



## *A Portrait of Women & Girls in the Washington Metropolitan Area* **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The status of women and girls is an important forecaster of the health of a community. Yet, too often, their well-being, needs, resources and perspectives are invisible in strategies intended to create a thriving community. Investing in opportunities for women and girls pays big dividends in healthy families, a strong community and a growth economy.

Over the past 18 months, the Washington Area Women's Foundation, along with talented and experienced partners, has researched the core issues for women and girls in our region to determine whether women and girls in our communities are thriving or simply surviving. *A Portrait of Women & Girls in the Washington Metropolitan Area* is the first step in illuminating the gaps and also identifying the many areas of potential investment that will ensure our communities are vibrant, healthy and complete.

In a collaborative effort that has engaged national and local experts, leaders and activists, we have looked at five intertwined areas of women's lives: **economic security; education; health and well-being; violence and safety; and leadership and giving back.** This project has provided a lens to evaluate critical community issues through the lives and experiences of women and girls.

The region we studied included the District of Columbia, Prince George's County, Montgomery County, Alexandria, Arlington and Fairfax County. Specifically, it covered the 1.8 million women and girls living in the region, of all races and ethnicities, ages, educational levels and professions.

Each of the five sections of the report includes key facts that underlie our strategies to strengthen our communities; comments from 14 community forums with diverse women and girls throughout the region; community innovations (projects or organizations with fresh and successful strategies for addressing the issues challenging women and girls in our communities); and strategies for improving our region. In this *Executive Summary* we have included the key findings of the report, the agenda for the future and the principles for action.

### **What We Learned: Key Findings and Insights**

The numbers, voices and collaborative journey of *A Portrait of Women & Girls in the Washington Metropolitan Area* present a complicated picture. As the research indicated, women in this region experience many of the national demographic and policy trends affecting women and girls throughout the country. In some ways, the region is succeeding in meeting the needs of women and girls and leading the nation. In other areas, however, this region lags behind. A review of the key findings from the *Portrait* research underscores the contrast.

## **Portrait Project Key Findings**

**Regional Challenges.** Our research identified the complex challenges that our region has not yet succeeded in meeting:

1. Women-headed households, especially those headed by single mothers, suffer disproportionately from the region's growing poverty. Over the past 10 years, the number of people living in poverty in the region increased by 32% and currently one in three children in our nation's capital lives in poverty. In the District of Columbia, 30% of women-headed families live in poverty – above the national average (27%) and the highest in the region. At 18%, Alexandria has the second highest number of women-headed families living in poverty in the region.
2. Even in areas in which our region is doing well, such as women's earnings and education, success is not even across the board. Women still earn less than their male counterparts. In Fairfax County, where the discrepancy is largest, men's annual median earnings outpace women's by \$18,700. In education, racial differences in attainment among women are stark. Sixty-two percent (62%) of white women and 56% of Asian women in the region have some sort of college degree, compared to only 26% of Hispanic women and 30% of African-American women. Further, the percentage of Latinas in parts of our region without a high-school diploma far exceeds the national average. Fifty percent (50%) of Latinas in the District of Columbia and 48% of Latinas in Prince George's County lack a high-school diploma.
3. Key family supports such as affordable childcare and housing are difficult to access. In 2000, in the District of Columbia, women-headed families at the median income (\$26,500) could afford to buy only 8% of homes in the city. The cost of childcare varies across the region, but many families are faced with childcare expenses that consistently exceed the standard 10% of median income recommended by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For example, the estimated cost of childcare in Montgomery County for an infant and a preschooler is \$15,329, more than one-third of the median income for women-headed families in that county.
4. Women of color and their children fare worse than their counterparts in the region in a number of key health indicators, including heart disease, obesity and diabetes. African-American women in all jurisdictions have much higher rates of death from heart disease than women of other racial or ethnic backgrounds. This disparity is compounded by the fact that many women of color and low-income women are more likely to lack health insurance or have more frequent lapses in coverage.
5. Despite the improvement in the rates of teen pregnancy, communities in our region still lag behind in infant-mortality rates, a key indicator of healthy pregnancies. The District of Columbia and Prince George's County have the highest infant mortality rates in the region (12 and 9.8 per 1,000 births, respectively); both far exceed the national rate of 6.9 per 1,000 births.
6. The District of Columbia has a higher incidence (new cases) of AIDS among women than anywhere else in the country. The rate of new AIDS cases among adolescent and adult women in the District of Columbia is 92 per 100,000 people, ten times the national rate of nine (9) per 100,000.

**Regional Strengths.** At the same time, key data reflect some important regional successes:

1. Women are a driving force in the region's labor market (women's employment rates are 65% regionally, compared to 57% nationally), and women's median annual earnings in the region outpace the national figures for women by at least \$8,500 and upwards to \$14,600 in some jurisdictions.
2. Women in the region have attained some of the highest educational levels in the nation. Almost half (46%) have earned a college degree, compared to 27% nationally.
3. Women hold key positions of leadership and influence in government. Women are well represented in local government, led by Fairfax County (where 60% of the board of supervisors are women), followed by Alexandria (43%) and the District of Columbia, where women make up 38% of the city council. Maryland is among the top ten states in the country for the proportion of women in elected office.
4. The District of Columbia is ranked fourth in the top 50 metropolitan areas for women's business ownership (based on the number of businesses, total sales and rate of employment). The 25 largest local, women-owned businesses generate annual revenues from \$7.6 to \$177 million.
5. Women head 34% of the top 100 foundations (by assets), and 28% of the largest new foundations established in the region since 1996. Foundations with women executives oversaw more than \$141.2 million in giving in 2001. Among the largest corporate foundations in the area, 50% have a woman executive in charge of giving.
6. Teen pregnancies across our region have been declining, mirroring a national trend. In the District of Columbia, the teen pregnancy rate declined from a 1993 high of 238.7 per 1,000 girls ages 15-19, to a low of 81.4 in 2000. Similar declines can be seen in teen birth rates throughout our region.

### **Insights**

In addition to these findings, the research led to some fundamental, overarching insights about the issues we addressed and strategies for improving the community. Foremost among these are the following:

1. Women contribute significantly to the strength of the region, especially in terms of earnings, educational attainment and leadership, but there are serious disparities based on race, ethnicity and geography.
2. Women and girls of all backgrounds need greater access to resources and supports – information, education and mentoring – to improve their lives and potential for success.
3. The dearth of current and quality data hampers accurate and comprehensive assessments of the problems this community faces. Increasing the access to and quality of timely, local data on women and girls, broken down by race, gender and ethnicity would improve our ability to address community challenges and leverage resources more effectively.
4. This region lacks a strategic community-action agenda to identify and address the complex problems faced by women and their families. A comprehensive effort that can mobilize the expertise and energy of community activists; business, non-profit and faith

leaders; policymakers; and funders would provide the opportunity to more effectively leverage the assets, influence and leadership of women and men in all corners of our region to build a better community.

Examining the key findings and these insights will be essential for learning from this research and building a stronger, more vibrant community for all.

## **The Future**

### **A Community Agenda that invests in women and girls should:**

1. Focus resources and public support on the families who are raising our next generation of children while struggling to overcome poverty. Strategies and targeted resources that provide support to single mothers and their children is a powerful but often overlooked approach to building long-term family security. Special attention should be given to key areas such as home-ownership, affordable, quality childcare and education and job training.
2. Improve the health and safety of women and girls throughout their lives. Invest in programs that increase access to life-saving screening and preventative care, critical tools for ensuring that women stay healthy and get the medical assistance they need before it is too late. For women and their children fleeing intimate partner violence, holistic approaches help women and girls receive the services they critically need.
3. Prepare adolescent girls for their futures through mentoring and leadership opportunities. Education and skills training in areas such as technology can ensure that they will be ready for tomorrow's job market.
4. Make financial literacy a baseline skill for all women and girls. From childhood to adulthood to retirement, women need skills and confidence to establish and maintain economic security throughout their lives.
5. Invest in women's and girls' leadership for a stronger regional future. Women are highly effective, yet significantly under-recognized as community builders and advocates. They are a powerful and untapped resource. Amplifying their voices and building new constituencies will yield results for the critical issues that affect local families and communities.
6. Improve regional data collection on women and girls of all races and ethnicities to better understand their varied needs and more fully tap their potential to create a thriving community.
7. Develop new models of documentation that focus on the results of investing in women and girls and capture the social and economic return on this investment.

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## **Washington Area Women's Foundation -- Principles for Action**

These concrete steps are important, but achieving them will only be possible if there are strong guiding principles to make sure actions are in accord with community values. At the Washington Area Women's Foundation, we will:

1. *Ask, listen and then act.* The best ideas for action will come from the people closest to the problems we seek to alleviate.
2. *Foster new and emerging leadership at all levels.* Women have untapped leadership potential to help build a stronger community.
3. *Build strategic partnerships for long-term impact.* The region is strengthened if we leverage resources across the community and create a base of support for seeking long-term, systemic solutions.
4. *Invest our resources where the gaps between needs and solutions are greatest and where there are opportunities to make a real difference.* Women and girls across the economic spectrum face difficult challenges. In many cases, the issues are the same, but women differ in the resources they can bring to bear to address and deal with their problems.

New answers, new energy and new leaders are needed to remove those barriers that stand in the way of the full participation of women and girls in the civic, cultural and economic life of this community. With an effective agenda and investment strategy, their leadership can be targeted to implement innovative programs that will improve the status of women and their families in our community. Then, and only then, will we advance together as a strong community.

***Established in 1997, the Washington Area Women's Foundation is the only public foundation dedicated to increasing resources and opportunities for women and girls in the Washington Metropolitan Area. Our mission is to foster a powerful wave of philanthropy to improve the lives of all women and girls in the Washington region. Since 1998, Foundation grants to 47 local organizations have helped more than 30,000 women, girls, and their families achieve economic and physical security, escape violence and physical abuse, maintain health and well-being, and secure education and leadership opportunities. Visit [www.wawf.org](http://www.wawf.org) to view the full report.***



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