

Mansour asks women to lead changes

By Sharon Dargay
staff writer

The director of the state Department of Social Services (DSS) Monday challenged a group of mostly white, middle-class businesswomen in Troy to lend their poorer sisters a hand by becoming "leaders for social change."

Armed with statistics about women on the bottom rung of the economic ladder, Agnes Mary Mansour described poverty as "the number one feminine issue of our day" and urged listeners to support women for key political and business positions.

"When they say, 'You've come a long way baby,' don't you believe it," the controversial former Catholic nun told more than 100 members and guests of the Michigan Women's Network.

"The statistics are glaring. Seventy-five to 80 percent of the poor in our country are women and children. Two of every three adults who are poor are women."

"Feminization of poverty is a reality. And, if that reality is to be turned around, I believe that it is women who will turn it around. What is unfortunate is that we don't have enough women in key decision-making positions."

"If you want to be leaders for social change you must become aware of the problems and become committed to change, realizing there will be a great deal of intimidation and criticism."

"Whether or not you're going to succeed is determined by how committed you are and whether you care not only for your own agenda but for an agenda for others who may be less fortunate."

The plea for compassion amid increasing "insensitivity to the plight of

the poor," had some listeners nearly gulping back tears with their chilled chablis.

Others left the 90-minute presentation at the Troy Hilton, disputing statistics and discussing Mansour's indictment of the educational system and defense spending.

MANSOUR, APPOINTED in 1983 to direct the state's most expensive department, spoke before a packed audience of business owners, executives, educators and medical professionals who make up the Network.

Members help each other establish business contacts, share job information, and executive savvy.

Extending that kind of supportive attitude to the poor could begin reversing the trends that have buried women under the economic heap, Mansour suggested.

"Do your businesses provide fringe benefits? Pension? Child care? What are you doing to allow for flex time? Are your businesses family-oriented?" she asked.

"The main reason for the feminization of poverty is there are more single parent households with children. Ninety percent are headed by women and of that group 50 percent live in poverty."

She attempted to crush the view that welfare recipients are mostly women "having baby after baby because it's so comfortable to be on public assistance."

"It can happen to anyone. I was at a conference in California last year. They had a group of ADC mothers and one said that one week she was deciding where to put the cot tub and the next applying for ADC."

Mansour defended spending for social services, while taking swipes at tax reform, defense spending and failures in education.

She claimed that 20 percent of adults nationwide are illiterate and the United States ranked 49th in educational excellence among the United Nations' 138 members.

"The dropout rate is between 25 and 30 percent," she said. "That's tax dollars going to support public education and if that isn't mismanagement of a system you tell me what is."

Mansour also questioned the need for "alternative" educational programs for students at risk of dropping out and urged more money and better teachers for preschool programs.

COMMENTING ON tax reform, Mansour said she supports a more equitable system but cringes at the current debate among federal lawmakers be-

cause "the strong lobbyists are not serving the poor."

She said that tax cuts, instituted four years ago, took an average \$400 from families earning \$10,000 and fattened pocketbooks of those with annual incomes exceeding \$50,000.

"What is going on in this country?" she asked. "We'll pay \$7,000 for a coffee pot in the defense department and begrudge a family \$8 per person per day to meet all essentials of life."

"We shelter a dog for over \$100, but we won't shelter kids."

Mansour pointed out that the federal government spent \$16 billion for 1.3 million military retirees last year but only \$12 billion to buy food stamps for more than 22 million people.

She complained that social services spending bears the brunt of public scrutiny, while defense cost overruns draw an occasional frown.



JIM VARON

Agnes Mary Mansour, director of the state Department of Social Services, urges listeners to become leaders of social change.

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