

Legislature's legacy leaves many women's issues to be addressed

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The 2016 legislative session produced some things for women to celebrate, but also resulted in laws detrimental to women.

That was the assessment Friday from a panel of four female lawmakers — three of them Democrats in the Republican-dominated Legislature — during a discussion at the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics.

Two issues singled out for criticism by panel members were a bill requiring a fetus to be anesthetized in abortions after 20 weeks'

gestation and the small-scale Medicaid expansion.

Rep. Angela Romero, D-Salt Lake City, said the Legislature "took many steps back when it comes to a woman's right to choose and what to do with her own body." Something that "frustrated" her was that lawmakers went against the advice of medical professionals and based their votes on "their moral values."

"That's on them, but for me I think it's really important to separate your religious beliefs from how you implement policy," Romero said.

Rep. Carol Spackman Moss, D-Holladay, agreed with Romero, calling SB34 and the debate around it "disheartening."

Meanwhile, Rep. Becky Edwards, R-North Salt Lake, said the Medicaid expansion approved by lawmakers would be best categorized as "leaving women out of the equation," as opposed to being good or bad for women.

Aside from benefiting 16,000 of the poorest Utahns — including homeless, newly released prison inmates and the mentally ill — she said the data show that the expansion is "disproportionate," in affecting men more than women.

The four women, among just 16 in the 104-member Legislature, added that while some progress was made during the session in the fight to close the wage gap — Sen. Jani Iwamoto mentioned her SB185, which allows awarding of back pay for discrimination and requires yearly state reports on wage bias — expand education and provide better caregiving resources, there is more work to be done.

Iwamoto, D-Holladay, told a story about when she was working at a law firm in San Francisco and a male co-worker was being paid \$35,000 more than she was. She said the statistic in Utah is that women make 70 cents on the dollar when compared to men.

There are a few specific categories where women's pay grade is equal or higher than men's, but most are not that way. For example, she said, Utah women in the legal profession make 40 cents on the dollar when compared to men.

Women were victorious in new legislation protecting minor victims of child sex trafficking (HB105 and HB206), allowing for extended protective orders for victims of domestic violence (HB148) and requiring employer accommodations for nursing and pregnant women (SB59).

Spackman Moss also said increasing resources for those battling drug addiction was a success for women this year, with a whole package of bills aimed at curbing overdose deaths.

Going forward, the female lawmakers hope more women will become involved in politics to give a more accurate representation of Utah residents.

Edwards joined Romero in calling to "change the culture of politics."

"The [tone of politics] right now is incredibly divisive. It promotes a sense of otherness to our communities, and it's negative," Edwards said. "Who wants to join that club, right? Who wants to be part of something that seems so negative? So as a people, and especially as women in the political system, I think we can model better behavior and model a culture that is inclusive."

Spackman Moss, a retired teacher, said if she can succeed in politics, anyone can, but Romero reminded those in the room that not everyone has the same opportunities to get involved.

Politicians need to "check [their] privilege at the door," she said, and be willing to "walk side by side with people" rather than just lead them.