

Executive Summary

In May 2005, the Women’s Foundation of California embarked on the Road to Equity Tour, an ambitious project to identify the issues, needs and solutions for women and girls in California. Over a period of 23 days, our staff traveled more than 2,500 miles to 10 cities — San Francisco, San Jose, Fort Bragg, Redding, San Diego, Riverside, Santa Ana, Bakersfield, Fresno and Los Angeles. We met more than 1,000 women and girls who shared their insights, heartfelt testimony, hunger for action and incredible enthusiasm about the power of women and girls to change the world for the better.



Toward Gender Equity

The movements to advance women’s rights have reaped many rewards. Today, for example, women play a stronger role than ever before in California’s economic and political life:

- Women own 30.1 percent of all privately held businesses in the state, generating more than \$406 billion in sales.¹
- Thanks in large part to Title IX, the participation of girls and women in sports in California schools and colleges has skyrocketed.²
- The number of girls enrolled in some Advanced Placement math and science courses is roughly equal to the number of boys.³
- Nationally, more women than ever are graduating from advanced degree programs: 46 percent of medical school graduates are women,⁴ and 44 percent of all doctoral degrees are earned by women.⁵
- California is home to two female United States senators and a woman serving as house minority leader in Congress.

Despite important changes such as these in women’s lives, women’s choices and opportunities are still constrained by unequal treatment and limited opportunities. Moreover, California demographics are changing; today, Latina, Asian and African American women make up half of the state’s female population,⁶ and these “minority” groups will become the “new majority” as the state’s population grows to more than 50 million by 2030. Multifaceted strategies will be required to ensure that the women who comprise California’s new majority today and in the future have the opportunities necessary to achieve their highest potential and make their fullest contribution to a stronger and healthier California.

A Statewide Agenda for Women and Girls: Five Recommendations

Reflecting the information gathered from Tour participants (see next section about key issues), the Women's Foundation of California has identified five recommendations for developing a statewide agenda for women and girls. These recommendations are built around four core strategies of community-organizing for movement building, leadership development for women and girls, policy advocacy and increasing investments in programs that benefit women and girls. (**A solutions section in the full report describes specific actions related to each of the five broad recommendations*)

1. THE NEED FOR UNIVERSAL HEALTH CARE HAS REACHED CRITICAL PROPORTIONS.

All Californians have the right to reliable and affordable health care. The Women's Foundation of California believes that addressing the concern around access to such health care involves strategies that look at both improving health care systems and closing the gaps on health disparities. Broadly, the Foundation recommends that we work toward universal health care in order to eliminate the complexity and administrative expense of the current health care system. We recommend that policymakers and community advocates support universal health care coverage for all Californians (Senate Bill 840).



We must also work to improve the health of California's women, girls and families by addressing the root causes of health disparities, especially as they affect low-income communities of color and rural communities. It is necessary to consider how economics, geography, race, genetics, gender and environmental factors contribute to health inequities. We recommend creating coalitions that involve parents, community health organizations and health care providers who together can examine the links between chronic disease and illness and environmental triggers to identify the conditions that contribute to disparities and potential public policy solutions to address those conditions.

2. END EPIDEMIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS.

We recommend increasing the focus on violence-prevention strategies, including the development, funding and institutionalization of programs whose goal is primary prevention of domestic violence and sexual assault. These programs should include changing the social norms and working with men and boys as well as women and girls. It is also necessary to develop strategies specifically for immigrant and low-income populations and those who interact with them. These strategies should include language-appropriate education of immigrant communities about their rights and available services and educating service providers, law enforcement officials and the legal system about the laws and the specific needs of immigrant communities and low-income communities in relation to domestic and sexual violence.

3. ENSURE A PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY FOR ALL.

All Californians should have the opportunity to participate in the democratic process and the knowledge to advocate for their basic human rights. The Women’s Foundation of California believes that the most effective solutions arise from people who are most affected by the issues. We recommend funding and supporting grassroots organizing that links voting and civic participation with community organizing around specific issues of concern. Linkages should be fostered between efforts that target broader engagement of communities of color and low-income communities in the political process with efforts promoting the political leadership of women as advocates and policymakers.

4. END POVERTY AND CLOSE THE ECONOMIC GAP.

Statistics show that education is a key strategy in developing economic security. Therefore, we recommend that policymakers adopt an “education first” approach to reducing poverty. California’s economic development and workforce development systems should align their job training goals and fund and deliver effective education and training services for the lowest-income and no-income individuals. In particular, the CalWORKs systems should prioritize education and training, not work. California should also increase funding for local Workforce Investment Boards and other job training and job placement resources specifically for jobs in higher-wage growth industries with opportunities for career advancement.

Private funders and the State of California can leverage each other’s financial strengths to adequately fund economic and workforce development programs to both train workers and develop sustainable jobs. Funders should fund programs that link specialized education and training with living-wage employment in job growth sectors.

Cost of living statistics prove that the current minimum wage is not adequate for women and families living in California. We recommend that policymakers increase the minimum wage to \$8.75 per hour and index it annually. We also encourage the state to adopt a statewide Living Wage Ordinance that applies to all state employees and contractors.

5. NEXT GENERATION LEADERSHIP IS IMPERATIVE.

Young women and girls need leadership opportunities and critical thinking skills to be healthy and thrive. The Foundation recommends that community organizers and funders invest in the continued leadership development of young women and women of color. Funders should also strengthen community-based organizations by investing in capacity building and internal development of staff, board members and volunteers so they can act as community leaders and peer mentors to other organizations and leaders. It is critical that we continue to invest in movement building, including developing skills in advocacy, sharing and deepening critical political, social and economic analysis, building our base of support and working in coalitions.

Key Issues for Women and Girls in California

How did we create the statewide agenda? Tour participants were led through a process to discuss the key issues facing women and girls and to identify the strategies they believed were most likely to help women and girls become full participants in their communities and achieve gender equity. Consistently — at each listening session, in every city — Tour participants suggested that the social, political, economic, community and family issues that affect women and girls are linked and that any recommendations or solutions developed to redress these concerns must acknowledge and build upon these connections. The inextricable links between basic human rights are supported and framed in the following five categories identified as key issues:

1. Improving Access to Affordable, Quality Healthcare

Today, the average annual cost of health insurance for a family of four in California is more than \$10,800 — exceeding the annual income of a minimum wage earner.⁷ A report released in February 2005 found that half of the people who filed for bankruptcy did so because they lacked the means to pay their medical bills.⁸ Most of these people were middle-class workers with health insurance.⁹ Tour participants throughout the state identified a need to expand access to health clinics that provide free and low-cost prevention, diagnostic and treatment services. They also stressed the need for hospitals and clinics to provide both multicultural and multilingual care — a particular concern in California, where people of color make up more than half of the state's population and one in every six residents is not a US citizen.¹⁰

2. Reducing Violence Against Women and Girls

At each Tour stop participants discussed the violence women and girls face at school and at home. Mothers and adolescent girls described school climates where young people fear for their own safety and where administrators do not do enough to enforce sexual harassment policies. Throughout the state, domestic and sexual violence is an escalating problem. Nearly 10,000 forcible rapes were reported to law enforcement in California in 2003.¹¹ In addition to finding ways to prevent violence from occurring, Tour participants emphasized the need for law enforcement agencies to improve how they respond to the victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. For example, it is well recognized that a batterer can be prosecuted for violating a Family Court restraining order.¹² Yet, according to a statewide database, in some counties up to 50 percent of these orders have never been served by law enforcement.¹³ Women also emphasized the need for outreach to undocumented residents about available domestic violence services and for family violence prevention programs that teach adolescent boys and girls.





3. *Ensuring Women's Economic Security*

The problems California women face in making ends meet were a recurring theme in every city. Tour participants focused on the need for a living wage, economic equity and access to jobs that pay higher wages. They have a solid grasp of the causes of the slow, steady decline in earning power experienced by a large population of women who are identified as “working poor.” The need for a living wage is driven, in part, by the high cost of living in California. A nationally developed Self-Sufficiency Standard estimates that in California a single parent with a preschooler must earn \$12.50 an hour to be economically self-sufficient — almost double the state minimum wage of \$6.75.¹⁴ In one-third of California counties, these families require an hourly wage above \$15 per hour to make ends meet.¹⁵

The fact that many women are in low-paying, dead-end jobs compounds the problems they face meeting a higher cost of living. Among poor women between the ages of 25 and 59, 36 percent work, 25 percent have a working husband and 25 percent rely on public assistance as their main income source.¹⁶

Tour participants identified the need to enforce the 1963 Equal Pay Act, which requires women and men to be paid equal wages for equal or comparable work. Enforcement of this Act is one step towards ensuring economic equity. Also stressed was the need for girls to be encouraged to take science and math classes and pursue career tracks that will set them on the road to higher-paying jobs. Young women also need access to the higher education and specialized training that can help women achieve economic equity and security. Currently, a woman with a bachelor's degree earns 75 percent more than one with only a high school education.¹⁷

4. Improving Access to Safe, Affordable Housing

The high cost of living in California is reflected in the difficulties families face in trying to buy a home. Throughout the state, housing costs have skyrocketed. In Los Angeles, housing prices are so high that more than 80 percent of families are unable to buy a median-priced home.¹⁸ While middle-class families struggle to buy homes, low-income families struggle to find any safe, affordable housing. Many participants noted that the only areas where low- or no-income women can afford to live have poor schools, high crime rates, no neighborhood grocery stores that stock fresh fruits and vegetables and few job opportunities. Additionally, low-income housing is often located near polluting facilities or in areas that are mixed zones, allowing industrial businesses to operate in the same area as residential housing.

5. Nurturing the Personal Development of Young Women and Girls

Repeatedly, conversations returned to the societal pressures on young women and girls, particularly the increasingly highly sexualized culture. In every Tour city, we heard stories of how gender stereotypes, especially in the media, affect young women's self esteem, body image and personal development. In the face of these societal pressures, Tour participants believe that it was more necessary than ever to increase opportunities for young women to develop leadership skills and the capacity for critical thinking. Participants cited the need for new forums for educating girls on a range of issues from sexual health to financial literacy and leadership development.



Endnotes

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