discrimination based on sex in public schools," she said. "Women will no longer be discriminated against in public employment. They are usually relegated to the lowest paid public jobs. Social Security rights and benefits will be extended to women under the ERA."

"The ERA will enable a man to draw on his wife's social security account. For example, if a woman dies or retires, her spouse will automatically be entitled to draw on his wife's account. Today, he cannot."

Both men and women will benefit from the passage of the ERA. Women will not be forced to work outside the home if they do not choose to. In a marriage, financial support flows from the spouse earning money to the spouse in

need. Child custody in cases of divorce would be awarded to the parent most able to care for the child. Fathers need ERA to assure equal education and job opportunities for their daughters as well as their sons."

A flood of misinformation about the ERA is one reason its ratification has been difficult, says Mrs. Miliken. Topics like rights to privacy, forced military service for females and rights to abortion are controversial issues often misrepresented by anti-ERA forces, she contends.

"The Equal Rights Amendment will not require sexually integrated restrooms or public facilities wherein personal functions take place, such as locker rooms or sleeping quarters."

"Women could be drafted under the ERA. However, Congress now has the

ability to draft women if it deems such action necessary. Qualified women would be able to serve in combat situations and would be subject to physical fitness training. However, they would not be wrenched from their children and forced to serve their country," she said.

"With ERA, Congress will retain power to create exemptions from the act as parents with children, educational needs or height or weight limitations."

"Additionally, women will be entitled to get benefits currently available only to male veterans. The amendment would have no effect on abortion. The principles of abortion are now contained in the constitution and would not be changed."

Currently, there are seven million

working female heads of households. This represents 56 percent of the labor force. On the average, a working female earns 60 cents on the dollar a man earns for the same kind of work, she said. The ERA would guarantee equal pay for equal work.

"THERE WOULD be no negative effect on state's rights. It would only insist on equality of principles. After the ratification of the amendment, the states will have two years to revise their laws and get their houses in order before the amendment would take effect."

"The amendment applies only to the action of the government, not to churches, organizations or private affairs. Clubs and private organizations may abide by whatever rules they se-

lect without interference from the government," she added.

The Equal Rights Amendment is supported by the American Association of University Women, the National Association of Business and Professional Women, American Civil Liberties Union, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Girl Scouts of America and more than 185 other national organizations.

"The woman's movement will not dissolve or dissipate. The ERA will not go away. The Equal Rights Amendment recognizes the historical forces behind our struggle for equality. We must let women into the constitution. We must recognize the dignity and worth of every individual, man or woman," Mrs. Miliken said.

"Human rights must include the half of humanity which are women."

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