The Status of Girls in Minnesota

Girls have the bold, transformative solutions for a state in which all girls, their families, and communities are healthy, safe, economically secure, and represented across all sectors of leadership. When we listen to their voices and expertise to co-create equitable solutions, we will begin to realize a more just world for all people. In this listening session, we listened to girls across diverse demographics and geography. The stories and wisdom of girls will continue to inform WFMN's grantmaking and policy priorities to ensure maximum impact so that all Minnesota girls can thrive.

FRIDAY, MARCH 16, 2021
LISTENING TO
Minnesota’s Women & Girls

At the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota (WFMN), we know that to improve the lives of all Minnesotans, we need strong grantmaking and policy agendas that are grounded in both qualitative and quantitative data. WFMN conducts research to listen, learn, and drive action with communities to create a state of gender and racial equity. We believe that women and girls in communities across Minnesota are the experts our state needs to shape real, lasting solutions.

Through nine Listening Sessions in WFMN’s Road to Transformation Listening Series in March 2021, we deepened our understanding of the real, lived experiences of Minnesota women and girls so that we can continue to strategically eliminate the challenges and barriers they and their families face because of injustice in our systems.

As a statewide community foundation, we convene and listen to center the vision and solutions of communities pushed to the margins and then activate our collective power to drive lasting change. The themes and solutions that surfaced across the Listening Series will inform the Women’s Foundation’s statewide agenda for gender and racial equity, using our levers of grantmaking, policy, strategic partnerships, narrative change, and research for years to come.
What the data show

Young women face financial challenges to reaching their goals.

Undergraduate women are more likely to take on debt than undergraduate men. African American women graduating with a bachelor’s degree have on average the largest cumulative student debt compared to any other group.¹

Girls are more likely than boys to report feeling depressed.

In Minnesota, 9th grade girls are nearly twice as likely as 9th grade boys to report significant, daily problems with feeling down, depressed, or hopeless. The isolation induced by COVID-19 restrictions has led to an increase in mental health concerns among youth.²

Young women and girls are leading.

On average, girls in Minnesota have higher levels of participation in student government and other leadership activities than their male peers. Student government is often considered an important launching pad to pursuing elected office as an adult.³


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PERCENTAGE OF MINNESOTA 8TH, 9TH, AND 11TH GRADERS WHO HAVE ATTEMPTED SUICIDE³

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
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<td>LATINO/A</td>
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CWGPP analysis of 2016 Minnesota Student Survey Data

10% of teenage boys and 15% of teenage girls in the state participate in student government activities.

Hmong girls are most likely to report participation in these activities (19%), followed by Asian Americans and Somalis (18% each).⁵
Girls in Minnesota are driven, creative, and hopeful. But they face significant challenges when it comes to their holistic well-being and ability to thrive.

The intersection of financial hardship, health, and safety impacts girls across geography, and is particularly felt by Black, Indigenous, and girls of color. Even in the face of an isolating pandemic and social justice uprisings in Minnesota, girls remain resilient and show solidarity with one another as they continue to imagine better futures for themselves, their families, and their communities.

In this Listening Session, Minnesota girls ages 12 to 18 shared their experiences, dreams, and solutions.

**Facilitator:** Neda Kellogg | Founder & Executive Director, Project DIVA International

**Grantee-partners:** Project DIVA International, Hmong Young Women’s Partnership, YouthPrise

**Research Fellow:** Amy Dorman, MPP
Listening to a Black girl on financial well-being, health, and safety.

This session began with a young Black woman sharing her experiences in finances, health, and safety. Her identity as a Black girl shapes her experience of these aspects of her well-being, and she noted that finances, health, and safety are inextricably connected. The storyteller related how American Black women pay hundreds of dollars for the right products to maintain their natural hair. She shared her stresses over how to prepare herself financially for retirement. She spoke about how limited finances affect the ability of families to eat well, which contributes to chronic health issues like diabetes and heart failure. She shared her experiences with gun violence, which “creates unsafe feelings for many Black girls.” She noted that “adults don’t feel safe, they worry, and their worry passes down to us.” Finally, the storyteller remarked on how these financial, health, and safety stressors compound to have grave impacts on mental health, particularly for Black women and girls, and that this impact isn’t taken seriously enough.

“I feel that families don’t acknowledge American Black women’s true feelings … and this may cause bad habits or mental illness. Our feelings aren’t taken seriously enough as calls for help. This makes us feel alone, leading to serious mental and physical breakdowns.”

Girls see managing finances as key to building future prosperity.

The storyteller’s words resonated with the other girls in the session. When it comes to building better futures and achieving their dreams, girls know that finances matter. Several shared how financial management courses are not offered in predominantly Black schools, but they have observed that some predominantly white schools have these courses. The participants felt unprepared to meet the financial obligations of adult life, including understanding taxes as they started working and taking out loans for college:

“We don’t learn much [about financial management]. They want us to learn outside of school, but they need to teach it in school. People around us aren’t educated well about finance, and they’re still learning themselves. It’s hard for them to teach us if they’re still learning … We’re teenagers and we need to learn about it when we start working so we understand taxes.”

“We need to be taught how to manage our funds and about things like taxes… I’m a couple years from being 18 and I have no idea how I’m going to do any of this stuff when I’m older. Growing up, we never had that much money, so I should be taught these things because I could change my own future.”

The participants said that the lack of understanding and support around finances impacts both their current situations and their futures. For example, several girls and young women pointed out the significant cost of hair products for Black women’s hair. Taking care of natural hair was talked about as culturally important but also expensive and surrounded by stigma that negatively impacts their sense of identity and belonging:

“It’s super expensive and it’s such a struggle to keep up with [Black hair]. There’s also a stigma around it … It’s frowned upon for me to go into a professional place with my hair in an afro or braids. I’m sure that a whole lot of Black girls have a story that for years they straightened their hair like I did. It always had to be flat and look like my white girl friends.”
Finally, finances and proactive planning play an important role in dreaming about the future. Instead of feeling confident and secure in their financial and professional plans, participants noted that the lack of education from schools and adults in their communities created a significant amount of anxiety and worry about the future:

“Transitioning from high school is a scary feeling. I still want to be a kid and enjoy my youth, but at the same time I have to worry about what am I going to do in my adulthood.”

“I want to go to other places but then I don’t want to be far from home because it’s home. Sometimes, I’m worried that I won’t be able to do what I’m trying to go for. I live on a reservation: there’s a lot of people that don’t do anything around here. You always see them walking around and I don’t want to be like that when I get older, so I want to do good in school and try to go to college and stuff, but I don’t really know how. I never thought of financing and stuff.”

Girls deserve to be healthy and feel safe, but economic insecurity and racism are barriers.

Girls are contributing to the health and well-being of their families and communities, but there are significant challenges to feeling healthy and safe. One participant reflected on the storyteller’s words around healthy eating and overall health. For her, healthy eating was tied directly to financial resources:

“[My diet is] plant-based. I’m in the process of having my family eat better: more fruits and veggies, less processed foods. It’s more expensive, even trying to go for organic produce instead of GMOs, there’s a huge price difference. I personally invested some of the money I earned into making sure my family is eating right so we can have as much organic produce as possible.”

Finances also affected the transportation available to girls. While girls wanted to work and have social lives, many expressed that using city buses and public transportation doesn’t feel safe:

“Taking public transportation with strangers makes me feel unsafe. I’m unsure of others’ intentions. Everybody can take public transportation – sex offenders, people who use drugs, alcoholics – you never know. I have to be aware of my surroundings and ready to act.”

“When you’re young, a teen, you want to go places. It’s hard to use the city bus because you never know who’s on it. It’s at the point where I can’t even take the city bus because I feel so unsafe. [I feel unsafe in] some Ubers, too.”

Gender, as well as race and ethnicity, affected the participants’ feelings of safety:

“It doesn’t matter where I am – a white neighborhood, a Black neighborhood, or my own home – I feel like I never feel safe. Some of that tension is brought down from my family and parents. I know they feel the same way. I’m constantly looking over my shoulder because I don’t know anyone’s intentions, regardless of their race or ethnicity.”

“Having targets on our backs due to our skin color causes us to be so much more cautious in everything we do in our homes and our communities. Because of my skin color, I am seen as a threat. Media manipulates our stories so that we look like threats. That is why we are killed so often.”

Police presence didn’t make the participants feel safer. Instead, police presence added to the anxiety girls were already feeling in public spaces. This was especially true for participants of color.
“For me, not feeling safe with the police is because of what has been going on with people with the same color skin as me. There’s a target on my back with the police. I don’t feel like we get treated fairly when it comes to them. There’s always going to be some confrontation or them just not seeing me as a human being: They see me as a threat.”

“[Police] shouldn’t automatically put their hand on their gun. They should try to talk to the person, to resolve the issue without a firearm or punishment.”

“The police are overly militarized. There’s been conversations about alternate policing methods because our current police system is over-militarized and threatening when they shouldn’t be.”

White young women and girls also expressed frustration with inequitable, unjust policing against communities of color in their state:

“A lot of what’s happening right now with how the police are portrayed is weaponized by different political parties. At first it was Black Lives Matter and then it turned into Blue Lives Matter. Why is it one or the other? When it came to Black Lives Matter, yeah, they do matter. Why do we have to turn it around to become ‘all lives matter’? Everything is all about politics.”

Girls experience mental health challenges and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 significantly affects the mental health of participants. Many mentioned the difficulties of learning in an online format and not having the in-person support of peers. Some noted how using Zoom and being on camera all the time induced anxiety. Others said that it was hard to stay motivated and keep grades up, especially when teachers weren’t responsive to the stresses of the pandemic.

“Online school is more challenging. It feels like since we’re not at school, teachers feel like it’s okay to put more work on us. They think there’s nothing going on in our lives because of lockdown. At the same time, we don’t know what to do. We have the pressure of trying to stay alive and then having to do all this work.”

“I had a lack of motivation because of all the work and ‘corona.’ You have nothing to do except be at home, doing nothing but work. It worsened my grades to a point that I didn’t know what to do anymore and felt numb, like I had nothing left to do, nothing really to do in life.”

Participants were unanimous in the struggles they expressed around mental health and anxiety in a virtual, pandemic world. Even so, one participant highlighted the resilience and wisdom of girls as she detailed using this time to build a stronger foundation of self-love and acceptance:

“Lockdown kind of helped me in a way. I got to reflect and build my relationship with myself more and uncover things I haven’t been healed from.”
Girls feel solidarity in working towards the future.

Throughout the Listening Session, participants demonstrated a deep camaraderie and responsiveness to each other’s experiences. Across identities and geographic locations in Minnesota, the girls supported each other within the session and were committed to advocating for each other. Still, several were taking on tough and necessary conversations to teach others in their communities about social justice issues:

“The place I live in is so removed from bigger cities and the actual issues. We didn’t really have ‘riots’ where we are, but we saw them on the news, and there was a strong opinion of ‘that’s rioting, that’s not okay,’ and then I’m in the minority and saying, ‘No, they’re protesting for something they deserve to protest for and should have already.’”

“I also live in a predominantly white town and I feel I’m not taken seriously. I don’t want to feel pitied, either. That’s the easy way out instead of tackling the issue.”

Participants lean on peers for support as they navigate the challenges of the pandemic and continue to work towards their futures. Participants discussed the time-consuming, hard work they are doing to achieve their goals: some work two part-time jobs while attending college full-time, another is one of the few women in her school’s engineering program, others found support in attending HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) or took pride in taking college courses during high school.

When it came to pursuing elected office in the future, feelings were mixed. Some were enthusiastic about making changes from this platform while others had seen the challenges of entering politics as a person from a marginalized group:

“I’ve seen people and organizations come after a Black man running for a political role. It’s really dirty, the way I see it. The system is not made for Black people. It feels like it’s specifically made for Black people to fail. That’s amazing that there are still people who even want to infiltrate the system. For me, I want to look for other ways to make a difference. I don’t see politics or being a politician as the way I’m going to go about it.”

As representation across gender and race/ethnicity in elected office has increased, so has the confidence of some participants to run for office, particularly local government:

“[Seeing representation] makes me more confident in myself. Before, I didn’t really see people of color or queer people of color or anything like that. So, then I thought, ‘I might not be in politics’ ... Then I got older and saw queer people running for places, Latina women already becoming governors. It makes me feel that I have a chance to do something. I want to be an influence of politics and I want to be a public speaker for things. I think the school board would be my groove.”

“It’s a good change and it should soon just be normal. It’s great to see everything happening. Just seeing people who aren’t predominantly white men, seeing other people standing up and being leaders should just be a normal thing. Seeing LGBTQ people, women, Black people just going for it and wanting to.”

“When I was a little kid, [elected officials in my town] were all white men, and now there are white women and a Black female. I was excited to see the change and I wanted to be a part of it. I want to be a school board representative and then Governor ... I want to change my town first so I can go bigger. I want my town to start the revolution.”
Solutions

Girls know what they need to improve their finances, health, and safety, and to build futures that allow them to thrive. The solutions participants offered would benefit not just girls, but their families and whole communities into the future:

1. **Include financial management courses in high school curricula:** When many adults do not know how to manage finances well, schools should be required to train young people to succeed financially. Offering courses in financial management positions young people to succeed, yet right now, participants see these course offerings as more accessible to white students.

2. **Design safety response mechanisms that center community needs and input:** Overcriminalization, adultification, and a militarized police presence threatens girls’ feelings of safety in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods. Efforts to reimagine community safety must be led by and with community with respect for holistic community well-being that acknowledges the racialized violence and trauma perpetuated by the police. Girls want to be treated with dignity and respect so they and their communities can feel safe in every facet of their lives. They deserve for their voices to be included in developing community safety infrastructure and policy responses.

3. **Provide spaces to amplify the voices of girls and gender-expansive youth:** Girls are in tune with their needs and the needs of their communities. Investments in girls are investments in families, neighborhoods, and future generations. Leaders must invite girls to the table using an intersectional lens, ensuring that girls of color, Indigenous girls, girls and young people in the LGBTQ+ community, rural girls, immigrant girls, and other historically marginalized groups are represented.

“I am part of the LGBTQ community, also being female and being dark-skinned, having these kinds of conversations with people is what’s going to help me in the future. Mainly the problem is miscommunication. We’re not heard, we have to fight for it. How about we just talk about it and hear from everyone’s perspective so we can all be equal?”