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# Convening Brief



## Towards a Women's Economic Justice Movement in Mississippi

Smith Robertson Museum and Cultural Center  
Jackson, MS | November 15, 2013

# Convening Brief

## More than 40 years of evidence

has demonstrated that achieving gender equality, primarily through investing in women, leads to reductions in poverty, faster economic growth, and significant improvements in family health, nutrition, education and quality of life. And while the progress of American women across political, social and economic domains is irrefutable, in many parts of the country we are still far from attaining gender equality. The promotion of gender equity therefore becomes an important tool for effective economic development and justice for women.

In November 2013 the Ms. Foundation for Women partnered with the Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative to convene a group of women leaders from across the state to begin a conversation about the barriers and opportunities for women to achieve economic justice in Mississippi. A month following the convening, a smaller group of the participants, were interviewed as part of a focus group.

## Why Gender Analysis?

A gender analysis reveals the different roles, rights, and responsibilities and constraints of women and men. In most cases, such analyses highlight an increased need for investment in women and girls, recognizing the historic and ongoing discrimination that has prevented them from reaching their full potential.<sup>1</sup>

## Convening Objectives were to:

1. Use gender analysis frame to develop a shared understanding of the economic and political landscape in Mississippi.
2. Provide an opportunity for women in cross-sector leadership roles to share their story and reflect on the threats and opportunities to economic justice for women in Mississippi.
3. Share promising practices, innovations in workforce development efforts targeting women and articulate three (3) potential investment strategies for grant-makers.

## Focus Group Questions:

1. What do you think are the most pressing challenges facing Mississippi women?
2. What work is currently being done in MS to address those challenges?
3. What is needed in Mississippi to increase our capacity to address these challenges?



*In discussions about the state's economic growth, women are not on the agenda!"*

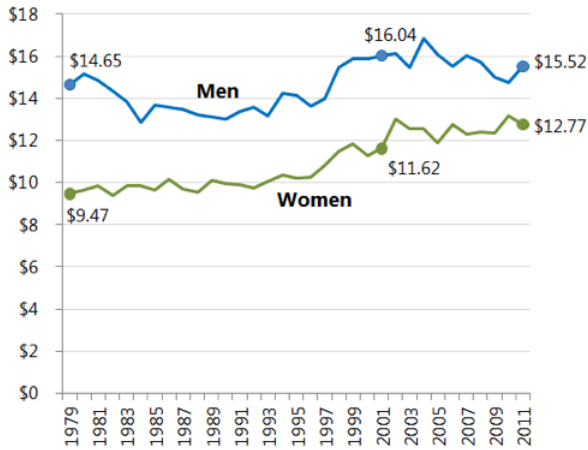
<sup>1</sup> InterAction: American Council for Voluntary International Action, Policy Brief, November, 2008.

# Data Analysis

The convening hosts invited leading expert, Ed Sivak with the Mississippi Economic Policy Center to share a data presentation on Women's Employment, Wage, and Self-Sufficiency Data in Mississippi.

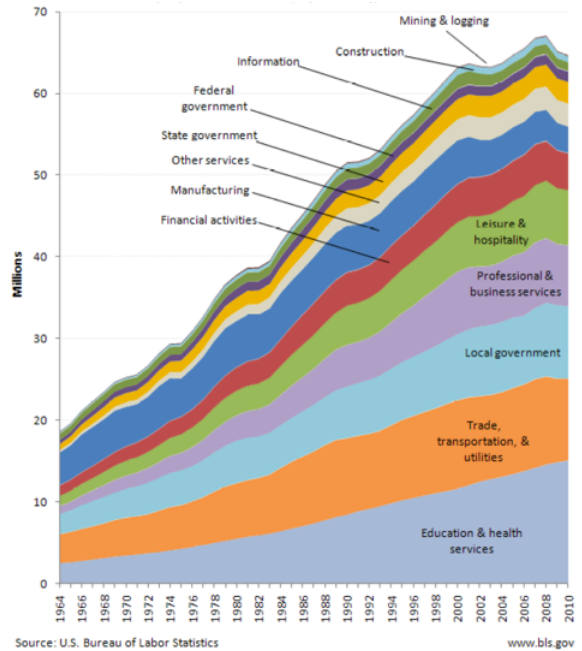
Statewide data was shared for the purposes of providing a broader context for the conversation. While the economic disparities revealed in the presentation were not experienced as a surprise, many of the participants reflected that they had not been accustomed to talking about this data through a single gender lens.

COMPARING MEDIAN WAGES FOR WOMEN & MEN MISSISSIPPI 1979-2011



Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of CPS data. 2011 Real Dollars.

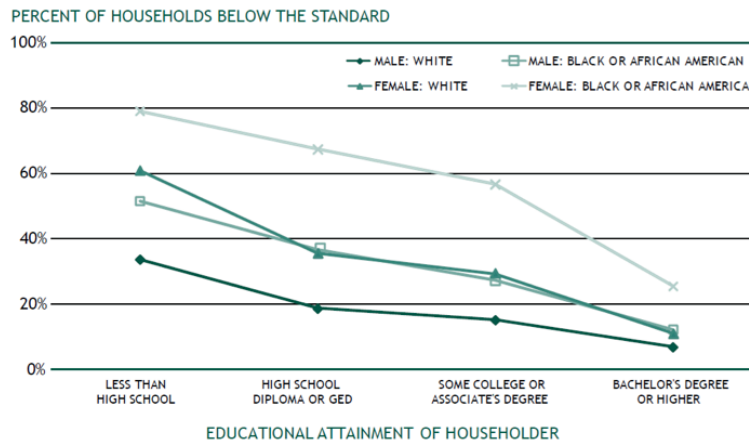
EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN BY INDUSTRY 1964-2010



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

www.bls.gov

COMPARING SELF-SUFFICIENCY BY GENDER



## Data Reflection

When asked to consider the degree to which this data reflected their experiences in their local contexts, participants identified obstacles and promising practices to achieving economic justice in Mississippi:

OBSTACLES	PROMISING PRACTICES
Poverty rates of women	Training programs for women in non-traditional high-wage jobs, i.e., construction
Lack of social service safety nets – child-care, transportation, housing, health care, etc.	Expanding childcare subsidies across the state and removal of obstructive policies so working parents can afford to work
Too few protections for women’s health (including reproductive health) and women’s safety (protections against domestic violence)	Intentional work supports for mothers
Proliferation of low-wage jobs	Community organizing and coalition building
Lack of gender pay equity	Workforce development targeted and designed for women
Access to quality education	Political will and advocacy agendas
Structural inequity, predatory lending, housing policies, employment, etc.	Develop women for political, civic, and governance leadership
Lack of political power base, minimal representation at decision-making tables or legislative bodies, corporate boards, councils, etc., despite the fact that women at 48% of the workforce	Community education
Toxic policy environment not specific to women but doubly impactful to women	Use data to share information, mobilize and decrease isolation between and among women and their allies
Conflicting/hostile cultural and social values – i.e., right-wing conservatism (political and religious)	Foster and leverage connections insides and outside of Mississippi

## Focus Groups

In the focus groups interviews, participants were able to describe in specific detail how women are being impacted by the lack of economic opportunity.

One participant reflected: “Women start out poor and continue to be poor throughout their life. We see low wages being an issue that limits opportunities and resources.” She found through her work, women that earn lower wages have higher loan rates and fees, they do not access banking institutions for any of their financial needs, and depend on prepaid debit cards. This practice depletes their assets. High cost financial products are quick, convenient and readily accessible, and are available in high poverty neighborhoods. There is no access to cheaper forms of credit. Instead, she asserted, there are rent-to-own stores, for-profit colleges that are more expensive than public community colleges.

Many women we talked to resonated with this structural analysis - that there seemed to be the collusion of public and private agencies and their policies and practices that worked to continually disadvantage those who already have less.

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“*Too many poor and working poor women shoulder the sole financial burden for themselves and their children and this leaves their families in disproportionate and relentless poverty.*”

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Another participant asserted that one of the environmental aspects that make systemic poverty possible in Mississippi is the dearth of consumer protection laws, work supports or public funded services that would increase access to transportation, education, child-care etc., thus reducing the economic impact of those financial burdens.

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Still another participant described the ongoing struggle for **reproductive rights and access to quality to education**. Mississippi has one family planning clinic in the state. Law-makers (predominately men) are actively working through legislation, against women’s bodies, rights and sovereignty, making it excessively difficult for women to have private care, not just abortion rights but, family planning, cancer treatment specific to women. For the growing number of college-age women, this is a threat to a target population that use and need these services. The ability to influence decisions in the public policy arena is thwarted by the dominant patriarchal values and sensibility.

Women we interviewed also acknowledged the racialized outcomes and differential conditions for white and black women in the state. **“The attitude of people in power is negative toward women and people of color,** the values they espouse are harmful to building a shared vision.”

Despite the seemingly intractable issues the participants named, they were also resolute that progress was being made and good work was being done to address the aforementioned concerns. They were each working on a part of the solution, there was an emerging sense that more was possible if a broader platform was created on which they were collectively working toward a few shared goals.

Women we spoke to pointed out that while individual organizations were making progress, it was issue specific and most often tied to direct service. Many of the issues previously mentioned were being addressed but as one participant noted; “No one organization is trying to take on the breadth of issues impacting women or address it systemically.” Recognizing the significance of this void, the women began to generate ideas about what would be needed to accelerate economic progress for women in the state.

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“*We often talk about needing the media or some larger group... that’s not very Mississippi... In our [construction] program, we create a community - women talk directly to and with each other. It changes their lives, how they solve problems, raise their children, etc. Getting people together is very Mississippi! We need to look at structures that do that!*”

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## Ideas for Progress

Among the ideas participants discussed to advance economic progress in the state:

- **Create a Mississippi Women's Platform.** Organize resources and create a platform and each plank will address what we think needs to happen, a more comprehensive agenda – provide political and legislative organization.
- **Build a women's leadership pipeline** to increase the participation of women in every aspect of the economic sector. Need a larger representation of women at the local levels of government and high level officials so legislation passes that is good for women's economic well-being.
- **Influence and increase investments in job-training programs for women** that include work supports. Look at successful models in the Delta as a blueprint to make strong business cases in other parts of the state.
- **Collect data to gather key information and build awareness** about issues that are impacting women's employment, health, educational attainment, earning power, mobility, homeownership, etc. There is a need to implement better strategies for awareness building regarding women's issues – from community to the highest levels of power
- **Infiltrate the business community.** There are plenty of those spaces and convenings (business councils, etc.), what's needed is a presence of organizations, women and men who are allies being active in these conversations.
- **Harvest allies – likely and unlikely.** Women and Men. Target the influential allies. Attack the monopolies/ power holds i.e., community colleges, workforce development orgs, etc. Create alliances with larger employers! There are good people out there who have been and can be supporting a workforce development agenda that targets women!
- **Host community conversations** where women are invited to come and learn about and contribute to the women's platform. To have education and invite a conversation that allows people to see this is what it could or should look like would be powerful. It would be really great to think of it across race! Racial equity could be integrated and a critical lens we use in these conversations, ex. MS Low-Income Child Care Initiative's Parent Advocacy Groups.
- **Connect women across various professions** so they are not alone on the issues concerning women. Create critical mass to change workplace conditions.

## Conveners

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Ms. Foundation for Women

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Mississippi Low income Child Care Initiative

Facilitator: LaShawn Routé Chatmon  
National Equity Project

Presenter: Ed Sivak  
MS Economic Policy Center



## Participants

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2. Jearlean Osborne, MS Low income Child Care Initiative
3. Jennifer Sollman, Winter Institute, University of MS
4. Sanchioni Butler, United Auto Workers
5. Jessica Shappley, MS Economic Policy Center
6. Mary Nellums, Mary Nellums Foundation
7. Paheadra Robinson, MS Center for Justice
8. Bonnie Allen, MS Center for Justice
9. Safiya Omari, City of Jackson
10. Jennifer Riley-Collins, ACLU
11. Timaka James-Jones, MS Workers Center for human Rights
12. Joyce Nunn, G.A. Carmichael FHC
13. Natalie Collier, Children's Defense Fund
14. Aisha Nayanda, Springboard to Opportunities
15. Jamie Bardwell, Women's Foundation of MS
16. Felicia Brown Williams, Planned Parenthood Southeast
17. Julie Kuklinski, MCH Women in Construction
18. Roxie Dixon-Lee Noxubee County
19. Reecy Dickson, MS House of Representatives
20. Nita Carter, MS Workers Center for Human Rights