

Road to Equality Tour (May-July 2008) Statewide Focus Group Discussion Guide

Facilitator: Welcomes people to the focus group, introduces RTE team. “Thank you for coming, thanks to our community partner _____ for helping us to organize this event...”

The purpose of this discussion is to:

- Deepen our understanding of the report findings and how these issues play out in your community
- Discuss policies that are important in addressing these issues (at the local and state level)
- Gather stories and ideas about local initiatives that are working to make things better for girls and women.

Any questions? You all have copies of the research overview...

Quick introductions (name and organization)...

I. Economics

Introduction: In Minnesota, female-headed families and those from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups are at particular risk of living below the poverty line, which significantly limits their children’s future success:

For most communities:

Research:

Child poverty is common to Minnesota’s urban and rural counties, alike; 45% of the state’s poor children live in the metro 7 county area; 55%, more than half of the state’s poor children live in Greater MN

Among poor families with children, female-headed families make up the largest share regardless of racial or ethnic group.

Poor female-headed African American families with children are at 71.5 percent. Poor American Indian female-headed families with children are at 67.2 percent. And white families with children are at 59.5 percent.

For Metro Women of Color:

Among poor families with children, female-headed families make up the largest share regardless of racial or ethnic group (except Asian American families).

Poverty rates for girls and boys of color are dramatically higher than those of white girls and boys.

African American girls and boys have the highest poverty rates (43.4% and 41.4% respectively), followed by American Indian girls and boys (41.5% and 28.8%, respectively).

Strategy for change:

State investments in full-day early care and education interventions for low-income and poor children would help to offset some of the negative effects of poverty on children and would also provide single-mother and dual working parent families with safe, quality environments for their children while they work. Expanding child care resources for low-income families would also decrease the need for teen girls to spend precious time caring for siblings when they could be studying or participating in extracurricular activities.

Question:

This is one example of a strategy for change. Would this strategy work in your community? *What other **strategies or policy changes** would you recommend to improve the economic outlook for women and girls in your community?*

II. Teen Pregnancy

Introduction: Low income girls and girls of color are disproportionately face socioeconomic inequities that make them more vulnerable to pregnancy at an early age. Having children at an early age often has devastating economic effects on girls' lives.

Research:

For most communities:

Girls in Minnesota have much lower birth rates. Research shows that pregnancy among teenage girls is on the decline in the United States as a whole and that the decline is attributable to an increase in contraceptive use.

For Metro Women of Color, Willmar Latina, and Bemidji Seven Nations communities:

Although unintended pregnancy rates have remained constant over the past decade, unintended pregnancies have actually increased among poor women and decreased among higher income women. This trend reveals a widening gap in access to reproductive health information and services between low and high income women in the United States.

Despite Minnesota's overall low birth rate among adolescent girls, birth rates are disproportionately high among girls of color in Minnesota. In fact, girls of color have higher birth rates than girls of color nationally, and birth rates have actually **increased** for Hispanic and American Indian girls between the time periods 1997-2001 and 2001-2005. Birth rates fell for white, African American, and Asian American girls between these time periods.

It should be noted that birth rates for Hispanic girls are highest at 133, 121 for African American girls and 1211 for American Indian girls.

Strategy for change:

Minnesota should implement mandatory, comprehensive sex education programs in its public schools. These sex education programs should focus on how to avoid unintended pregnancy and STDs and provide information about sex that will empower girls to both delay and prepare for sexual activity.

Question:

This is one example of a strategy for change. Would this strategy work in your community? What other *strategies or policy changes* would you recommend to help girls delay pregnancy in your community? Where and how does sex education occur: in schools, community, church, families? What are the implications for girls' future aspirations and economic well-being?

III. Mental Health and Risky Behaviors

Research:

For most communities:

Girls have lower levels of self-esteem than boys within every racial and ethnic group and at each grade level. Whereas boys' self esteem gradually increases from 6th to 9th to 12th grade, girls' self esteem drops in the 9th grade.

Poor self esteem is correlated with a number of other unhealthy attitudes and behaviors.

Girls are more likely than boys to use drugs or alcohol to relax, to escape their problems, or because they're feeling sad, lonely, or angry. American Indian girls are the most likely of girls or boys of any race or ethnicity to give these reasons for drug and alcohol use.

Girls are more likely than boys to see themselves as overweight, to employ unhealthy methods of weight control, to feel that they're no good and can't do anything right, and to think about and attempt suicide.

Lower self-esteem in girls is strongly correlated with binge drinking, smoking, prescription drug abuse, and using drugs to escape their problems or to deal with sadness, loneliness or anger.

For Metro Women of Color and Willmar Latina communities:

Girls of color are at a greater risk of attempted suicide than boys, particularly American Indian girls who are more likely to think about and attempt suicide than girls or boys of any racial and ethnic group. Hispanic girls are also at a high risk of suicide.

For Metro Native American Women and Seven Nations communities:

American Indian girls are the most likely to smoke cigarettes among girls or boys from any racial or ethnic group, with a striking 27.2 percent (more than 1 in 4) reporting daily use. African American girls are the least likely to smoke cigarettes of girls or boys from any racial or ethnic group with 7.0 percent reporting that they do so daily.

Girls are more likely than boys to use drugs or alcohol to relax, to escape their problems, or because they're feeling sad, lonely, or angry. American Indian girls are the most likely of girls or boys of any race or ethnicity to give these reasons for drug and alcohol use.

Strategy for change:

A comprehensive approach to supporting girls and their healthy emotional development should be at the center of any policy or program designed to address the high levels of [depression] suicidal thoughts and attempts by Minnesota girls. Parents, schools, family doctors and experts in the areas of adolescent depression and counseling should come together to develop a network of support that gives girls of different economic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds plenty of support options

Question:

This is one example of a strategy for change. Would this strategy work in your community? What other *strategies or policy changes* would you recommend to help girls increase their self-esteem in your community? What are some community initiatives that address some of these issues (self-esteem, suicide, drug use, eating disorders)? to what extent have they been effective? What else is needed?

IV. Safety and Security

Research:

For most communities:

The physical and sexual abuse suffered by girls and boys in Minnesota points to serious issues of insecurity in the home and community. According to the Minnesota Student survey, girls are more likely than boys to have been physically or sexually abused. Girls are twice as likely as boys to have been sexually abused by a family member or a non family member.

Strategy for change

Girls and boys need school and community programs that educate them on the pervasiveness of and harmfulness of physical and sexual violence against girls and women, in the home, in the school, in the community, and in the media. Girls should also have access to programs that teach them how to maximize their safety and provide them with support when they have experienced violence.

Question:

This is one example of a strategy for change. Would this strategy work in your community? What other *strategies or policy changes* would you recommend to help girls and boys understand the harmfulness of physical and sexual violence against girls and women in your community? What are some local initiatives that address these issues (physical and sexual abuse) in your community? To what extent have they been effective? What else is needed?

- *For Metro Women of Color, Willmar Latina, and Bemidji Seven Nations communities*
American Indian and African American girls are the most likely among all girls to have been physically abused, with between one in four and one in five reporting abuse by a family member inside or outside of the home. Also experiencing high levels of abuse, 18 percent of Asian American and Hispanic girls in the state are abused by a family member in their household, and 19 percent are abused by a family member outside of their home, respectively.

Strategy for change:

Advocates for girls in Minnesota should convene a statewide task force on the well-being of girls of color in Minnesota. This task force should draw on experts in the areas of domestic abuse and sexual violence, homelessness, and mental health to address the wide-ranging vulnerabilities experienced by girls of color in Minnesota.

Question:

This is one example of a strategy for change. Would this strategy work in your community? What other *strategies or policy changes* would you recommend to help increase girls safety in your community? What are some local initiatives that address these issues (physical and sexual abuse) in your community? To what extent have they been effective? What else is needed?

V. Education

Research:

We see education as the great equalizer in terms of girls' long term success. In Minnesota, girls report higher grades than boys, spend more time studying, report a more positive outlook on school, and hold higher aspirations for their educational futures than boys. *However, they are less likely to be considered college-ready by standardized tests with test scores in math and science that lag behind boys' scores considerably.*

Higher grades in school for girls do not translate into higher standardized test scores. Girls' lower achievement than boys on standardized tests contradicts their higher achievement in terms of grades.

ACT data for Minnesota show that girls in Minnesota are substantially less college ready than boys, with only 28 percent of girls compared with 36 percent of boys meeting the college readiness benchmarks in all four areas: English, math, reading and science.

Strategy for change:

Schools in Minnesota need to address girls' lower standardized test scores, particularly in math and science, by combating gender stereotypes about these subjects and finding ways to make educational environments more conducive to girls' learning.

Question:

This is one example of a strategy for change. Would this strategy work in your community? What other *strategies or policy changes* would you recommend to improve educational outcomes for girls in your community?

VI. Work and Family Balance

Research:

One of the themes in this research indicates that girls are working hard in at home, at school, and in the community, and that girls generally have high aspirations for themselves. However, the data also show that girls are therefore learning to balance family, work and school life at a very young age.

Strategy for change:

Creating educational and economic opportunities for girls in Minnesota will require addressing fairness for girls in the home, in school and in the workplace.

Question:

The question is... what is society requiring girls to give up, to maintain this kind of balance? What are the expectations for girls in your community? What does the future hold for girls in your community? Girls are working hard, what else is needed to support them and provide pathways to success?

CONCLUSION for All Focus Groups

FINALLY...considering all the policy recommendations we've discussed today, what are the top two priorities that you feel would really make a difference for women and girls in your community?