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# HIGHLIGHTS

*A Closer Look* is a first step towards understanding the status of women’s and girls’ well-being in the Puget Sound region. We researched and analyzed five topics—economic security, education, health and well-being, safety and violence, and leadership and giving—that funding organizations, policymakers, businesses, and community-based organizations should consider to improve the lives of women and girls in the region.

The following section summarizes the key findings from *A Closer Look*. These highlights demonstrate the tremendous accomplishments and contributions women and girls have made in the region, but also draw attention to the challenges we must overcome to ensure that all women and girls have the chance to live healthy and economically secure lives, that are free of violence and full of opportunity.

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Photo by Anthony Camera courtesy of Intercommunity Mercy Housing

### Strengths

- Women make a tremendous contribution to the local economy. Two-thirds of women in the four-county region participate in the labor force.
- Washington is ranked 9th highest in the nation for median earnings of women working full-time/full-year. At \$41,601, women in King County have the highest earnings in the four-county region.
- Programs, initiatives, and collaborations in the four-county region continue to emerge to provide services that address women's and girls' critical need for work supports such as education and job training, housing, child care, and transportation.
- Compared to women born in the U.S., immigrant and refugee women are more likely to be entrepreneurs in business.

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*One of the things that impedes women from economic security...is a demand and expectation from the existing governmental and social services structure that all families should be like Ozzie and Harriet.”*

~Community Source

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### Challenges

- Single women with children have the lowest median annual earnings of any family type. Married couples with children in King County, for example, earn about 160 percent more per year than single women with children.
- Washington State is ranked 42nd lowest in the nation for equality of earnings between males and females working full-time/full-year. Across the four-county region, women consistently make about 75 cents for every dollar men earn, even when accounting for educational level and occupation. Compared to white men, women who are Hispanic, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and Black are the least likely to earn equal wages.
- Nearly 180,000 women and girls in the four-county region are living in poverty. In Washington, one-third of Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaskan Native girls live in poverty.
- In Whatcom County, over one-third of single women live in poverty. Almost 90 percent of these women have children under age 18. Similar trends exist in King, Snohomish, and Pierce counties.
- Sexism, racism, xenophobia, classism, and homophobia continue to impede women's progress toward economic self-sufficiency. These challenges are particularly acute for women of color, immigrant and refugee women, poor women, lesbians, bisexual women, and transgendered people.
- Lack of affordable, flexible child care is one of the most significant barriers to women achieving economic security in Washington and the four-county region.
- Many immigrant and refugee women in the region—particularly those who are newly arrived—face barriers to economic security and educational attainment due to lack of education, limited English proficiency, family responsibilities, and cultural expectations within their communities.
- Anti-immigrant sentiment in the region results in discrimination, harassment, and policies that exploit immigrant and refugee women and girls in the workplace and discourage or prohibit undocumented women and girls from accessing health- and human-service systems.
- The complexities of the employment, education, and health- and human-service systems, plus a lack of culturally and linguistically competent services prevent many immigrant and refugee women and girls from accessing services. This is particularly true for those with limited proficiency in English.
- Both within and outside their communities, immigrant and refugee women and girls face sexism and gender stereotypes that limit their employment and educational opportunities.

## EDUCATION

### Strengths

- The percentage of women obtaining college degrees in the four-county region has increased with almost every generation. Compared to women age 65 and older, twice as many 25- to 34-year-old women have a bachelor's degree or higher.
- Over half the students in Washington's four-year institutions and community/technical colleges are women.
- Of women age 18 to 24, nearly two-thirds in Whatcom County and approximately one-third in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties are enrolled in college.
- Nationally, over the last 25 years the educational attainment of immigrant and refugee women and girls from all regions of origin has increased dramatically.
- Washington is the only state in the Pacific Northwest that allows eligible, undocumented students to qualify for in-state tuition.
- Both nationally and in Washington, attainment of higher education among foreign-born individuals is on par with those born in the U.S.

### Challenges

- Women in Washington continue to be overrepresented in academic fields (such as education, psychology, and health) that lead to lower-paying jobs; they remain underrepresented in fields (such as engineering, computer and information sciences, and the physical sciences) that lead to higher-paying jobs.
- The cost of higher education, lack of financial assistance and lack of equity in athletic scholarships pose major barriers to women and girls, particularly those with low incomes, entering and graduating from institutions of higher education.
- While trends vary slightly by county, females across the four-county region are performing poorly on the math and science WASL tests. Approximately half of 10<sup>th</sup> grade females meet math standards and one-third meet science standards.
- Among 10th-grade females in Washington, 61 percent of Asians and 57 percent of whites met WASL math standards compared to just 35, 27, and 26 percent of American Indian/Alaskan Natives, Hispanics, and Blacks, respectively.
- Lack of quality, affordable, and culturally and linguistically appropriate early care and education programs and support for caregivers—including respite care for those whose children have special health care needs and those caring for aging parents and older family members—are major barriers to educational attainment for women and girls in the four-county region.
- In Washington, graduation rates for children with limited English proficiency were 58 percent compared to 70 percent for the general student population.



Photo courtesy of Passages Northwest

## HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

### Strengths

- Washington is ranked 7th in the nation for reproductive rights favorable to women and girls.
- Washington has the lowest percentage of low-birthweight babies in the nation and the 10th lowest state infant mortality rate.
- Prevention and education efforts in the region are increasingly tailored to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of women from diverse communities.
- In spite of economic hardship and other disadvantages, immigrants in the U.S. generally have better overall health outcomes than people born in the U.S.
- In the four-county region, community and migrant health centers and public health clinics play a critical role in providing affordable, culturally and linguistically competent primary health care to immigrant and refugee women and girls.

### Challenges

- Over 300,000 working-age (18 to 64) women lack health insurance in Washington State. Nearly half (142,000) of these women live in King, Pierce, Snohomish, and Whatcom counties.
- Hispanic women have the lowest rates of health insurance in the state—43 percent were uninsured in 2005.
- Women and girls who do not meet eligibility requirements for publicly funded health insurance programs (such as Medicaid and the Basic Health Plan) and do not have access to employer-sponsored programs face significant challenges in accessing medical care, dental care, and other health services. Even women and girls who are eligible for publicly funded health insurance programs have difficulty accessing health services, due to limitations in the capacity, coverage, and number of providers participating in these programs.
- Lack of access to and availability of holistic and preventive care in the region—including prevention and education programs—challenge women and girls trying to optimize their health and well-being.

- The complexities of the health-services system and lack of culturally and linguistically competent services pose barriers to obtaining services, particularly for women of color, women with limited English proficiency, lesbians, bisexual women, transgendered people, and those who are differently-abled.
- Significant proportions of women (over 18) engage in health behaviors that put them at risk for heart disease. One in five women across the four-county region has high blood pressure; over one-third has high cholesterol, between 20 and 25 percent of women in the region are obese; and the majority of women do not eat enough fruits and vegetables or meet recommended physical activity requirements.
- Washington State has the highest incidence of breast cancer in the nation. At 191 per 100,000 women, King County has the highest rate in the four-county region. In spite of high incidence, women in Washington have the lowest rate of death from breast cancer in the country.
- More than 900 females are known to be living with HIV/AIDS in the four-county region. Over half of these women were living in King County at the time of diagnosis. Females in Washington represent an increasing proportion of new HIV cases (15 percent in the last five years). Compared to white females, prevalence rates of HIV/AIDS in Washington are 15 times higher for Blacks, four times higher in Hispanics, and twice as high for American Indian/Alaskan Native females.
- Across the state, the infant mortality rate for American Indian/Alaskan Native and Black mothers is double that of mothers in other racial/ethnic groups.
- One in five 12th-grade females in Snohomish and Whatcom counties report smoking at least one cigarette in the past 30 days; one in five 8th-grade female students in Pierce County and well over a third of high school females in all four counties report having at least one drink in the past 30 days.
- In Washington, over a third of female students in 8th, 10th, and 12th grades reported feeling so sad or hopeless for two weeks or more in the last year that they stopped their usual activities.
- Across the four-county region, young women and girls between the ages of 15 and 24 have higher rates of sexually transmitted disease than women in any other age group.



Photo courtesy of Chaya

### Strengths

- In the four-county region, increased public awareness and discussion about violence against women contribute to an atmosphere that supports women and girls in addressing these issues.
- Social-support networks help women and girls address safety and violence issues in their lives.
- Washington is a leader among U.S. states in combating human trafficking. It was the first state to pass anti-trafficking legislation and establish an anti-trafficking task force.

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*Educate, support and believe...those are the most important things that we have. We have a saying at our office, “If we’re not making people uncomfortable, we’re not doing our job.”*

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~Community Source

### Challenges

- Intimate-partner violence is the leading cause of injury to women in Washington State; most cases are not reported.
- Social and cultural norms—including sexism and gender stereotypes—continue to contribute to denying, minimizing, and, in some cases, normalizing violence. These norms also shape attitudes—often judgmental—toward victims of violence.
- Forty-four percent of Washington women (18 and over) report experiencing some form of physical or non-physical intimate-partner violence in their lifetime.
- Just over half (51 percent) of women in Pierce County, over one-third (39 percent) in Snohomish County; and about one in four in King (23 percent) and Whatcom (27 percent) counties report having been injured by an intimate partner during their lifetime.
- Women and girls who experience violence face economic, educational, mental health, and psychosocial barriers to escaping abusive relationships. Other significant barriers include racism, xenophobia, classism, and homophobia. Immigration issues compound these challenges for immigrant and refugee women and girls attempting to escape abusive relationships and human trafficking.
- One in ten high school females in Washington reports that, in the previous year, an intimate partner limited her activities, threatened her, or made her feel unsafe. One in six reports being hit, slapped, or physically injured in the past year.
- Half of all women murdered in Washington in 2005 were killed by their former boyfriend or husband. Over 300 women in Washington have been killed by an intimate partner in the last decade.
- Thirty-eight percent of women in Washington report some form of sexual assault in their lifetime.
- Twenty-nine percent of women in King and Whatcom counties; 26 percent in Snohomish County; and 19 percent in Pierce County report being threatened or forced to have unwanted sex in their lifetime.
- Women in Washington are more than twice as likely as men to report being a victim of sexual abuse as a child.
- Immigrant women are more likely than women in the general population to die from domestic violence.

## LEADERSHIP AND GIVING

### Strengths

- Washington is ranked first in the nation for women's participation in politics.
- Washington is consistently ranked in the top 10 states for percent of women in the state legislature.
- The Puget Sound region is ranked 15th in the nation for the number of privately-held, majority-women-owned firms; 126,857 women-owned, private firms in the region generate \$23 billion in annual sales.
- Key factors influencing women in leadership positions in the four-county region include family, personal awareness and concern about societal issues, success in educational and professional life, mentoring and support, and leadership programs.

### Challenges

- Only one of the nine positions for Washington in the U.S. House of Representatives is filled by a woman.
- In Washington's 73 top companies, only five women are CEOs and two serve as board chairs. In addition, women hold only 18 percent of executive positions and 14 percent of board positions in these companies.
- Women in Washington continue to confront institutionalized sexism and hit the "glass ceiling" as they seek executive leadership positions in high-net-worth public companies.
- "Leadership ladders" in the four-county region discriminate against women who disproportionately bear the burden of caring for children, aging parents, and other family members.
- Institutionalized oppression continues to challenge women of color and women from diverse communities in their efforts both to increase their participation and influence as leaders and to receive appropriate recognition for their contributions.



Photo courtesy of Northwest Women's Law Center