

# LISTENING

TO MINNESOTA'S YOUNG WOMEN, YOUTH, & ADVOCATES

Young Women of Color, American Indian Young Women, Young Women from Greater Minnesota,  
LGBTQ Youth, and Young Women with Disabilities

*Listening Sessions for Philanthropy & Policy Leaders*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





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### *Listening Sessions for Philanthropy & Policy Leaders*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | APRIL 2017

HOSTED BY

Women's Foundation of Minnesota

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A special thank you to the **White House Council on Women and Girls** and the **NoVo Foundation** for their partnership in convening the Listening Sessions.

*“The key is to make sure the voices, knowledge, and expertise of young women are part of the conversation.”*

DR. KIMBERLYN LEARY,  
ADVISOR TO THE WHITE HOUSE  
COUNCIL ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

NOTE: The opinions and conclusions expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views or positions of any person or organization that participated in a Listening Session.

# The Power of Listening



Our mission is to drive gender equity and create a world in which all women and girls can lead safe, prosperous lives. Building on the White House Council on Women and Girls' 2015 National Listening Tour on Women and Girls of Color, the Women's Foundation of Minnesota convened a series of statewide, community-based Listening Sessions in 2015/2016 to learn from young women experiencing health, educational, and economic disparities.

We believe that young women of color, American Indian young women, young women with disabilities, young women from Greater Minnesota, and LGBTQ youth and advocates from each community are the real experts on how to create real, lasting solutions. The NoVo Foundation's ongoing partnership in this work made this crucial listening process possible.



These Listening Sessions helped each community have a conversation around five topics: economic security, culture and identity, safety and well-being, negative social narratives and gender norms, and education. First, young women (ages 12-24) from distinct cultural and geographic communities shared their stories. Advocates — in partnership with the philanthropic, nonprofit, business, and government leaders at each session — then added context by telling us what they knew about research, data, and historical trends.



The full reports of these Listening Sessions (Volumes I-III, available on our website) summarize these community-specific insights and recommendations. They also form the basis of the Foundation's new Young Women's Initiative of Minnesota (YWI MN), a cross-sector, public-private partnership between the Women's Foundation of Minnesota and The Office of the Governor. YWI MN's statewide Action Plan for gender and racial equity details how leaders in every sector can remove barriers to and increase resources for young women experiencing the greatest disparities in outcomes. Young women are at the center of this exciting Initiative, driving the solutions they want to see.

# Listening to Minnesota's Young Women, Youth, and Advocates

*“I miss all opportunities to experience what it feels like to be a young adult because of my family obligations.”*

**HMONG & KAREN YOUTH PANELIST**

*“What I want is always second to what I need. Hope is not enough to bring the groceries home.”*

**AMERICAN INDIAN YOUTH PANELIST**

*“People of color and LGBTQ aren't embraced by society. There's still a lot of seeing people of different races and different sexual orientations as 'other.' And it's not much of a leap from 'other' to 'threat.' We need to embrace identities other than our own more often.”*

**LGBTQ YOUTH PANELIST**

## **ECONOMICS, HOPES, & DREAMS**

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We heard from Minnesota's young women that they dream, hope, and work hard to shape their own futures. Most think a good education is the best way to get a good job and become financially stable; some are already first-generation college students.

But economic barriers hold many of them back: in low-income families, basic needs take priority over educational costs. Young women work instead of — or in addition to — attending school, sometimes to support family members still living outside the U.S. Others manage their households so that their parents can work multiple jobs. LGBTQ youth report coming out only to find that they've lost family emotional and financial support.

Family ties can be a challenge: while tight-knit families sustain young women and youth, they also lean on them to care for siblings, elders, and extended family. In families with little English fluency, young women translate, handle family paperwork, and represent their families in agency and financial interactions.

These challenges take time away from the self-development that is vital to young women's ability to plan their futures.

## **CULTURE & SELF-IDENTITY**

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Products of rich cultural heritages, young women of color and LGBTQ youth also carry multiple, often conflicting, identities. Holding these contradictions can sap self-esteem and is a constant balancing act. Many young women believe that pursuing their own success threatens their families' well-being and emotional support.

Young women of color report experiencing racism, negative social stereotyping, and/or social invisibility. They are at risk for low expectations at school, diminished opportunities at work, isolation, and negative self-identity. Trauma, in historic and current cultural narratives and within families, is a common theme.

*“I don’t feel safe in this country even when I’m striving to participate in the American Dream.”*

**SOMALI & EAST AFRICAN YOUTH PANELIST**

*“If I don’t have sex, I’m the Virgin Mary. If I do, I’m a slut. I personally don’t believe that’s true, but that is what society sees for girls.”*

**SOUTHERN MINNESOTA YOUTH PANELIST**

*“I want to speak my mind without being made out to be ‘loud, angry, sassy,’ and to be passionate and go for what I want, but without stereotypes.”*

**AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH PANELIST**

*“My ultimate dream would be to work at Mayo or Gillette’s, but when I’ve had appointments there, I’ve never seen a staff member in a wheelchair. That’s something I want to change.”*

**YOUTH PANELIST WITH A DISABILITY**

*“The college dropout rate for Latinas is high because we don’t have the economics, and we don’t feel we belong. We need to build communities that help keep us there, because it’s so hard to even get there.”*

**LATINA YOUTH PANELIST**

*“It’s hard to raise yourself and your brothers while going to school.”*

**NORTHERN MINNESOTA YOUTH PANELIST**

## **SAFETY, HEALTH, & WELL-BEING**

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In many cases, personal experiences informed young women’s concerns: fear of bullying, physical violence, and sexual assault; public misconceptions about mental health; schools’ health/wellness education’s focus on only traditional genders and relationships; cultural barriers to having open discussions about health topics; high suicide rates; alcohol- and drug-related family issues; and police harassment.

## **NEGATIVE SOCIAL NARRATIVES**

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Gender norms are the rules, beliefs, and expectations most of us hold for how we should look, act, and dress as women or men. Young women experience inequity in gender norms and do not feel seen for who they truly are. Some report being raised with higher expectations and more responsibilities than their male siblings or cousins. Others are taught to prioritize first the needs of males and families. Many, including LGBTQ youth, undocumented young women, and young women with disabilities, experience multiple barriers to success.

## **EDUCATION**

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We heard consistently and clearly that Minnesota’s education system is failing young women and girls of color and American Indian young women. Teachers and counselors have huge potential to impact students’ lives, but many don’t know how to interact in culturally-competent ways. Racism, stereotyping, and lack of understanding about students’ undocumented status, nontraditional gender and sexual orientations, and physical disabilities erode students’ self-identity, self-confidence, and initiative.

Young women also face barriers in preparing for college, securing financial aid, and making the transition to college successfully. For those in financially unstable situations and facing demanding family obligations and other challenges, educational success hinges on economics.



## Solutions

*“Identify the difference between safety and comfort. Challenge yourself and lean into your discomfort.”*

ADVOCATE

*“Instead of asking what’s wrong, ask what’s right. There are really great things going on in our communities, and there isn’t visibility for what is going right.”*

ADVOCATE

The following suggestions, expressed by young women, youth, and their advocates, represent true community-based solutions. These themes emerged across all communities. We invite you to access the broad range of community-specific solutions in *Listening to Young Women of Color, Youth, & Advocates: Volumes I, II, and III*, available at [www.wfmn.org](http://www.wfmn.org).

- **Start community conversations about racism, stereotypes, social and gender norms, and non-conforming identities** to promote dialogue around more inclusive social narratives and build awareness, understanding, and empathy. These conversations can open the door to change.
- **Increase cultural responsiveness in Minnesota schools.** Train teachers and counselors to better serve all students, and diversify Minnesota’s teaching pool. Recognize, value, and include diverse cultural histories and non-conforming peoples in curricula.
- **Strengthen families’ economic stability.** Only when parents can find family-supporting jobs, childcare, transportation, and pathways to U.S. citizenship will young women develop and thrive as individuals.
- **Make a college education possible.** Help young women get into, pay for, attend, and graduate from college.
- **Take a systems approach to mental health.** Mental health can promote or undermine every step a young woman takes. Integrate strategies that help them cope with this stigmatized health issue.

# Conclusion

*“I cannot let another girl go into society thinking she isn’t good enough or powerful enough to do whatever she wants in this land.”*

ADVOCATE

Minnesota’s young women need targeted, positive investments in solutions they and their communities define. They also need the partnership of leaders in philanthropy, nonprofits, business, and government — at the local, state, and national levels — to move the following strategies forward.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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**Focus on holistic approaches to overcoming complex and interrelated barriers.** A whole person approach (emotional, social, and physical) can help young women thrive. We need multigenerational strategies that strengthen families and allow young women to simply be their age. Linked issues such as economics and education must be addressed together.

**Create allies and advocates in every direction.** While leadership and initiative for change must come from within communities, the wider community must offer support for change to take hold. Each stakeholder must seek out advocates, implement ally-building activities, work across sectors, and cultivate deep relationships.

**Raise the voices of young women of color, American Indian young women, young women from Greater Minnesota, LGBTQ youth, and young women with disabilities.** These inclusive Listening Sessions proved to us, again, that wisdom and solutions reside within the communities experiencing specific challenges. It’s crucial that young women’s voices stay at the center of efforts to remove barriers to their success.

**The time to act is now.** This is a unique opportunity for those of us who care about young women’s and girls’ safety and economic security to fully engage. Momentum for change is building in many of the communities with whom we dialogued during the Listening Sessions: in the eyes of young women, they *are* the movement. They see themselves as a generation on the brink of a different and better future. You can help us help them make their dreams a reality. Now is the time for philanthropists, business leaders, policymakers, and opinion shapers to step forward and be part of the cross-sector collective impact leveraged by the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota’s Young Women’s Initiative of Minnesota.

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Dakota Wicohan

El Colegio

Empowering Hmong Women, Inc.

Girls in Action

HAP

Hnub Tshiab — Hmong Women  
Achieving Together

Leech Lake Tribal Community  
Wisdom Project

Linked 4 Leadership

Mankato Public Schools

Matrix Housing Services

Minnesota Indian Women's  
Resource Center

Minnesota Indian Women's  
Sexual Assault Coalition

Minnesota Urban Debate League

Native Youth Alliance of Minnesota

Neighborhoods Organizing  
for Change

Northwest Technical College

Open Door Health Center

Peacemaker Resources

People's Center Health Services

Pillsbury United Communities

Planned Parenthood Minnesota,  
North Dakota, South Dakota

Project DIVA

Red Lake Comprehensive  
Health Services

Rural American Indigenous  
Leadership

Somali Arts Language  
Leadership Institute

St. Catherine University

SURGE!

The Arc Greater Twin Cities

Western Community Action

Women Organizing Women

Women's Initiative for  
Self Empowerment (WISE)

YouthCARE



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