



ON THE ROAD TO EQUALITY: Statewide Findings & Policy Recommendations

October 2014

INTRODUCTION

On the Road to Equality: Statewide Findings & Policy Recommendations is a supplement to the *2014 Status of Women & Girls in Minnesota*¹ (June 2014), a research report by the Women's Foundation of Minnesota in partnership with the Center on Women & Public Policy (University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs). Annually, data is gathered and analyzed in economics, safety, health and leadership using a gender-race-place-equity lens to gauge the progress of Minnesota's women and girls, and to offer solutions.

In June 2014, the Women's Foundation and Center on

Women & Public Policy embarked on the Foundation's biennial Road to Equality Tour. Community presentations and focus group studies were conducted in 12 communities, across seven cities.

The cities visited included Duluth (6/3), Grand Rapids (6/4), Rochester (6/9), Twin Cities (6/11), Mankato (6/16), Willmar (6/18), and Moorhead 6/24). Key research findings from the *2014 Status of Women & Girls in Minnesota* research were shared and community input gathered regarding women and girls' equality.

The goals of the Tour were to learn, firsthand, how the *Status* research represents what women and girls are experiencing in Minnesota's communities and to inform the Foundation's own grantmaking and policy priorities.

In addition to the community presentations, a total of 12 focus groups were held; one in each city, plus six targeted to specific communities: African American (6/12), Latina (6/12), and Asian American women and girls (6/13), senior women (6/13), and adolescent girls (6/10). The focus groups were invitation-only and included leaders from nonprofit, public, education, law enforcement, philanthropic and business sectors in each of the communities.

In this report, we capture the voices and policy recommendations of the community leaders who participated in the focus groups. The data represent participants' perceptions of the challenges that Minnesota women and girls face and what changes are needed to improve their lives.

This report will serve as a roadmap for Minnesota government, community and business leaders to examine and advocate for policies which ensure that all women and girls have equal access to opportunities and pathways that lead to success. It is our intention that it be shared widely, informing decisionmakers and driving action towards gender equality, statewide.

¹ Status of Women and Girls in Minnesota: Research Overview, research and writing by the University of MN Humphrey School's Center on Women & Public Policy in partnership with the Women's Foundation of Minnesota; June 2014.

METHODOLOGY

The focus group protocol included questions and discussion focused in five areas: Economics, Safety, Health, and Leadership. A local partner in each community helped the Women's Foundation to identify leaders across sectors, who were then invited to participate in the discussion.

When discussing each of the focus areas (Economics, Safety, Health, and Leadership), we asked the same two questions:

- 1) How do these issues play out for women and girls in your community?
- 2) What is needed to improve women's and girls' economic security, safety, health, and leadership?

A total of 12 focus groups were held, each with an average of 13 participants. The discussions were digitally recorded and notes were taken. The subsequent raw data was then analyzed and synthesized for this report.

KEY CONCERNS

The overall findings from the focus groups supported and confirmed the trends that we saw in the most recent *2014 Status of Women and Girls in Minnesota* research. Analyses of the findings indicate that women in all communities of our state are grappling with similar types of issues.

Issues found in Greater Minnesota for rural women and women of color are more similar than different. Cultural barriers, challenges due to the lack of access to resources, and how female breadwinners and single mothers tend to be more disadvantaged are some of the many problems that overlap among rural and urban communities, in communities of color, and among refugee or new immigrant female populations.

Economic barriers, as in the *2012 ROAD TO EQUALITY: Statewide Findings & Policy Recommendations* report², **continue to be the most pressing concern for women and girls in Minnesota, across all 12 focus groups.**

Women make up the majority (60%) of low-wage workers in Minnesota³, and this working-poor female population is increasingly the primary breadwinner in the family.⁴ This population often holds sole responsibility for child or elder care, holds two to three minimum wage jobs with little or no benefits (such as paid sick leave), and struggle to meet their housing or transportation costs. All of these factors tend to negatively impact their ability to achieve economic security.

Analyses of the focus group findings also indicate the intersectionality of the challenges faced by women and girls. Women and girls' health, safety, and leadership are strongly related to their economic security and to each other.

For example, women and girls struggle financially to access affordable, nutritious food, which affects their physical health; homeless women increasingly tend to find themselves in unsafe and unhealthy environments, vulnerable to sexual or physical abuse. A lack of leadership and mentorship opportunities in high-paying, nontraditional jobs for women and girls ultimately keeps them in low-income positions, contributing to the cycle of poverty and vulnerability.

² On the Road to Equality: Statewide Findings & Policy Recommendations; November 2012.

³ Status of Women and Girls in Minnesota: Research Overview, research and writing by the University of MN Humphrey School's Center on Women & Public Policy in partnership with the Women's Foundation of Minnesota; June 2014 (Page 6).

⁴ Status of Women and Girls in Minnesota: Research Overview, research and writing by the University of MN Humphrey School's Center on Women & Public Policy in partnership with the Women's Foundation of Minnesota; June 2014 (Page 7).

“To get women out of poverty, they must have a holistic support system. They need access to transportation, childcare, and more. They have to have a safe place to live. They need the whole package... [not] just one piece.”
- Focus Group participant, African American Community

A single policy is unlikely to fix all the problems, because each problem has its own complexities. Layered solutions may be needed to address these intricacies. Analyses of the focus group findings direct us towards options to turn challenges into opportunities.

Participants believe the role of communities in the decisionmaking process is vital to fully disaggregating the issues and finding possible solutions. Lifting existing barriers will require women and girls -- and men and boys -- to view one another as allies and equal partners in this process. In addition, the expansion of culturally appropriate resources and access to services for all women and girls cannot happen without strong collaborations between all the sectors: government, nonprofit, business, and community.

However, while women and girls face similar problems across different cities, some issues can be unique to specific communities, and disparities exist even within the same community.

Community-specific problems are discussed more elaborately in this report in the thematic area-specific sections (see next page).

KEY ISSUES & CONCERNS IN FOUR THEMATIC AREAS

(In order of frequency of mentions, from highest to lowest)

Economics		
1.	Education, Entrepreneurship & Workforce Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Higher education is unaffordable ▪ Lack of pipelines to nontraditional higher-paying fields ▪ Lack of workforce development, skills-training ▪ Extra challenges for new immigrant women and girls
2.	Equal Pay & Job Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Wage, promotions disparities ▪ Extra burdens: child care, spouse care, or elder care. ▪ Lack paid sick leave
3.	Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of affordable, quality childcare ▪ Older children caring for younger children ▪ Shift jobs often best option
4.	Minimum Wage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Women: majority minimum wage workers, primary breadwinners ▪ Multiple low-wage jobs to meet needs ▪ No retirement savings, social security
5.	Housing & Homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Need for affordable, adequate housing ▪ “Invisible Homelessness” impacts for immigrant communities
6.	Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Issue for low-wage earners with child/elder care responsibilities ▪ Lack of transportation for workers outside of regional/city centers

Safety		
1.	Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Girls’ safety, domestic violence, sexual abuse not in school curriculum ▪ Increased sexual assault on college campuses
2.	Physical or Verbal Abuse & Domestic Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Economic, financial stresses increases domestic violence ▪ Most at-risk: homeless children, adolescents, women
3.	Sex Trafficking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Victims unaware of services ▪ Homelessness, mental health conditions increase vulnerability ▪ Communities lack awareness, education, preparedness
4.	Bullying & Harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Young girls: school, Internet; adult women: workplace, families ▪ Lack of supportive services for girls = suicide, self-destructive behavior
5.	Housing & Homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Homeless youth in greater Minnesota for sexual/physical abuse

Health		
1.	Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bullying, violence increases mental health conditions ▪ Mental health stigma, lack of mental health providers ▪ Impacted by substance abuse, affects physical health
2.	Physical Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of access to healthy, affordable food impacts health ▪ Lack of affordable, accessible health services, insurance. ▪ Low-income earners exercise less
3.	Reproductive Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ High teen pregnancy , repeat pregnancies among young women of color ▪ Economic, socio-cultural factors affect use of birth control, birth and abortion ▪ Reproductive health seen as unhealthy, abnormal = lack of care, support
4.	Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of comprehensive sex education = teen/early pregnancies, stress, cycle of poverty/violence ▪ Low priority given to need for quality early childhood education ▪ Lack of health services students with special needs, abilities ▪ Negative self-image/confidence correlation to standardized testing

Leadership		
1.	Political Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Female representation largely “symbolic” ▪ Isolating and unfavorable environment, little support
2.	Nonpolitical Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Low board participation, little encouragement ▪ Leadership roles mostly informal ▪ Higher in nonprofit sector
3.	Mentoring, Support & Women and Girls’ Self-Confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of mentors ▪ Work-life balance issues ▪ Lack of leadership training, skill development opportunities

AREA-SPECIFIC ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Area I: Economics

“Our daughter was one of the top welders in her junior-high school program and would have been very successful in that field, but wasn’t encouraged by us as parents or people in construction. Why? She would have had to struggle for acceptance by men in that field, who would not be welcoming. So, she’s not in that career. Even though they may have the skills, women have to always fight that battle.”

- Focus group participant, Grand Rapids

Based on the focus group findings, cultural factors appear to pose the greatest barriers to women and girls’ economic prosperity in all the communities that we visited.

Predetermined gender roles, gendered fields of study, careers, and job positions, and the lack of adequate societal support tend to make it difficult for young girls and women to take up nontraditional roles and higher-paying jobs in mining, welding, large scale business, or manufacturing. Racial biases can also hinder women's ability to advance.

A large number of focus group participants believe economic challenges can be exacerbated by the lack of access to and awareness of resources and information that may be available. The "working poor," especially lower middle class families, tend to face economic hardships because they do not qualify for government subsidies and programs. They argued for better systems to support low-income workers, particularly women. This was true across both rural and urban areas.

"This large [lower] middle class of women who are trying to do everything that's possible, yet they are at the very edge, where they can be homeless the next day. The unfortunate part is that we're not poor enough to get assistance."

- Focus group participant, Asian American community

Issues related to education, entrepreneurship, equal pay and benefits, minimum wage, childcare, housing and transportation are all interrelated; assessing each aspect of the economic problem is vital to unraveling possible solutions to women's economic security.

"A lack of affordable housing ties in with the alarming rate of homelessness in our community. Not only are there very few rental properties, rent is high and not in keeping with the economic opportunities in the area. Also, childcare costs are so high, which factors in. We've got families working several minimum wage jobs just to afford rent and childcare... it's crazy."

- Focus group participant, Moorhead

Education, Entrepreneurship & Workforce Development

Lack of educational and entrepreneurial support and workforce development for women and girls were top concerns in every community. Participants shared that although the graduation rates for women are higher compared to men in high schools and colleges, women tend to be funneled into lower-paying service jobs in sales, caregiving or healthcare, a finding that was consistent with the status report trend that "workforce development programs reinforce occupational clustering" in Minnesota⁵. They identify the importance of role models, mentorship programs, and skill development opportunities for young girls and women to boost their self-confidence and drive to pursue high-paying jobs in nontraditional or male-dominated fields.

Equal Pay & Job Benefits

Closing the wage gap was also unanimously voted as a major pathway to women's financial security. Female-oriented jobs tend to be less valued, disposable, and paid minimally with little or no benefits. Moreover, many low-wage female workers who face multiple responsibilities of childcare, eldercare, or spouse care can suffer disproportionately compared to male low wage earners, because they do not have access to paid sick leave.

"I think it's important that we make paid sick time a benefit along with health insurance coverage, because it's not doing much good if they're going to come to work sick or risk losing their job."

- Focus group participant, Rochester

⁵ Status of Women and Girls in Minnesota: Research Overview, research and writing by the University of MN Humphrey School's Center on Women & Public Policy in partnership with the Women's Foundation of Minnesota; June 2014 (Page 4).

Childcare

Childcare is closely connected with equal pay and job benefits as quality childcare costs are skyrocketing in Minnesota and are usually not covered as part of job benefits. Participants cited that this affects low-income families, especially single mothers and women of color who have to work two to three low wage jobs to make ends meet. Female breadwinners are sometimes forced to pull their older children out of school to take care of their younger sibling at home, which can lead to risky behaviors among unattended children.

Other Economic Barriers

Many minimum wage workers happen to be women of color who struggle from the lack of adequate financial resources to barely meet their housing needs and transportation costs related to childcare or elder care. We found that minimum wage earners also tend not to save for their retirement or emergency needs, keeping their lives at risk. Participants also highlighted that many women are homeless and that transportation challenges keep suburban women from accessing higher-paying job opportunities in city or regional centers.

Economics: Community-Specific Concerns

While women and girls face similar economic problems across different cities and communities as seen above, some issues can be more pronounced or unique to specific communities and disparities exist even within the same community. The tables below lists some of the major overlapping issues that were brought up within community-specific focus groups, as well as the problems that were viewed as more distinct for certain groups of women and girls.

Community	Concerns
Women & Girls of Color, Refugees, and New Immigrants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Lack of culturally appropriate or linguistically sensitive information.▪ Women and girls of color face cultural barriers to advancement.▪ Inadequate scholarships, skill development, or entrepreneurial opportunities available for women and girls of color.▪ Many female immigrants are undocumented and can face difficulties finding jobs or starting their own businesses.▪ Many are unaware about financial planning when they arrive in US due to dependency on their male breadwinner.
Senior Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Rising levels of poor, homeless, and isolated elders and inadequate programs to support such need.▪ Many aging elderly women of color have little knowledge about saving for retirement, so they are fully dependent on their younger generations.▪ Invisibility of elderly women.
Lesbian/Transgender/Bisexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Trans women are less likely to be hired despite strong anti-discrimination laws in Minnesota.

Recommendations to Address Economic Barriers

Focus group participants offered the following recommendations to address economic barriers. They are listed in order of the frequency with which they were mentioned.

No.	Recommendations
1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Increase awareness among community members to encourage more girls and women into nontraditional sectors.▪ Mentor and build women’s self-confidence, and encourage girls to take up nontraditional roles and higher-paying technical jobs and leadership positions.
2.	Increase resources and bridge the information gap through increased navigational services and access to culturally relevant resources.
3.	Allow more apprenticeship opportunities and 2- and 4-year degree programs for young women to advance in nontraditional career paths.
4.	Develop strategic policies to address barriers to economic self-sufficiency for undocumented refugee or new immigrant women.
5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Include daycare services as part of job benefits or provide childcare subsidies.▪ Consider community-based housing to share child and elder care responsibilities.▪ Step up the role of the private-public partnership in supporting work/life balance through expansion of job benefits to women, including increasing paid sick leave and subsidizing early childhood education and childcare.
6.	Provide skill development opportunities for low income families on welfare so that they can transition more smoothly out of the system.
7.	Provide tax credits for caregivers or caregiving services.
8.	Increase funding for public housing and expand services for homeless women and youth.
9.	Find creative ways to address transportation issues where populations are geographically spread out, such as ride share programs.

Area II: Safety

“Sometimes if I am going somewhere, I dress up like a boy so I feel safer, so that no one calls me out...”

- Focus group participant, Adolescent Girls Community

Across all focus groups, personal safety and security for women and girls was of top concern and key factor in whether they will succeed in life, and thrive.

Community leaders stressed that cultural factors are one of the biggest barriers to safety and security. Participants noted that from an early age, girls are prepared to expect danger and live in fear, which makes them more vulnerable and tolerant of violence or abuse against them; this is true for both rural and urban women and girls.

Participants voiced that they believe formal and informal power relations between men and women tend to make women more susceptible to physical violence and sexual abuse. Moreover, new immigrant and refugee women and girls often do not report violent crimes and domestic partner violence due to a culture of silence and fear of deportation.

Girls and women in Minnesota report that pop culture and media's portrayal of women and girls as sexualized objects affects people's perceptions and has a significant negative impact on their safety and self-image. Women and girls' safety challenges are exacerbated by the lack of access to and awareness of resources and information that may be available related to safety and security, as well as the lack of linguistically or culturally appropriate information for women and girls of color.

Education

With cases of sexual assault on the rise on college campuses, statewide and across the country, education was believed to be a key safety issue for women and girls. Focus group respondents reported that topics around women and girls' safety and physical, sexual, and mental abuse are not adequately discussed in the school-learning environment. They stressed the need to educate not only girls, but also boys and men on how to respect and value women and girls.

“[There are] programs... [that] attempt to change the culture around bullying or sexual assault... Hopefully, we will reach a tipping point where it will be the norm to say, “No, don't behave that way, that's not right, you can't do that.” And, we need to teach our boys, so they know how to value women in their lives. When you value someone, you're not going to want to hurt them.”

- Focus group participant, Willmar

Physical or Verbal Abuse & Domestic Violence

“The women we are seeing at our shelter come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. [T]hey are living in unsafe homes and environments and are economically dependent on the man [...who has abused them]... Education is connected to safety [...in my community]... it's so interlinked that one will not happen without the other.”

- Focus group participant, Asian American Community

In many communities, participants highlighted the economic implications of women and girls' safety. For instance, victimized or abused women and girls have difficulty reporting crimes or leaving their families because they are economically and financially dependent on the breadwinner, who is often the perpetrator of the violence.

Participants noted cases of homeless female youth and children, who either want to escape domestic violence in their own homes, or avoid mental stress due to unhealthy family relationships. They tend to be at risk and vulnerable to physical abuse or rape at the hands of those who provide them with temporary housing.

Sex Trafficking

Compared to the focus groups in 2012 where many respondents were reluctant to discuss the matter of sex trafficking, this year many community leaders recognized that it is a major concern not only for the metro area, but equally so for greater and suburban Minnesota. And they cited that community members are still not fully aware of the magnitude of this issue for Minnesotan women and girls.

Additionally, they reported that communities are ill-prepared to respond to the problem due to insufficient funding and lack of appropriate service delivery mechanisms to help vulnerable female children, adolescents, and adult women. Victims are not aware of the few available services or the information available may not be culturally or linguistically relevant for women and girls of color.

“In our county attorney’s office there was one case of a 12 year old [girl] who was trafficked to Chicago and brought back. Now we’re trying to find a place to get therapeutic intervention for that child and it’s going to be \$600 a day. We know that this community is a destination medical center, [and a] destination for sex trafficking, as well, and we aren’t prepared as a county to have therapeutic interventions, to have funding, to know how to help those in need. There’s a big learning curve for us and the whole state.”

- Focus group participant, Rochester

Other Safety Concerns

Bullying and harassment were among other prominent safety concerns for women and girls. Young girls are bullied by other girls and boys, not only in school but also through texting and social media, like Facebook.

Adult women are bullied in the workplace as well as within personal relationships. Bullying affects mental health, self-confidence, and self-image, and sometimes victims resort to suicide or other self-destructive behavior.

Participants cited the need to provide additional counseling services to young girls in schools that encourages them to share their feelings or experiences. Also viewed as essential for women and girls’ success is to include men and boys as equal partners and allies in promoting solutions and lifting existing barriers to women and girls’ safety.

Safety: Community-Specific Concerns

While women and girls face similar safety issues across different cities and communities, as seen above, some problems can be more pronounced or unique to specific communities and disparities exist even within the same community.

The table below lists some of the major overlapping issues that were brought up within community-specific focus groups as well as the problems that were seen as more distinct in certain communities.

Community	Concerns
Women and Girls of Color	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Many cases of domestic violence for refugee and new immigrant women and girls remain unreported due to a culture of silence. ▪ Issue of “abusive international marriages,” where victims of assault or abuse do not report crime in fear of deportation. ▪ Racial stereotypes exist around violence for African American women and girls.
LBT Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Vulnerable to school bullying, and also often do not feel safe at home. ▪ Transgendered women’s health and safety at risk.
Elderly Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Do not receive the appropriate services based on their special needs. ▪ Vulnerable to thefts, scams, robberies, and physical assault.

Recommendations to Address Barrier's to Women and Girls' Safety

During focus group discussions, participants were prompted to make recommendations that would address the safety concerns facing their communities' women and girls (in order of frequency), as listed in the table below.

No.	Recommendations
1.	Community partnership (involving schools, families, and community-based organizations) and dialogue with law enforcement agencies may be necessary to create policies and improve the safety of neighborhoods.
2.	Increase community involvement and awareness around verbal or physical bullying, domestic violence, sexual assault, and sex trafficking.
3.	Educate men and boys on what behaviors are acceptable/ unacceptable.
4.	Encourage conversation from an early age that teaches young boys and girls to respect and value one another.
5.	Invest in youth counseling and peer-to-peer education programs to increase awareness on various safety issues and also to provide young girls emotional support.
6.	Expand culturally, linguistically sensitive, and age appropriate support services and information for all victims of abuse.

Area III: Health

Participants in all focus groups agreed that good health paves the pathway to women and girls' prosperity. Cultural factors play an important role in influencing the quality of health for all women and girls.

*"We don't tend to talk about health issues until we get to a crisis state. There's a wonderful community watching out for crisis, which is a good thing; they help us overcome that crisis. We need to talk about it before it becomes a crisis. Another piece is stress. I've become a fan of something called "truth telling and cultural healing" and I think that we need to learn how to talk about our stress and adopt positive coping skills for stress."
- Focus group participant, African American Community*

Focus group participants argued that Minnesotans, particularly women and girls, suffer negative health outcomes because of a focus on health crisis response versus health crisis prevention. While Minnesota offers one of the country's best health services and outcomes, a closer examination of statistics indicates persistent health disparities for women of color and for women in greater Minnesota.⁶

According to leaders in many communities, one reason is because many women of color have primary responsibility for care children, spouse, and/or elderly family members while working multiple minimum-wage jobs. As a result, these women tend to prioritize their own health last, given their limited financial resources and time.

⁶ Status of Women and Girls in Minnesota: Research Overview, research and writing by the University of MN Humphrey School's Center on Women & Public Policy in partnership with the Women's Foundation of Minnesota; June 2014 (Page 12).

Focus group participants cited that health and economics are closely linked. Without job benefits, such as paid sick leave, low-income female-headed households can suffer because the female breadwinner gets stuck in the middle, balancing caregiving and household responsibilities, while not missing work. People with serious health conditions are often forced to forego job opportunities to protect their existing health benefits.

The conclusion: being in good health promotes women and girls' ability to work and make a living.

Mental Health

Mental health was among the top health issues based on the findings, affecting girls and adult women, women and girls of color, and aging women.

There is a strong negative impact of media on women and girls' body perceptions, self-image, and self-esteem, which can have adverse physical health impacts. For example, many girls suffer from bulimia and anorexia, as a result.

Focus group participants also emphasized the powerful and persistent social stigma around discussing mental health problems or accessing mental health services.

Physical Health

“For transgender women who have decided to transition medically, there’s a lack of resources and skilled providers to the transgender community. Transgender people have been invisible in our community. I’m now seeing an increase in the number of transgender women “coming out” and at a younger age... we need to have adequate resources available.”

- Focus group participant, Asian American Community

Women and girls' health problems are exacerbated by the lack of access to and awareness about resources and information that may be available, but may not be culturally or linguistically appropriate.

Focus group participants shared that low-income female-headed households suffer due to a lack in affordable healthcare and health insurance.

Health services are believed to be inadequate to meet the rising demands for healthcare needs, resulting in patients' distrust that doctors will provide the necessary care.

Moreover, participants cited the lack of affordable and nutritious food, which can lead to conditions such as diabetes and obesity, considered prevalent among Minnesotan women and girls.

Reproductive Health

“Women’s health has been marginalized and disparaged for hundreds of years... You were considered not well enough if you had your period or were pregnant, for example. This is a bias that some doctors still have... [it’s a] lack of education, a lack of research on women bodies. This hurts women.”

- Focus group participant, Aging Community

Reproductive health rights of women, such as the decision to use birth control, have children or have an abortion, are affected by economic and socio-cultural factors.

Teen, early, repeated, and unintended pregnancies were viewed as critical health issues.

Participants saw the lack of adequate sex education and awareness as a major cause of these issues and they believe such situations can put unnecessary financial burden on young couples and can also lead to a cycle of poverty and violence.

Other Health Concerns

Focus group findings highlighted the need for quality early childhood education, which is necessary for the overall development and wellness of a child.

Other health issues include a lack of appropriate services for children with special needs and disabilities, and societal pressures on students to excel in standardized testing, which can adversely affect students' self-esteem and mental health.

Health: Community-Specific Concerns

While women and girls face similar health issues across different cities and communities, as seen above, some problems can be more pronounced or unique to specific communities and disparities exist even within the same community.

The table below lists some of the major overlapping issues that were brought up within community specific focus groups as well as the problems that were seen as more distinct in certain communities.

Community	Concerns
Women and Girls of Color, Refugees and New Immigrants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Least likely to discuss issues of mental and reproductive health in order to protect family loyalty, honor, and to avoid shaming themselves.▪ Many medications are not tested for side effects in women of color, who may be predisposed to certain health conditions like high blood pressure.
Aging Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ People are not incentivized to pay for long-term care.▪ Many aging women live independently and do not qualify for in-home care benefits, but are “in limbo” because they do not have enough savings to pay for the needed private care.
Native American Women and Girls	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Mental health a major concern due to historical trauma and grief that is largely unresolved.▪ High levels of substance abuse, including alcoholism.▪ Sexual abuse and domestic violence are acute in Native American families.▪ Appropriated funding and resources do not reach Native communities due to institutional racism.

Recommendations to Address Health Barriers

Focus group participants gave a number of suggestions for initiatives that would address health barriers for women and girls. They are listed below in order of frequency.

No.	Recommendations
1.	Expand services of locally available food shelves and affordable farmer's markets.
2.	Revisit the cultural understanding of health to incorporate a more holistic meaning, one that focuses on prevention and includes mental, emotional, reproductive, and physical well-being.
3.	Increase culturally and linguistically sensitive MNSure navigational services to new immigrants and refugees.
4.	Make health insurance and health services affordable and reform health insurance policies to make them portable and available when people lose jobs or transition between jobs.
5.	Expand jobs benefits for women, especially increased access to paid sick leave time for women, so that low wage or minimum wage female workers can take care of themselves or their family members without the risk of losing their jobs.
6.	Increase federal funding that targets both mental and physical health disparities in communities of color and among women of different age groups.
7.	Educate doctors to be more culturally aware so that they are able to integrate their knowledge with patients' understanding of health conditions and treatment.

Area IV: Leadership

When asked the question, "Why is it important to have women in leadership positions," several communities pointed out women's unique leadership qualities, the value in promoting a democratic and inclusive leadership body, and how organizations and businesses benefit from incorporating diverse opinions and experiences in decisionmaking processes.

"Women are underrepresented... It's important we're at the table, because we're 50 percent of the population. [We have] different viewpoints, decisionmaking and planning processes. It's important for all of us to be at the table. One gender shouldn't dominate over the other gender. It's important to have parity."

- Focus group participant, Grand Rapids

All communities acknowledged the importance of women and girls' leadership and cited culture as the greatest barrier to women and girls' successful leadership.

Gender norms and careers/jobs and assumptions about women and girls' abilities affect their self-confidence to take on leadership positions. Women and girls, whether in urban or rural settings, are taught to be "nice" and people believe they cannot handle aggressive, power-driven leadership positions. They face criticism and harassment when they take on what are considered to be traditional male or masculine roles and positions.

“It’s important to see other women in leadership and to see what leadership looks like. Women know what other women need... I want to know how we -- girls -- can be women leaders, as well... and I really hope that becomes a challenge we take on.”

- Focus group participant, Adolescent Girls Community

Focus group participants also believe that many communities lack sufficient services that can connect young girls and women with mentors who can help them build their self-confidence and provide them with the guidance needed for both political and nonpolitical leadership positions. Mentorship programs seem particularly rare in communities of color.

“If you are from one ethnic group, you don’t see anybody from your community in those leadership positions, so you don’t aspire to it. That’s why diversity is very important. Even when we see greater gender equity, it’s still almost exclusively white, wealthier. We have a growing New American community; we have Native American folks in our community. It is still a narrow view of who’s having a say in major decisionmaking.”

- Focus group participant, Duluth

Political Leadership

“We still bump up against the “Oh, you got here because you’re a woman of color, so now we get to check off two boxes...”

- Focus group participant, Asian American Community

Participants believe structural racism within government and state agencies limits the leadership of women of color. Female representation in politics is felt to largely exist on a symbolic basis to fill a female quota in city and state governments or school boards. They also noted that women are held accountable to different standards than men.

Women are often reticent to pursue political leadership opportunities, whereas men tend to jump at any given opportunity, increasing their chances for success. When women do take on demanding leadership positions, they are often without family or societal support, which can discourage other women from following in their footsteps. Difficulty balancing work, life, and family responsibilities tends to push women away from leadership positions.

Participants cited the need for greater family and societal support and for men and boys to work with women and girls as equal partners and allies for increased women and girls’ leadership.

Nonpolitical Leadership

Women rarely participate on the boards of for-profit companies and tend not to be encouraged to do so. . Their leadership tends to fall in the informal sector: at home, in schools or in religious settings, or in the nonprofit or philanthropic sectors. Participants noted the lack of female representation in media, athletics, and pop culture due to insufficient leadership trainings and skill development opportunities.

Leadership: Community-Specific Concerns

While women and girls face similar leadership challenges across different cities and communities, as seen above, some issues can be more pronounced or unique to specific communities and disparities exist even within the same community. The table below lists some of the major overlapping barriers that were discussed in community-specific focus groups as well as the problems that were seen as more distinct in certain communities.

Community	Concerns
Women and Girls of Color, Refugees, and New Immigrants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Difficulty in balancing work, life, and family duties (multiple burdens of child care and elder care can limit women’s ability to participate in community leadership).▪ Women of color are disproportionately represented in formal or informal leadership positions.
Aging Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Elderly women are isolated from leadership positions and are “invisible.”

Recommendations to address barriers to Women and Girls’ Leadership

By no means exhaustive, the table below lists the participants’ recommendations for increasing women’s leadership (in order of mentions).

No.	Recommendations
1.	Expand mentoring programs so that young girls have role models and the support they need to envision a variety of nontraditional career paths for themselves.
2.	Encourage successful women in political or nonpolitical leadership positions to mentor young women.
3.	Increase leadership development opportunities so that young girls and women develop skills and enhance their self-confidence and self-worth.
4.	Encourage women to join professional networking groups, where they can find opportunities to advance.
5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Educate new immigrant families and refugees on the school systems, bureaucratic processes, etc. by making information available in different languages, so that they become aware of and more confident in participating in leadership roles.▪ Foster greater opportunities for minority populations to participate in democratic leadership.
6.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Educate and encourage family members to support women and girls’ leadership inside and outside of home: schools, businesses, community, etc.▪ Encourage spouses to shoulder more responsibility at home so as to help women balance work/family life.
7.	Many older educated women of the “baby-boom” generation can be valuable assets to fill the role of mentors, or to take on other leadership positions in the community.

CONCLUSION

The statewide focus group findings and recommendations cited in this report are intended to serve as a tool for communities, advocates, educators and policymakers to spur action towards Minnesota's women and girls reaching their full potential. Women and girls are powerful resources for the state. When barriers are removed and opportunities opened to them, women and girls thrive and Minnesota benefits.

At the family, community and policy level, this report contains recommendations to advance women and girls towards safe, healthy and economically successful lives. Through progressive policy, continued advocacy and increased investment, pathways for women and girls can be created for them to flourish.

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To access this policy report, focus group discussion guide, 2014 Status of Women & Girls in Minnesota and all of the Women's Foundation of Minnesota's research, visit WFMN.ORG.



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