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Growing Inequities among Women in Massachusetts: Income, Employment, Education and Skills

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Growing Inequities Among Women in Massachusetts: *Income, Employment, Education and Skills*

Problem

Massachusetts women compare very favorably to women in other states in earnings, education, and employment. However, these general trends mask a substantial and growing divide between women in these areas.

Earnings

The relatively high average earnings of Massachusetts women (\$30,300) place them 7th in the nation and 2nd in New England. **BUT**

- The average income for single mothers with children is \$20,400, placing them squarely in the lowest 20% income group.
- Women's earnings continue to lag 25% behind men's earnings, regardless of educational level.
- Massachusetts ranks only 20th in the nation and 4th in New England for the percentage of women living above the poverty level (\$13,702 for a family of three).
- Cash benefits for welfare recipients are half of the federal poverty standard (\$13,700 for a family of three), and have decreased in value over the past 15 years.
- The overall poverty rate in Massachusetts is 10%; however, the poverty rate is 30% for single mothers and 49% for immigrant mothers.

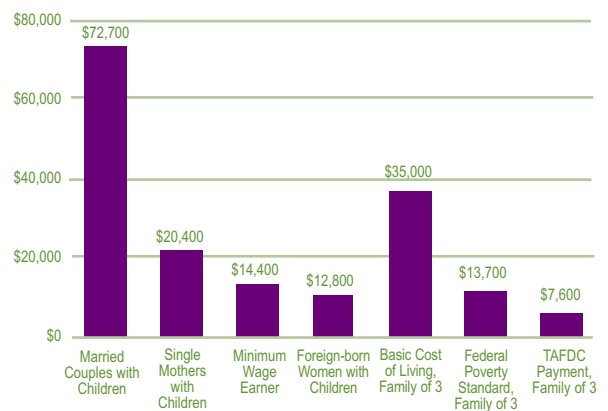
Employment

The high proportion of women in managerial or professional specialty occupations (36%) places Massachusetts women 5th in the nation and 2nd in New England on employment achievement. **BUT**

- 55% of women are still in low-paid "traditional" women's occupations—i.e., retail, service, and administration—that typically provide annual earnings of \$15,200 - \$29,000 and few, if any, benefits.
- Women employed full-time, year-round in a minimum-wage job earn about \$14,400—just above the poverty level for a family of three.
- The average earnings of immigrant women are even lower: around \$12,000.

FIGURE 1

INCOME LEVELS COMPARED TO INCOME STANDARDS, MASSACHUSETTS, 2000



Education and Skills

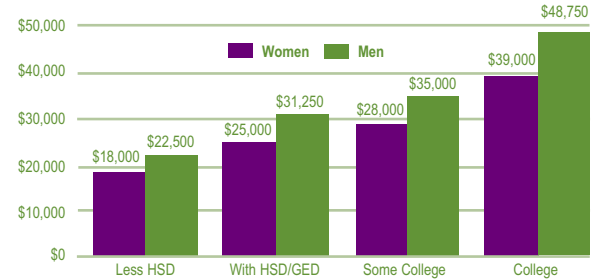
The high proportion (29%) of women with four or more years of college places Massachusetts women 2nd in the nation and 1st in New England for educational achievement. **BUT**

- Massachusetts is the only state whose welfare policies do not allow any form of education or training to "count" in the mandatory work requirements. Instead, women are referred to low-wage jobs.
- Immigrant women with poor English skills experience lengthy waiting lists for English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.
- Employers typically offer education and training opportunities to their better-educated workers.
- Employed single mothers are the least likely to utilize after-hours, work-based training because of family responsibilities.
- Federal funds once earmarked for training low-income mothers have been replaced by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) block grant.
- Low-income women referred to one-stop career centers by welfare caseworkers seldom receive skills assessments or referrals to education and training.
- Massachusetts has the least coordination of all states between welfare and WIA policies.

Although Massachusetts women as a whole are among the best-educated women in the U.S., the gap between rich and poor women is widening as low-wage women experience serious obstacles to the education and training that could provide pathways to jobs with living wages. Federal and state policies, as well as state budget cuts, limit access to education and training for low-income single mothers.

FIGURE 2

MEDIAN INCOME BY EDUCATION LEVEL FOR MEN AND WOMEN IN MASSACHUSETTS, 1999



Context

The income, employment, and educational inequities among women are reflective of widespread inequalities, as Massachusetts is identified as one of the top ten states with the most unequal income distribution. In 2000, the average earnings of the top 20% of earners were \$150,000, compared to \$18,000 for the lowest 20%.

At the same time, the cost of living in Massachusetts is the 3rd highest in the country, homeownership is the 6th lowest, and an estimated 46% of renters are unable to afford fair-market rent.

With almost two-thirds of jobs in Massachusetts now requiring superior or competent skills, only college-educated and skilled workers have experienced real income gains over the past 20 years.

Solutions

Reframe policies to suit employers and employees. Both the economy and families benefit from policies that allow more flexibility in gaining access to skills.

Recognize common values. Educational access is the keystone to a democracy. Parents and children need stable, secure, and lifelong opportunities to learn and develop skills.

Think beyond compartmentalized “target groups.” The welfare recipient of yesterday might be the teacher, nurse, or mechanic of today; the new immigrant may become an elected official in the future; and today’s factory worker may be tomorrow’s technician. Each group has a different but equally valid need for education and training.

Address the barriers to skills development and jobs faced by low-income single mothers. Many women experience a lack of transportation and childcare resources, a fear of domestic violence, the frustration of learning disabilities, and the hopelessness that comes with chronic health problems and homelessness.

Specific recommendations:

- Change state (and federal) welfare policies to allow more flexibility for education and training.
- Establish a baseline of educational attainment for all people in the workforce prior to entering employment, or guarantee access while employed.

- Disseminate information more effectively on education and training opportunities through welfare and WIA personnel.
- Conduct timely and comprehensive assessments of skills and training needs of low-income women to detect barriers.
- Coordinate WIA and welfare policies resources by creating a statewide task force to coordinate WIA and welfare policies.
- Document employer-provided education and training opportunities that work for low-income women.
- Educate girls about “non-traditional” work opportunities and training.
- Encourage adults to use Education Opportunity Centers that provide outreach and hands-on assistance with college applications.

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This fact sheet draws on the following sources: *The Status of Women in Massachusetts* (October, 2000), Washington DC: Institute for Women Policy Research; *Pulling Apart: A State-by-State Analysis of Income Trends* (January, 2000), Washington DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; *Money Income in the U.S. (2001)*, Washington DC: US Census Bureau; *State of the States Project for Massachusetts* (2001), Northampton: The National Priorities Project; *The Rise in Income Inequality in New England* (August, 2001), Boston: MassINC; *The Workforce Investment Act: A First Look at Participation, Demographics and Services* (March, 2003), Washington DC: Center for Law and Social Policy; *Toward Order from Chaos: State Efforts to Reform Workforce Development Systems* (1999), Berkeley: National Center for Research in Vocational Education