LISTENING
TO YOUNG WOMEN OF COLOR, YOUTH, & ADVOCATES

Listening Sessions for Philanthropy & Policy Leaders – Volume III
COMMUNITIES: LGBTQ + NORTHERN & SOUTHERN MINNESOTA
Today is about learning, taking action together, and leading with hope. This is an opportunity to learn from the young women as they share their stories, solutions, and wisdom.

LEE ROPER-BATKER
PRESIDENT AND CEO, WOMEN’S FOUNDATION OF MINNESOTA

A special thank you to the NoVo Foundation for its partnership in convening the Listening Sessions.
Creating Pathways to Prosperity for Young Women in Minnesota

The Women’s Foundation of Minnesota thanks the NoVo Foundation for its ongoing partnership in convening Listening Sessions in 2016 with young women (ages 12-24) from Northern Minnesota, Southern Minnesota, and LGBTQ communities. This report, Volume III, documents the vital community wisdom and solutions at each session, as presented by the young women and their advocates. This report’s conclusion features their insights and recommendations in partnership with philanthropy, nonprofit, business, and government leaders.

The Women’s Foundation kicked off the Listening Sessions series in November 2015 at the invitation of the White House Council on Women and Girls as part of its National Listening Tour on Women and Girls of Color. The first one-day event featured Listening Sessions with young women and advocates from Minnesota’s Somali and East African communities and American Indian communities. The sessions are captured in the first report in this series, Volume I. With the NoVo Foundation’s support, the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota then convened a second round of Listening Sessions in June 2016 with young women from African American, Latina, and Hmong and Karen communities (Volume II).

Throughout this process, the Foundation has been honored to provide a platform for young women who experience the greatest disparities in outcomes to share their experiences, barriers to success, and solutions. Each is a leader, moving us closer as a community and state to gender and racial equity.

Our gratitude to the following community youth and advocate-leaders for their partnership in crafting the Listening Sessions’ program agendas and in developing and participating in the panels:

YOUTH PANELISTS:
SELENE ANTUNEZ
STEPHANIE BLOCK
DENEA BUNKHOLT
TIA DAHMEN
ALEX EXUM
MAKAYLA FLYNN
ZION HART
SEANICE JAMES
NIDHI JARIWALA
ARICA JOLICOEUR
LEAH MAIR
MUNA MOHAMED
KENZIE MORITZ
AMINA OMAR
MARIAH REYES
NIKKI VLASICH

ADVOCATE PANELISTS:
SUBI AMBROSE Executive Director, Matrix Housing Services
ANNA GOLDTOOTH Planned Parenthood Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota
SUZY HAAS Western Community Action
DONNA HAUER Director of Multicultural and International Services, St. Catherine University
ERICA IDSO-WEIS Open Door Health Center
AYLA KOOB Red Lake Comprehensive Health Services
LINSEY MCMURRIN Leech Lake Tribal Community Wisdom Project
CANDY ROBERTS-SALTER Peacemaker Resources
ERIN SHARKEY Artist, Advocate, Organizer
JANELL SIPE Mankato Public Schools

MODERATORS:
DR. JOI LEWIS Creative Catalysts
CANDY ROBERTS-SALTER Peacemaker Resources
SARA SINNARD SURGE!
STACY SODERHOLM Western Community Action
SUE SUTTON Northwest Technical College

FEATURED ARTISTS:
MAYDA, JENN MELBY-KELLEY

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

At the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota, we believe the challenges and solutions to gender and racial inequity reside at the intersections of race, gender, place, and other identities such as class, age, ability, sexuality, and legal status. Our mission as a statewide community foundation is to drive gender equity and build a world of equal opportunity where all women and girls can create and lead safe, prosperous lives. To get there, we know that hearing directly from young women of color and other young women and youth is essential to creating real, lasting solutions.

Building on the momentum of 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 2016. Young women (ages 12-24) and advocates from the following communities participated: African American, Latina, Hmong and Karen, Northern Minnesota, Southern Minnesota, and youth who identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer and/or questioning).

With the learning from the Listening Sessions, the Foundation has developed and launched the 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 Governor Mark Dayton. Its statewide Action Plan for gender and racial equity will leverage increased resources for young women of color and other young women facing the greatest disparities in outcomes. Young women are at the center of this Initiative, driving the solutions that they want to see in their communities.

“We want to hear directly from young women to learn about their successes and challenges. Today, we lead with hope and a belief that change can happen.”

SAANII HERNANDEZ
VICE PRESIDENT, WOMEN’S FOUNDATION OF MINNESOTA
The Listening Imperative

- The number of [Minnesota families with children below the poverty line](#) rose from 64,181 in 2000 to 102,719 in 2014 – a 60% increase.

- [Minnesota families headed by women of color are disproportionately impacted by poverty.](#) 49.7% of Native American, 49.6% of African American, 41.7% of Latina, and 22% of Asian female-headed households fall below the federal poverty line, compared to 21% of White female-headed households.

- While [students of color and American Indian students now represent 28% of the school-age population](#) in Minnesota, only 4% of the teacher workforce represents these populations.


In Minnesota, research data illustrate the sharp disparities in outcomes for women of color:

The Women’s Foundation of Minnesota conducts ongoing research on the status of women and girls to illuminate disparities in outcomes and create solutions through grantmaking and public policy work. In 2016, the Foundation made grants of $2.6 million to innovative, community-driven programs across the state to create equal opportunity and build pathways to prosperity for women and girls.

We drive gender equity by using an intersectional lens, taking into account gender, race, place, and other identities such as class, age, ability, sexuality, and legal status. Research drives our work: we ask a comprehensive set of questions to help us identify the complex causes of inequity. Then we invest resources in innovative, systemic solutions that drive gender equity.
Girls and Young Women Voice Their Realities

We know that one size does not fit all any more than one community solution works for every community.

By design, each community participating in the Listening Sessions formed its own panels to allow for deeper conversation around economics, racism and culture, school and education, societal and gender norms, safety, and health. The young women first shared their stories, experiences, and thoughts through panel discussion. Then, advocates extended those conversations in a second panel, adding research, data, and historical trends to further illuminate and support the young women’s narratives.

As the young women (ages 12-24) and advocates spoke, snapshots of their daily challenges and triumphs emerged:

- **LGBTQ youth** have hope for the future and for greater understanding and empathy within the broader community. Though some panelists were hesitant, they shared their preferred pronouns and invested themselves in sharing difficult experiences in order to inspire and advance change.

- **Young women in Southern Minnesota** have much on their plates, balancing roles as family caretakers and income-earners with ambitious dreams for the future. Their paths to higher education and healthy self-development collide with multiple social, financial, and emotional barriers. They see education as a solution to their individual struggles as well as to widespread intolerance in their communities. Their mantra: we’re in this together, let’s solve this together.

- **In Northern Minnesota, young women** confront significant financial barriers as well as negative stereotyping about ethnicity, gender, and disabilities. Yet, they have confidence in themselves, striving each day for college, graduation, and professional careers. They don’t see many role models in their communities or the media, but are determined to be role models themselves for other young women facing similar barriers.

The following pages comprise the commentary from each of the panels.
“I know that I am treated differently every day because of who I am. I will not change who I am, but I want to change the way society thinks.”

YOUTH PANELIST

“Their expectations are slowly chipped away. They [LGBTQ youth] don’t know what options they have. It is a direct result of how they are treated by race or gender norms. They are very much at risk.”

ADVOCATE
ECONOMICS, HOPES, & DREAMS

LGBTQ youth are optimistic despite the many barriers to their economic success. They have well-defined dreams which include college and careers. However, some of the youth panelists are in ‘emergency mode,’ living paycheck to paycheck instead of having life choices and job and housing security. For others, family responsibilities and the need to earn income are the barriers to pursuing their dreams. As one advocate commented, “They have to ‘fight to the opportunity.’ We need to open doors and help them find them.”

CULTURE & SELF-IDENTITY

Culture and self-identity for LGBTQ youth are complex issues. Youth panelists note that there is an enormous lack of knowledge and understanding about gender nonconforming youth, which can lead to cultural invisibility and lack of representation. At the same time, these youth are often at the intersection of negative gender and racial stereotyping. Invisibility and negative stereotypes are reinforced by the media.

“Marriage and careers are very difficult for LGBTQ people. Gay marriage is legal in the U.S., which is a major improvement. However, it is still legal to fire someone from their job just for being LGBTQ. This is a major problem that LGBTQ people deal with all the time.”

YOUTH PANELIST

In terms of self-identity, some youth are comfortable publicly identifying as LGBTQ while others are not. Advocates noted that the average youth will not come out during the teen years, forcing them into identities that are not theirs. One youth panelist explained their discomfort as, “I will often get asked questions on trans-gender issues, which I may not know the answers to because I’m not trans. Or I just don’t want to speak for a group I’m not a part of.” An advocate shared a similar experience: “As a student, I was forced to ‘co-teach.’ I was always asked to ‘speak on’ what they identified me as when teachers wanted to bring diversity into the space.”
In addition, LGBTQ youth experience systemic oppression that is often invisible to mainstream culture. Many daily life experiences hold some sort of oppression for LGBTQ youth, including the process of filling out government and healthcare forms, the lack of diaper-changing areas in men’s restrooms, lack of privacy in school locker rooms, and the unpredictable responses to LGBTQ individuals in new classrooms or workplaces. Youth panelists and advocates said community education and dialogue could be a starting point for changing some of these norms.

“The media portrays us to be a sex-crazed freak or slut. Then, ignorant people who don’t understand, grab on to that and treat people who identify as LGBTQ horribly. It’s our job to show the truth about us.”

YOUTH PANELIST

“Being a black woman walking down the street, I can’t NOT be harassed, honked at, or followed. Telling people I’m gay or have a girlfriend only fuels the fire with men. Nobody takes me seriously, and they always want to ‘turn me out’ or ‘make me straight.”

YOUTH PANELIST

SAFETY & WELL-BEING

LGBTQ youth panelists and advocates agreed that health/wellness education in schools does not address the full spectrum of students, focusing only on traditional genders and relationships. One advocate suggested “bringing in parents that are involved in the schools to have better training to support their friends or their own children.”

Advocates noted that the feelings of isolation often experienced by LGBTQ youth can be highly dangerous. When families, cultures, or religions do not accept gender non-conformity, coming out may cause youth to lose their entire support system. One advocate commented, “We need to fight isolation by building community around the most important factors. Persistence and grit and sense of belonging are the biggest indicators of success and graduation.”
“Cisgender people do not have to worry about which bathroom they are the safest in, unlike LGBTQ people. Since they are gendered, it can cause mental, emotional, and physical harm to transgender students. Promoting gender-neutral bathrooms could make many students feel safer at school.”

YOUTH PANELIST

NEGATIVE SOCIAL NARRATIVES

LGBTQ youth experience gender inequity on many levels. The youth panelists described traditional norms for women as a barrier but also talked about barriers due to being outside of traditional social and gender norms. (Gender norms are the rules, beliefs, and expectations most of us hold for how we should look, act, and dress as women or men.) Advocates stated that it is hard for LGBTQ youth to be accepted when people lack understanding and, therefore, empathy. They also noted that everyday language with binary pronouns like “she” and “he” can be a barrier. One advocate stated, “Look for opportunities to bring complicated language into a space where there might be trans people there. How do you have the conversation about pronouns and nuance, to think about and challenge yourself? Any efforts toward our thinking about how to reject binaries and be nonconforming as much as you can will help.”

Another advocate said, “Open the door to talk about privilege...Why don’t we ask straight people their coming out story? ‘When did you know you were straight?’ Walk through a neighborhood holding hands with the same sex and see how that feels.”

At work, a manager talked to us like “you girls” and “you guys” and was openly sexist. We’re treated like girls can’t do that, but boys can. It made me feel small and little. Why do I have to put myself in this role?”

YOUTH PANELIST

“With systemic oppression, sometimes you just don’t know if you are being treated like this because you are LGBTQ. You never ask, ‘Are you treating me this way because I am white or because I am straight?’ Sometimes you just don’t know.”

ADVOCATE
EDUCATION

LGBTQ youth panelists commented that they were/are treated differently in school, which creates negative feelings, emotional damage, and depression. Fortunately, they are starting to see more diversity-oriented groups in school. In their view, an important role for these groups is to educate the wider student body about the LGBTQ space. Advocates indicated that while there is an increase in the number of LGBTQ students at colleges and universities, the suicide rate for these youth is two to three times higher than that of straight students. They emphasized that living in a residence hall can be difficult for LGBTQ students whether they have come out or not.

“At Jefferson High School, people would get detention, suspension, or other consequences for using phrases like, ‘that’s gay.’ They didn’t tolerate bullying of the LGBTQ community.”

YOUTH PANELIST

“In history class, we don’t hear about gay stories at all, and it leads people to think that being LGBTQ is a more ‘recent thing’ when in reality LGBTQ people have existed for as long as straight people have.”

YOUTH PANELIST

“In Health, we’re actually working with our teachers now to get a more trans- and gender-nonconforming inclusive curriculum. We didn’t even go over any of that in Health up until recently.”

YOUTH PANELIST
SOLUTIONS

Youth panelists and advocates express a great need for community education and dialogue around LGBTQ issues. More open talk and greater understanding within the wider community would serve many purposes, including building empathy and support. Achieving greater understanding and empathy could advance every one of the vital needs for change posed by the Listening Session participants, which include:

Find ways to increase LGBTQ youth mentorship. Panelists report that there are not many LGBTQ elders who serve as role models or mentors. Yet, having a mentor helps youth explore and understand themselves and shape their own self-development. Advocates suggested that ‘whole person’ mentoring has the greatest value. They also noted that for many LGBTQ youth, acknowledging their identification as LGBTQ and learning to talk about it requires effort and emotional strength. Advocates support education of mentors who may already have relationships with LGBTQ youth through school, work, or church.

Pursue community-building and allies. LGBTQ youth are often isolated by stereotypes and inequity in treatment, and that isolation is dangerous. Advocates recommend pursuing community-building for LGBTQ youth and helping those who wish to support them become allies. For people who want to be welcoming but don’t know how to approach it, include training on how to open a conversation. One advocate encouraged ally-building in the community with, “I know I can’t walk in your shoes, but how can I support you?” LGBTQ youth must know and feel that support is there for them.

Recognize the difference between safety and comfort. While everyone must have safety for their well-being, advocates said some discomfort is necessary to open minds and change beliefs, attitudes, and values. Some groups, including LGBTQ youth, are more uncomfortable than others: this is a result of systemic oppression. Real change starts when we all lean into our discomfort and participate in honest discussions that make us uncomfortable.

Increase awareness of LGBTQ funding needs. As one advocate noted, less than 1% of funding currently goes to LGBTQ-specific programs. And, LGBTQ youth risk losing their support systems by coming out. Funding solutions should include college scholarships, as youth often come out after their teen years.

Re-examine “the table.” Advocates identified the need to ensure LGBTQ youth are at the table but also to recognize that the table isn’t the only place at which conversations occur. As one advocate commented, “Push past the ‘table’ because sometimes that is inscribed with its own set of unwritten rules about how the table works and the language used.”

Recognize that responses to LGBTQ are community-specific. Advocates explained that the way in which communities interact with LGBTQ communities is impacted by place, experience, access, and geography. While experiences across the nation can be informative, solutions must come from within the community to be effective over the long term.
“I want to be a nurse practitioner because I like to help people. A challenge I’ll face is paying for college.”

YOUTH PANELIST

“I want to be a sign language interpreter so I can help build a bridge between those who can and cannot hear. I don’t have the time and money to go to college right now.”

YOUTH PANELIST
ECONOMICS, HOPES, & DREAMS

Thriving economically means having free time, financial resources, and opportunities. The Southern Minnesota youth panelists shared ambitious dreams and exciting career goals. They see economic success in terms of financial stability as well as “getting better each day and taking every opportunity that comes your way.” One advocate noted, “No matter what we are dealing with, we can all dream...They are still dreaming, so there is hope.”

However, responsibilities to family as caregivers and income earners hold youth back. As one youth panelist described, “I recently faced a financial challenge, and the solution I took was getting another job as well as giving my savings to my older sister’s education. I do what I have to do to keep a roof on top of my family’s head. I sometimes have to choose family over fun, extracurricular activities, rarely a class or two.”

“In high school, I babysat my siblings until my parents were off work. I couldn’t be involved in groups. It affected friendships. I felt like I was the only one having to take on those responsibilities.”

YOUTH PANELIST

The young women panelists from Southern Minnesota are hard-working, determined to meet their responsibilities, and have little time or space for self-development. As one advocate noted, “It is a privilege to have spare time — to be wild and carefree. There is so much growth in that free time.” Another said, “Girls just don’t have the free time we did at their age, free time to be a kid and explore who they are.”

All of the youth panelists expressed hope that they would attend college — and frustration at the high cost. They are unclear about how they will pay for it: several said they are not willing to incur large debt.
“Economic thriving is if you can put food on your table and not have to go to the food shelf. And if you can go buy an actual set of clothes in the store instead of clothing drives or thrift stores.”

ADVOCATE

CULTURE & SELF IDENTITY

Youth panelists commented that they have been treated differently because of their last name, accent, and manner of dress (hijab). Several said they felt intolerance was a larger barrier in high school than in college. Advocates affirmed that this stress and anxiety is real. As one advocate explained, “They are dragging a lot of things behind them when they come into a classroom.”

“Culture and religion are tied into each other. My religion is more targeted than my culture. I am a Muslim. In college, I get some comments, like she’s part of ISIS, like that. But, nobody cares who you are as long as you go to your classes and get your stuff done.”

YOUTH PANELIST

Young women in earlier Women’s Foundation Listening Sessions were clear in stating that the media does not portray accurately women of their particular race or religion. In this Listening Session, young women in Southern Minnesota extended this theme, observing that the media does not portray accurately Caucasian women, teen girls, or women with larger body shapes. Our two takeaways were that many young women are critical consumers of media, and media portrayal of women must change.

“For Hispanic culture, you don’t see much about students graduating with a 4.0 and graduating with honors. In the media, they just look at the bad things and not enough at the good things.”

YOUTH PANELIST
SAFETY & WELL-BEING

Both the youth panelists and advocate groups stated that fear is a huge obstacle to young women's ability to reach their full potential. Intolerance emerges in many ways, including bullying and different accountability for boys and girls. Advocates observed the need for young women to constantly protect themselves, wherever they are.

When asked about pressures coming from society, one youth panelist commented, “If I don’t have sex, I’m the Virgin Mary. If I do, I’m a slut. I personally don’t believe that is true, but that is what society sees for girls.” Another noted, “In high school, I felt I was outed for choosing NOT to be sexually active.” One advocate contributed another perspective, stating, “We need lots of conversations about sex trafficking and safety. Our students are being exploited and getting caught in sex trafficking. We need to help them understand the impact of making those choices.”

Lack of awareness about mental health was a concern for one young panelist: “People are born with mental health issues like anxiety, depression, phobias. They teach you about colds and flu and Ebola, but they don’t teach you about anxiety or depression. It’s not something you can see. I feel like there should be more talk about it in schools.”

When it comes to sources of emotional support, youth panelists reach out to people in different roles, depending on the situation. The young women often mentioned family members and God, though they also described supportive relationships with friends and teachers. One youth panelist who experiences social anxiety talked about her therapy dog as an important source of support.

“Sexual assault in small towns is not recognized. People think it can’t happen. There’s a John Oliver quote, ‘Sexual assault is like boxing. If both partners don’t consent, you’re committing a crime.’ Many people don’t understand that.”

YOUTH PANELIST

“My biggest obstacle is feeling comfortable in the community and being able to feel like people will take me seriously. There should be more groups people can join to build confidence and be able to let their guard down and learn from each other.”

YOUTH PANELIST
NEGATIVE SOCIAL NARRATIVES

Most of the youth panelists made it clear they see societal expectations as being different for girls. One panelist observed, “Guys around here think they can do rude things since they weren’t taught that the things they are saying and doing are wrong.” Another young woman commented, “We grow up hearing all these stereotypes about men and women, and those stereotypes stick with us until we are educated about them.”

Young women in Southern Minnesota have creative and unique ways for handling these challenges. Three panelists say they focus on the individual person, not the gender; another called for more education on mutual respect. Several focused on changing gender norms for boys so they feel freer to show emotion.

Advocates voiced even stronger concerns about different cultural expectations based on gender, stating:

“We need to teach that ‘only yes means yes.’ It’s not women’s job to protect themselves. It’s men’s job to say, ‘We don’t say that, we don’t do that.’”

“For girls, there is indirect bullying and the internalization of the message that I’m not good enough, I’m not acceptable as I am. We do an icky job in terms of shaming girls, all the microaggressions. We’re letting boys get away with things. They need to stop others from saying hurtful things.”

EDUCATION

Though the young panelists described a range of experiences with school, most said they felt safe in school and had positive relationships with teachers and staff. Negative experiences were mainly driven by interactions with other students.

One advocate noted progress at her school through its increased support of LGBTQ students through programming. However, a school counselor panelist also commented, “I feel on a daily basis like a chicken with my head cut off. If I do step out of my office, I have several pleas, ‘I need to see you today.’ We only have 100 students, but they are the most at-risk kids in the district. The needs of our kids are huge. It’s housing, depression, anxiety is rampant, fears.”
SOLUTIONS

Despite their different backgrounds and perspectives, low-income-related issues unify young women in Southern Minnesota. Many of the barriers are interrelated. To make a true impact, solutions must acknowledge that complexity and use a systemic approach:

“Questions are better than assumptions.” This comment by a youth panelist is a call to educate one another as a way to reduce or eliminate intolerance. She also noted, “A person who is well-educated is more open-minded,” echoing others’ comments about the need for greater awareness of cultures, races, religions, and sexual preferences as a step toward understanding and empathy. One advocate said, “It’s interesting that the girls are not anti-male. Their approach is that we’re all in this together, let’s solve it together.”

Young women need support to act and be their age. As noted by one advocate, “Several of the panel members have a parentified role that doesn’t allow for activities good for economic development, like internships, shadowing, opportunities to get a taste of what they are interested in.” Child care for families is a solution that is not often identified as a need related to teenage girls: it frees students from family obligations that hold them back from the time (and time to earn tuition) needed to attend college. We also need solutions to transportation issues faced by young women who are undocumented, unable to afford a car, and/or living in smaller towns without public transportation.

Lift financial barriers to college. Youth panelists and advocates both described the cost of college and student debt as significant deterrents to education that could lead to family-supporting earnings. Advocates identified support for education as a critical need.

A “whole person” approach to services is essential. Advocates commented that basic needs such as housing, health and dental services, mental health services, and education are not adequately met for many young women. One advocate noted that especially in the arenas of health and education, “The whole person experience is really important.” As an example, she explained it would support students’ learning if educators understood better the connection between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) and poor academic outcomes.

Focus on mental health, with a systems approach. Young women in Southern Minnesota need more mental health supports. Advocates recommended a systems approach that integrates mental health education and services with other support and programs. One advocate explained, “Mental health makes me feel helpless in our work. It’s a conversation that keeps coming up about how it relates to income stability and jobs or even food security. We know it needs to be addressed, but we need help in trying to identify what program or systems change is needed to make an impact.”
“No matter what you’re going through, you can get through it. It doesn’t have to take over your life. There’s always opportunity to do the best that you can do.”

**YOUTH PANELIST**

**ECONOMICS, HOPES, & DREAMS**

Despite many challenges, the young panelists from Northern Minnesota have high expectations for their futures and are determined to achieve their dreams and goals. One young woman interested in engineering started a girls’ robotics team at her school. Several envision working to serve others through careers in nursing, social work, and education. Their current realities shape their vision for the future. As one young panelist explained, “What made me want to be a nurse was watching my parents almost overdose, and I was not able to help them in any way. All I could do was call 911. I would love to help kids in situations that I had to go through because it’s hard to watch that and not know what to do.”
Economic realities make it difficult for these young women to take steps to change their situations. One panelist works full-time but struggles to pay household and college bills. Another has no support from her family. She explained, “I face a lot of financial challenges still to this day. I moved out on my own due to family drug issues. I keep taking one step forward at a time and continuing my education so I can get out of this situation.” Some young panelists are the primary caretakers for siblings and/or extended family.

“**My career goal is to become an engineer. I also want to become a foster parent. I want to have a place where troubled teens can go and still get their education and a job.**”

YOUTH PANELIST

For another panelist, medical problems in her family as well as unrealistic state regulations regarding disabilities make it difficult for her to afford school and transportation. She commented, “My dad has a severe spinal injury and is permanently disabled. Our family has high medical bills. All the assistance programs only take into consideration actual income. Thankfully my mom has a very good job, but when applying for programs, they say we do not qualify due to my mom’s salary.”

She added, “I applied for the county waiver so I could receive assistance in getting an accessible van. I had some money saved up for the van, but to be accepted for the waiver, I could not have assets over $3,000. I had to do a financial spend-down, and then I was accepted for waiver. But this van had to be 2008 or newer with less than 50,000 miles. How was I expected to go and buy this vehicle when I had to spend all my money to get this waiver?”

Advocates said young women need diverse pathways to successful futures, as well as more effective social, emotional, and financial support.
CULTURE & SELF-IDENTITY

The Northern Minnesota youth panelists discussed a range of experiences when asked if they are treated differently than other young women. While some said no, others mentioned the negative stereotyping they have experienced themselves or witnessed in their community. A common theme was that these young women do not feel seen for who they truly are. Most felt that aspects of their culture and self-identity are not accurately recognized or embraced in the community or in the media.

“My ultimate dream would be to work at a place like Mayo or Gillette’s in the social work field, 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

SAFETY & WELL-BEING

For these young panelists, feeling safe and secure in the world means “everybody getting along with everybody,” and “not feeling threatened when walking down the street.” While one panelist wished catcalls on the street would end, others described fears of being mugged, raped, or kidnapped. Advocates validated these comments, feeling strongly that young women and LGBTQ youth in Northern Minnesota are not safe, physically or emotionally.

Two young women talked about being bullied in school. School administrators responded poorly. As one panelist described, “I was called all of the names in the book: a cheat, a liar, a thief, redskin, fat, ugly, a dyke. I went to the administration once and they told me it was a passing thing, not to worry about it. I was told it was better for them to pick on me than some other poor kid. And I took on the responsibility of the comments in hopes some other poor kid wasn’t getting them, too.”

“I don’t feel safe walking down the street due to the increase in sex trafficking in my own community.”

YOUTH PANELIST

Several identified addiction to alcohol, street drugs, and prescription drugs as a major concern, having seen and experienced the devastating impact of addiction on family members and friends. Another noted the unhealthy pressures society places on women, saying, “As sex goes, if you have sex with multiple partners, you are a slut. If you don’t have enough sex, you are a prude. If you have just one partner, you are not experienced enough. If I don’t want to wear makeup, I am lazy. If I wear makeup, I am fake. The image that the world has of women is so screwed up and unrealistic.”
“There is a lack of support for children victimized in drug and alcohol-related family issues. They grow up learning that since their parent did it, they should too. All they may know is, ‘Steal for what you want.’ If they choose another path, it’s very difficult to climb the ladder and build a life for themselves.”

YOUTH PANELIST

When they need emotional support, many young women turn to their families, friends, and their faith. However, one commented, “When I feel sad or lost, I don’t reach out to anyone because that’s how I’ve always been. I don’t have parents I can talk to about my day or what problems I’m facing. I’ve been taught at a young age to handle my problems or issues on my own.”

NEGATIVE SOCIAL NARRATIVES

The youth panelists agreed that girls are raised with higher expectations and higher levels of responsibility than boys. Many are being taught traditional male/female roles: they are aware and determined not to be limited by these social and gender norms. As one young woman stated, “Boys or girls have to play certain roles growing up and you’re supposed to stay in those roles. I feel there should be a lot more fluidity when it comes to that kind of thing.”

One young panelist said traditional gender norms make it easier to be a female disabled person than male: “Whereas women are typically viewed as the ‘weaker’ sex and need to be taken care of, men are viewed as the ‘breadwinners.’ When a male is disabled and unable to fulfill this role, society can portray it as the fault of that person. With women it is more likely to be ‘accepted.’ People will often open doors for me. However, my male disabled friends have less experiences like this.”

“‘We are expected to get better grades and to do the same work for less pay. We are expected to take the fall if we get pregnant, as if we were the only ones involved.”

YOUTH PANELIST

“My voice is not valued or heard the same way, compared to a man.”

ADVOCATE

Youth panelists and advocates raised the topic of education, both as an incubator of norms and as a means of changing them.
An advocate stated, “Women are taught to be soft. If you’re assertive, then you’re called the ‘b’ word. How do you teach young women to be assertive?” One panelist commented, “Many of these issues would not occur if, from day one, boys were taught that women are equals. I think men should be shown that they can show emotion just like women.”

“I do not want to be the only one who cares for the child or does the housework if I have a full-time job, too. That is NOT right. It is a partnership.”

YOUTH PANELIST

EDUCATION

The young panelists said that most of the time they feel safe at school. However, one participant noted, “I hear a lot of rude comments toward other people from a different cultural background. When I hear comments like, ‘I can’t wait until we take out the rest of your people,’ those are the days that I do not feel welcome or safe.” Though they believed teachers are responsive to their needs, overall young women wished for greater support in overcoming the multiple obstacles that impact their success as students. These barriers include family caretaker responsibilities, coping with parental drug abuse, the challenges of being a first-generation college student, and negative stereotypes about physical disability.

“It’s hard to raise yourself and brothers while going to school. We need a support system for kids going through what I had to go through. A lot of young people in my community have to take care of themselves and be a role model and caretaker.”

YOUTH PANELIST

“People at school assume that students with disabilities do not have social lives. And, at sporting events, the student section is not handicap accessible. While they have a section set aside that is, we are not able to experience the cheerleaders, giveaways, or sitting with friends.”

YOUTH PANELIST
**SOLUTIONS**

Advocates viewed many of the solutions for young women in Northern Minnesota in terms of security: effective change means increasing their financial, physical, and emotional safety. And, while some barriers are related to economics, advocates indicated that many of the solutions involve shifting mindsets and social norms:

**Encourage conversations about change.** Advocates called for an end to the “Minnesota Nice mentality,” a regional cultural pattern of avoiding difficult conversations and uncomfortable topics. An important step is to build skills community-wide so that the tough conversations become possible. Another is to elevate young women’s voices. As one advocate commented, “Policy and systems change seem to come from louder voices. How can we make our women's voices louder?” We must encourage the practice of intentional deep listening, especially among those in advocacy and policy-making roles. Youth panelists added that they would like to have a space in which to hold these conversations, talk about their experiences, and form community.

**Change social and gender norms to increase safety for all youth.** Current inequities contribute to physical and sexual violence as well as social risk for young women in Northern Minnesota. Education about equity, gender roles, and social behavior could help reduce intolerance and violence and increase support for young women.

**Increase cultural responsiveness in schools.** Advocates noted with concern the lack of education and curriculum on American Indian and other cultures in area schools. As one advocate explained, “It minimizes the role of American Indian youth when they don’t hear stories reflected in public schools. It impacts their identity when they don’t hear their identity reflected in public school systems in our area.” They proposed education for everyone with a role in the school system, including teachers, administrators, para-professionals, lunch workers, custodians, and bus drivers.

**Increase support for the transition from high school to college.** Advocates indicate that young women carry a lot on their shoulders, including multiple traumas. One advocate stated, “How can we expect them to graduate if they can’t handle their own lives? How do we expect them to graduate if we’re not helping them figure it out?” Greater support for their financial, physical, and emotional safety is needed to help young women move successfully toward independence and college.

**Focus on empathy, compassion, and “soft skills” for more effective support.** One advocate commented on the disproportionate number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) experienced by women and people of color in Minnesota. She believes an essential element in helping young women cope with ACES and trauma is a greater focus on empathy, compassion, and other “soft skills.” She noted, “Trauma is real. We hear, ‘I can’t give these kids a break just because they’ve had it hard at home.’ We’re not talking about changing expectations, but supporting young people so they can get to that destination of being successful, providing them a different path to get there.”
Conclusion

Girls and young women in Minnesota need targeted, positive investments in solutions that they and others in their communities define. They also need the partnership of leaders in philanthropy, nonprofits, business, and government at the local, state, and national levels.

KEY INSIGHTS:

Childcare and transportation are essential for young women. Many girls and young women in low-income families have primary caretaker roles and household responsibilities. These roles prevent them from taking critical steps in self-development, forming social bonds, and participating in economic activities that could help them reach college. Young women who are undocumented, unable to afford a car, and/or living in smaller towns without public transportation face similar barriers.

Many Minnesota schools are not responsive to minority cultures or nonconforming gender identities. Youth panelists and advocates described a serious lack of education about and awareness of diverse ethnicities and LGBTQ youth in schools. This invisibility in education has a negative impact on students’ self-identities and tolerance for diversity within the community. The gap in education about human relationships other than male-female puts LGBTQ youth at risk and leads to lack of understanding — the starting point for empathy — within the student community.

Girls and young women are frustrated by stereotyping. As one young panelist stated, “These days, it seems as if society runs on stereotypes. People of color are viewed as uneducated, violent, abusive, and poor. People in the LGBTQ community are viewed as confused about their gender or sexuality. All of these stereotypes can be harmful and cause unnecessary judgements.” Many of the young panelists have had negative experiences related to stereotyping about race, culture, and gender. For many, the solution is to open minds and hearts through education and community conversation.

Starting conversations around LGBTQ is a critical community need. Very few people have a comprehensive, accurate understanding about what it means to identify as LGBTQ. Many people, including LGBTQ youth themselves, do not know how to start conversations that could lead to increased understanding and empathy.
RECOMMENDATIONS:

These recommendations for increasing resources and creating systemic change are community-based:

1. **Fund strategies that create financial, physical, and emotional safety.** Increase resources for strategies that offer economic opportunities and shift social and gender norms to help young women build security in their lives.

2. **Strengthen families to enable young women to be their age.** When families experience poverty, addiction, undocumented status, and other obstacles, young women often take on extreme levels of responsibility. To allow them the time and space to focus on self-development, solutions must assume a whole-family approach.

3. **Encourage mentorship for LGBTQ youth.** Mentors could be a critical source of support for LGBTQ youth, but young women in rural Minnesota do not feel that they have access to a community of “elders.” Solutions may include funding of strategies for education of potential mentors who may already have relationships with LGBTQ youth through school, work, or church.

4. **Increase awareness of LGBTQ funding needs.** There is a significant lack of funding for LGBTQ-specific solutions. Three essential areas in which increased resources are needed include housing for LGBTQ youth who have lost family support after coming out, scholarships, and development of community allies.

5. **Integrate a “whole person” approach more often.** Advocates suggest that this solution could address multiple issues, including mental health problems and trauma from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES). Two areas for further exploration and funding include training on ACES for educators and integrating mental health services into existing services for youth.

6. **Raise voices in order to make solutions community-specific.** The Women’s Foundation has long understood that challenges and solutions come from the same place, and participants in these Listening Sessions affirmed this approach. Solutions to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps for Minnesota’s young women and youth must focus on making the voices of young women and their advocates heard.
“It’s really hard to get past your past. A lot of people didn’t have a lot of faith in me, so I had to be my own support system. It’s hard when people aren’t really there for you.”

YOUTH PANELIST

“Young people have a good handle on how gender identity and gender roles affect their lives. They are challenging harmful gender norms. We have a lot to learn from them.”

ADVOCATE