

For Economic Growth, Invest in Women and Girls

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VERMONT WORKS FOR WOMEN



Investing more thoughtfully in opportunities for women and removing barriers that hinder them is a potential key to economic growth.

New England census data leave little doubt that our economic future hinges upon making the most of our homegrown talent. With the region's population growth only one-third the national average, New England states have seen a 25 percent decrease in the number of residents ages 25–34 and have failed to retain many of the students who come for college.¹ In Vermont, a high school graduation rate in the 90 percent range has not been matched by college attendance. The college-going rate is 53.5 percent, while the national average is 63.3 percent.²

In anticipation of projected shortages in key fields, states have ramped up initiatives to attract out-of-state talent to state colleges or universities, or have offered incentives to graduates who stay. Such

initiatives are important elements of any economic development strategy, but it is also important to focus on how to make the most of the young people who are actually here.

Current Job Picture

It would be wise to take a lead from the widely accepted international-development observation that investing in women and girls is a powerful economic-growth and stability tool. Gender matters. Although the realities for women and girls in the United States are not as harsh as for those in developing countries, it is fair to say that we are squandering female talent here, and at great cost.

Three of the five states with the highest percentage of low-income working households headed by women are in New England—Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island.³ In all six New England states but Maine, 50 percent or more of the women heading these families have not had any postsecondary education. Nationally, women head just 22 percent of all working families, but they are a disproportionate share of all low-income working families. And the trajectory is getting worse: between 2007 and 2012, the share of



low-income working families headed by women increased from 54 percent to 58 percent.

Working women are more likely to live in poverty than working men, and the reasons for the gender gap are well documented. Low-income people in particular have limited access to programs that help them balance work and family, such as paid sick leave, family leave, and affordable child care. Moreover, federal and state minimum wages have not kept pace with inflation, and even multiple minimum-wage jobs can't lift many families out of poverty. Such factors have a disproportionate impact on women, who represent two-thirds of all minimum-wage workers.

Occupational Differences

Many of these issues keep resurfacing. Hikes in the minimum wage, paid sick leave, and affordable child care will go a long way toward making work do what it is supposed to do: pay the bills. But if we hope to harness the full economic potential of women, we must vigorously attack occupational segregation. Nearly half of all working women are employed in just 5 percent of the available jobs—in

child care, housekeeping, retail, or health care. Workforce projections for 2018 show that nine of the 10 fastest-growing occupations requiring at least a bachelor's degree will involve significant scientific or mathematical training. Some of the largest increases will be in engineering- and computer-related fields—fields in which women are significantly underrepresented.⁴

For decades, experts have called for increasing women's numbers in nontraditional fields—construction, law enforcement, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Nearly three decades ago, in 1988, the National Research Council Committee on Women in Science and Engineering warned of the “threat of a serious shortage of scientific personnel.” It recommended finding “ways to employ underrepresented groups more equitably—for reasons of national interest as well as of equality.”⁵

In spite of the cyclical attention STEM careers have received, little has changed. Indeed, national data show women have lost ground in fields where they had previously made inroads. Women's participation in civil engineering, for example, declined from 13 percent in 2005 to just over 7 percent in 2009. In 2008, women

held only 25 percent of all professional IT-related jobs, an 11 percentage point drop from a high of 36 percent in 1991.⁶ The reasons are many: inconsistent and insufficient funding for programs that expose girls to nontraditional careers; insufficient outreach efforts by employers to deliberately recruit women; and unsupportive organizational cultures that erode female retention rates.

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Given how consistently these issues have been raised, it's time to get serious about making change. Increasing the number of women rocket scientists isn't rocket science, but without deliberate and sustained effort, it will remain an elusive goal.

In Vermont

Our work suggests the value of starting with young women and girls. Last year Vermont Works for Women (VWW) published a report on what young Vermont women say about how well-equipped they feel for the challenges of school, work, career, and economic independence as adults. *Enough Said—Young Women Talk about School, Work and Becoming Adults: Why We Should Listen and What We Can Do* is the result of in-depth interviews, surveys, and conversations with more than 210 young women and girls, ages 15–25, from 28 Vermont communities.⁷

The conclusions were startling and led to a statewide Task Force on Young Women and the Vermont Economy, which presented its “Change the Story” recommendations to Governor Peter Shumlin and the legislature in December 2013, attracting wide media coverage.⁸ The young women shared deeply felt concerns about the future:

- **They lacked knowledge about personal finance.** They did not know enough to make decisions about student loans or careers. They couldn't estimate what it would cost to live on their own or what various jobs pay, and they didn't know how to fill out a tax form or open a checking account. The Task Force recommended including personal finance in state standards as a core competency for high school graduation.
- **They mentioned social aggression among girls.** It served to shake both confidence and aspiration. They also mentioned the ways in which adults ignored, were unaware of, or fueled the dynamic in personal relations and popular culture. The Task Force recommended development of curricula and a statewide conversations to highlight the problem and provide strategies to end peer aggression.

- **They lacked exposure to careers that might be of interest.** They didn't know about careers that might lead to financial independence. “How can I know I want to be an automotive technician,” we were asked, “if I have never held a socket wrench?” The Task Force called on employers to partner with the schools and nonprofits to provide wider career opportunities.

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Smart economic development strategies for New England require new and deliberate action to tap the full potential of women and girls. Asserting without hesitation or apology that gender matters is essential, as are gender-disaggregated data. Among the questions we must ask in shaping policy or practice is: How will it affect women and girls?

Gender matters. Among champions of gender inclusion are leaders and pacesetters in finance, philanthropy, and government: for example, the Bill and Melinda Gates and Nike Foundations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, Goldman Sachs, and the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. All have asserted that women play a critical role in fueling economic growth. Now we must make that happen in New England.

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Endnotes

- ¹ R. Gittel, *The Declining Young Adult Population in New England* (fact sheet no. 1, winter 2007, Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire).
- ² National Information Center for Higher Education Policymaking and Analysis, <http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbbrowser?year=2010&level=nation&mode=data&state=0&submeasure=63#/1/>.
- ³ D. Povich, B. Roberts, and M. Mather, “Low-Income Working Mothers and State Policy: Investing for a Better Economic Future” (Working Poor Families Project Policy Brief, winter 2013–2014).
- ⁴ C. Hill, C. Corbett, and A. St. Rose, *Why So Few? Women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math* (Washington, DC: American Association of University Women, 2010).
- ⁵ National Research Council, *Women in Science and Engineering: Increasing Their Numbers in the 1990s: A Statement on Policy and Strategy* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 1991).
- ⁶ C. Ashcraft and S. Blithe, “Women in IT: The Facts” (report, National Center for Women and Information Technology, Washington, DC, 2010), http://www.ncwit.org/sites/default/files/legacy/pdf/NCWIT_TheFacts_rev2010.pdf.
- ⁷ See www.vtworksforwomen.org/EnoughSaid.
- ⁸ See <http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/article/20131203/NEWS03/312030032/Panel-pitches-plans-to-change-the-story-for-women>.