The VOIGES WOMEN





THE VOICES OF WOMEN: PERCEPTIONS OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN ARKANSAS



WOMENSFOUNDATIONARKANSAS.ORG COPYRIGHT 2014

ASSISTANCE FOR PRINTING COSTS PROVIDED THROUGH A CENTRAL ARKANSAS PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT GENERAL IMPROVEMENT GRANT WITH SUPPORT FROM SENATOR JOYCE ELLIOTT, DISTRICT 31.

A FOUNDATION MUST TRULY KNOW ITS COMMUNITY TO BE EFFECTIVE AND SERVE AS A RESOURCE.

This project and report were developed, administered, and prepared by Clinton School of Public Service student Marisa Nelson.

(SEPTEMBER 2013 - APRIL 2014)

FOREWORD

In my introduction to the I973/2013 Report, I stated "A foundation must truly know its community to be effective and serve as a resource." Marisa's report "The Voices of Women: Perceptions of the Status of Women in Arkansas" allows WFA to hear from the women in Arkansas and achieve a better understanding of their lives, their issues and needs. With this report, WFA moves a step closer to truly knowing its community.

The mission of the Women's Foundation of Arkansas is to promote philanthropy among women and to help women and girls achieve their full potential. The Foundation does not employ solely grant-making toward educational programs to help women and girls move closer to economic security, but also provides reliable research and reporting to address the barriers or obstacles that may hinder or prevent our state's women or girls from reaching economic security. The voices Marisa shares with us in her report will ably guide the Foundation's work as we strive to serve the women of Arkansas.

The themes that emerged from Marisa's research will likely raise some questions. The quotes and themes included in this report come from discussions with Arkansas women. What may be true for these women is not necessarily true for all women in Arkansas, but it is important that we listen and allow women

the space to share their stories. So often we make assumptions about what women will want with regard to education, work, or family, and these stories show just how different those wants, needs, and expectations can be.

Through these focus groups, some women took issue with different aspects of the I973/20I3 report. While we are focused on expanding knowledge on the status of women in Arkansas, the 20I3 report was a strict update on the topics researched back in I973. We intend to delve deeper into many areas that could not be included in that report, and the women in these focus groups even shared with us future topics for research that are important to them. We look forward to continuing to hear the voices of women in Arkansas.

If you would like to view the full transcripts from each of the focus groups conducted for this report, please contact the Women's Foundation of Arkansas by email at admin@womensfoundationarkansas.org or call 501.244.9740.

Tynnett Watts

Lynnette Watts

Executive Director

Women's Foundation of Arkansas

AN EFFORT TO ENGAGE ARKANSAS WOMEN ON THIS TOPIC HAD NOT BEEN UNDERTAKEN SINCE THE 1973 REPORT.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the Women's Foundation of Arkansas published "1973/2013: A Then and Now Report on the Status of Women in Arkansas," an update to a report commissioned by Governor Dale Bumpers in 1973. The 2013 report provides quantitative data on the economic, political, and health status of women in Arkansas. While these data detail aspects of the situation women in Arkansas face, there remained a lack of women's voices on the subject. My report provides key findings from a project to discover women's reactions to the 1973/2013 report and their perceptions on women in general.

Seven focus group discussions were held with more than 50 women in six cities and towns across Arkansas. Three research questions guided the study: (I) What are participants' reactions to the I973/20I3 report? (2) What issues are women in Arkansas interested in hearing more about? (3) What are Arkansas women's perceptions of women in the home, workforce, and in politics?

This focus group project served as a listening tour for the Women's Foundation of Arkansas. After seeing the numbers on where women stand in the state, WFA wanted to hear what women thought about them. They wanted to better understand how Arkansas women perceive the role of women today: in the home, in the workplace, and in politics. An effort to engage Arkansas women on this topic had not been undertaken since the 1973 report was published. WFA found itself in the unique position as a resource on "all things women" to go out into the community and ask women what they think. Results show that while general themes regarding choice, fairness, and individuality were commonly agreed upon, many themes provoked disagreement among groups, within groups, and even contradictions within individuals.

ma ru

Marisa Nelson

Clinton School of Public Service

Graduating Class of 2014



As a partner with the Clinton Foundation through the Clinton Health Matters Initiative (CHMI) for Central Arkansas, the Women's Foundation of Arkansas is pleased to offer this report as a means of working across sectors to develop and implement coordinated, systemic approaches to creating healthier communities. Understanding and addressing the economic, education, and health needs of Arkansas Women can only lead to stronger, healthier communities. If you would like to view the full transcripts from each of the focus groups conducted for this report, please contact the Women's Foundation of Arkansas by email at admin@womensfoundationarkansas.org or call 501-244-9740.



METHOD

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups were chosen for this project because they provide an opportunity to understand what a group thinks about an issue. Focus group discussions build on conversation and participant interaction to get a better sense of how the group thinks and feels. They also give participants a chance to reflect on their own experiences and beliefs as they listen to other individuals discuss theirs. While this focus group data cannot be indicative of all Arkansas women, the report provides detailed information on how the participating women view the status of women in the state.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A focus group process was developed that was consistent enough to allow for comparisons, yet flexible enough for each group to follow its unique path. Focus group discussions centered on three key questions of interest:

- What are Arkansas women's reactions to the 1973/2013 report?
- 2. What issues are women in Arkansas interested in hearing more about?
- 3. What are Arkansas women's perceptions of women in the home, in the workforce, and in politics?

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

Women from several communities in Arkansas were recruited into this project by working through existing relationships and connections with individuals and organizations across the state. WFA wanted to hear Arkansas women discuss their perceptions and experiences, so any adult woman who had lived in Arkansas for approximately three years or more was eligible to participate.

Seven focus groups were organized by identifying individuals in six different communities who were motivated to host a discussion. These organizers took care of the logistical questions of where and when to host the focus group, and also extended invitations to women in their community. Focus group locations included a church, a university, some community meeting spaces, and a couple of living rooms. The goal was to include cities and towns from across the state and get participation from women of different ages, racial and ethnic backgrounds, beliefs, and life experiences.

FOCUS GROUP PROCEDURE

Focus group discussions began with a presentation of the I973/2013 report. A WFA volunteer presented the report's findings on the educational attainment, employment, political representation, and health issues of Arkansas women. Then, the current project was more fully explained, any remaining questions were answered, and each woman voluntarily gave her verbal consent to participate.





After brief introductions, reflection on the report began. A discussion of further research topics and other areas of interest followed. The last segment of the focus group discussion centered on women's perceptions of women. Participants were asked about their thoughts on issues such as the ideal work/family balance, female leadership styles, and the role of women in politics.

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Seven focus groups were conducted with women across Arkansas between November 15, 2013, and February 13, 2014. The location, date, and number of participants are shown to the right.

In total, 5I women participated in this project. Of the participants, 48 are included in the analysis of demographic characteristics, as three participants did not complete the demographic surveys. Figures one through four show focus group participants' responses on their race and ethnicity, household income, education attainment, and age. (see pages 8-9)

DATA ANALYSIS

Each focus group was audio-recorded with the permission of the participants, while the researcher or an assistant took notes. The audio recordings were then transcribed, and these transcriptions were used in the analysis process. Themes around the project's research questions emerged, while several other subthemes developed.

Respondents' statements were organized among these themes, and certain representative quotes were selected to support the general findings extracted from the conversations.

DATE	LOCATION	CODE	NUMBER
11/15/13	LITTLE ROCK	LRI	6
II/20/I3	LITTLE ROCK	LR2	17
11/21/13	FAYETTEVILLE	FAY	5
11/21/13	BENTONVILLE	BVL	6
12/10/13	EL DORADO	ELD	6
12/13/13	FORT SMITH	FSM	6
02/13/14	HELENA	HLN	4





FIGURE ONE: PARTICIPANT RACE & ETHNICITY

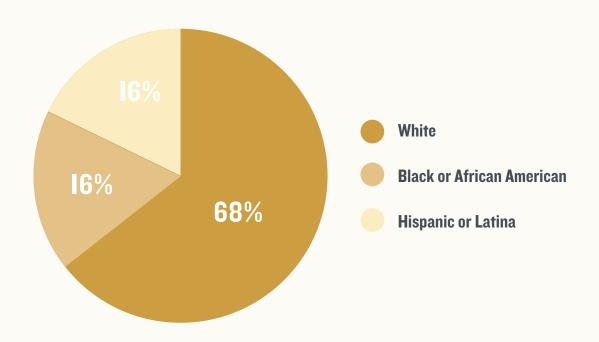
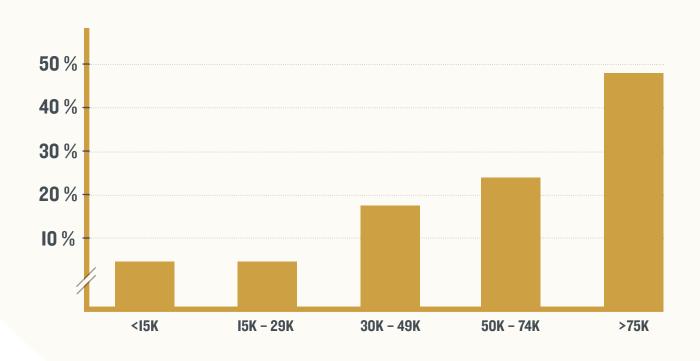


FIGURE TWO: PARTICIPANT HOUSEHOLD INCOME

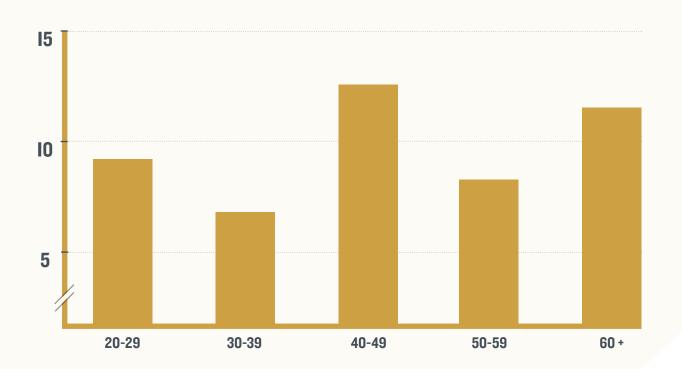






Number of Respondents

FIGURE FOUR: PARTICIPANT AGE GROUP





RESULTS

The following results provide an in depth view of the thoughts and perceptions of the 5I Arkansas women who participated in the WFA focus groups. Through discussions often filled with laughter, empathy, and understanding, these women reacted to the statistics reported and discussed their perceptions based on their own experiences and beliefs.

REACTIONS TO THE REPORT

Initial reactions to the I973/2013 report were largely a mixture of surprise and disappointment. Many participants commented that they knew women made less money and were less represented in positions of power than men, yet they were still taken aback by the extent of the disparity found in Arkansas. The following two quotes reflect many participants' initial reactions.

My initial reaction to that report was shock. I don't know why, because women always have been sort of the underdog. It's a little shocking that we still have so far to go. (HLN)

I'm not surprised because I figured it would still be a lot lower than I feel like it should be in various—all areas. But I guess there's still that shock like, "Wow, we've come a ways, but not as far as we need to." (BVL) Several participants noted that while the numbers on the status of women in Arkansas may not be what they wish, evidence of a significant cultural change in the past 40 years could be found in the report and in their personal experiences. Some older participants had actively been a part of the transition, breaking barriers by pursuing degrees and careers that had traditionally been held by men. One participant had actually been a student at University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in 1973, and knew the female graduates referred to in the report. Two women described the change they have witnessed in their fields.

I remember when I first came to med school I knew all 22 of the girls who were in med school, because there were so few of them. And now, almost half the enrollment in med school is women. In college it's the same thing. So one place where we seemed to have advanced is in the number of women who are entering higher education and graduating from college. (LRI)

I know when I first started going to law school, there were very few women in the profession. And that's one of the things I learned when I was going to law school—women are kind of stepping up and breaking some barriers, and now I think the school is more than 50% women. (LRI)



Two of the most commented-on gender disparities discussed in the report were gender pay gaps and the lack of female representation in top-level positions. Participants agreed it was wrong for two people doing the same job with the same responsibilities and skills to be paid differently because of their gender. Some women were surprised by the report because they perceive their work environment to be very different from what was described. While many of them were surprised, participants often said this is what they had come to expect. The following quotes reflect these two perspectives.

I'm surprised a lot by some of the numbers just because I've been in this bubble at my work. I've been here for so long now, and I do see women who are in high positions. It just shocks me that it's not actually like that in the state. (FAY)

We knew we made less. That's a given. It's just always been that way. I wasn't really surprised. (ELD)

Some participants brought up the question of women's desire to hold competitive positions or political office. These women said that one explanation for low numbers of women in higher positions could be that they choose not to apply or not to run. They described how family duties, women's "nature," and lack of interest keep women from seeking these roles.

I think to some extent some of those statistics were just okay. We don't have to be 50% everything. I am capable, but I sure don't want to be in the legislature. And so maybe the male gender is more inclined to—they tend to be more confrontational. So I think some things are just okay. I think it's important that we have the rights to do those things if we choose to do those things, and if it's not 50/50 then that's our choice—hopefully. (ELD)

At my work it's not that they don't give women the higher positions, it's that they don't want it. Not as many women apply, because they have children to take care of at home. (FSM)

There were some focus group participants who took issue with the report. These participants disagreed with what they saw as an implicit message that women must work or have positions of power to contribute to our state. They expressed that a depiction of Arkansas women is incomplete if women who choose to stay home and raise children are left out. Some felt that the report tries to pit women against men in a negative way. Even through these differences, all participants agreed that if a woman is in the workplace, she deserves the same rights as a male counterpart.

"It's a little shocking that we still have so far to go."

I wonder how much of that is people who are choosing to stay home—for a period of time at least—or choosing to work part time and also stay home. That number is reflected maybe in the percentage of women who aren't employed or even in pay being lower, but that's our choice because we want to stay home with our kids. We can't just look at it as black and white. It's really missing something. (BVL)

So many times we see a report like this and it's almost like it's men against women or women against men. I don't like that. I mean, it's good to have things balanced, but I don't think we need to train our daughters that they've got to go out and be stronger than the men. (LR2)

The report, when you put it in statistics and graphs, it's very flat it doesn't give the whole story. At the same time, two people doing the same job in the workplace with equal responsibilities and skills should be paid the same. I do think that's incorrect. (LR2)

The level of inclusion was also questioned for both the 1973 report and the 2013 update. These concerns may speak to issues with data collection, or may show how data reported doesn't always coincide with individuals' perceptions of their community.

I have mixed emotions on how accurate the report was towards African American women in 1973. I'm not sure we were accurately included. (HLN)

One of the statistics was the number of womenled households. I thought it was extremely low. I think it is a lot higher than that. I think that needs to be checked, as a matter of fact. (ELD)



"...that's just how we are raised in this sort of culture."

"Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children."

"...if you're a strong woman... you stand out, you're not always received all that well."

PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN

It was evident in the focus groups that perceptions on women in Arkansas are influenced by tradition, religion, and southern culture. Some participants felt that the state's traditional culture is a barrier for women, while others believed strongly in these traditional gender roles. I think it has to do with the south more than the north. It's more conservative, more religious, and the women have to kind of just submit to the man. I think it's part of the southern culture. (FSM)

I think southern culture has a lot to do with those traditional family values. Getting married early and having women think of their career in terms of their relationship life. So like, you're thinking, "Okay, I have a boyfriend, but I really want to take this job in this city, but if I do that we may not last. So I'm just going to stay here and I'm going to take a different job that may not be as good. That's just how we are raised in this sort of culture. (FAY)"

In our faith we believe that men are to preside over their families and provide for them, while mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. They help one another as equal partners, but the roles are very different. (LR2)

Within a number of groups, Arkansas was described as being "behind" when it comes to women's issues. The state was seen as having barriers for women that are not as prevalent in some other states. Many participants discussed a difference between more urban and rural areas of the state.

I have in other places seen women in different positions, in higher positions, years ago that women in Arkansas just don't hold. And it's not that they're not qualified, but they are just not getting the positions. (HLN)

You have to have an open-minded person in the position to make the decision to choose the woman over a man. Probably somebody that's not from Arkansas, or someone who has lived somewhere else and really race and gender is not a big issue for them. (HLN)

I think if you go to different parts of the state you'll see a very different cultural attitude towards women. Just driving through the state you see how people interact with you, you see how people respond to you. And if you're a strong woman and you stand out, you're not always received all that well. (FAY)

WOMEN IN THE HOUSEHOLD

The traditional role for women in Arkansas has been to act as primary caregiver for children and complete the majority of the household duties, while men's role has been to protect and support the family financially. Focus group discussions on these gendered roles varied significantly. Many were encouraged by the trend toward increased sharing of household and work responsibilities, happily discussing stay-at-home

dads and younger couples who try more balanced approaches. Others felt strongly that women were created to be nurturers, often citing the Christian concept of women as helpmates.

Whether women held one belief or the other-or something in between-childbearing and rearing played a large role in the discussion, and play a large role in Arkansas women's decision-making processes. The following themes about women in the household emerged from the focus group discussions.

SHARING HOUSEHOLD RESPONSIBILITIES

Participants largely expressed that things have been changing for women in Arkansas when it comes to caring for their families. Before it was just assumed that women would be the primary caregivers; now there is at least the opportunity for discussion. Many participants said that now men generally do more around the house and are more involved in raising children than in past years.

I do think that that is something that women have gained that you can't necessarily put on a chart, and that is that we have the ability to have that conversation with our future spouse about our careers, about sharing household duties. When our parents got married, that was not expected. (BVL) I think that younger couples share that responsibility. When I had my kids, my husband didn't get any time off. He couldn't be there. So we understood, we accepted that. That was just the norm. But that's all changed. (LRI)

Though things may be changing, most participants agreed that women still tend to be in charge of the majority of parenting and housework activities. They said that even if a woman works full time, she will likely still be cooking dinner and putting the kids to sleep when she gets home. Most perceived women to be predominantly secondary income earners, as well as the ones who usually work part-time or take time off from work to focus on children.

The woman is also coming home tired from working, and she's not going to be like the man because even if he helps, he'll never do as much as you. I tell you that from experience. He sets the table, but you can't compare setting the table with constantly thinking about what we're going to eat, what we need from the store — just that stresses you out and makes you tired. Obviously there's an impact in the family because it affects your mood and you get tired. And it can also reflect in your work as well. It's like a circle. It makes an impact. It plays a big role. (FSM)

A lot of the women are taking on 50% of the responsibilities for bringing home a pay check

and providing for the family, but a lot of men are not taking on 50% of the responsibility to taking care of the house and providing for the things that are needed there. (LR2)

WOMEN AS NURTURERS

While participants are pleased with the increased sharing of responsibilities in the home, a significant amount believe that women do have a natural predisposition to care for children and focus on families. For many, this was in line with their religious beliefs that God created men and women to be different. Equal, but different. The following quotes reflect this perspective.

I think to some degree we're hesitant to say that, but I agree that it's important that mothers stay home sometimes. I think that being a mom is one of the most important jobs we have as women. I mean, let's face it. We carry them. And we do have an attachment that is different than the men in our lives. (ELD)

The ideal role for women is the helpmate. He has his role. I have mine. And I would love to meet a man that I could feel that comfortable with. I would love to, because I would love to surrender and not have to be the strong force. Most women don't really want to be the strong force. (HLN)



I think it's something we're born with. It's like they say, it's not education only. God built us this way. We are the one to take care of the family. You're born with it. (FSM)

OPPOSING PERSPECTIVES

Women of different perspectives on the role or nature of women all agreed that it should be a woman's right to pursue the life she wants, yet as conversations flowed many women questioned how satisfied or happy women following the opposite lifestyle truly were. The following quotes reflect these differences in opinion.

There are those women who do want to be those homemakers. That's what they want to do. And that's totally fine, too. But then you're also wondering is that truly what this person wants, or are they strongly influenced by whatever culture they were brought up in or whatever society is telling them to do? It's really a confusing issue. (FAY)

Their identity is in being a mom only and ultimately their goal is to continue to have a lot of children so they don't have to work. They've lost their ability to really do anything other than be a mom. The question is what happens when those kids do grow up, or what kind of example is being set for them? (FAY)

I once heard that "No success can compensate for failure in the home." And when you look at the generations that are going to be coming after us and who is going to be our leaders, if they're in a day care—and I'm not trying to put down day cares or anything—but if they're not being raised and taught properly in the home, what are those leaders going to be like? (LR2)

It would be interesting to ask the women that were part of the improvement, part of the change-2013 women-are you doing what makes you happy? Are you disappointed about something? It might be more revealing, but not within the report, as to what percentage of women who were actually very satisfied and comfortable with what they were doing? That would be important to know to truly know about the success of women in the workplace. (LR2)

These differences seemed to spark a sense of defensiveness, or feelings of judgment coming from the other side. One group of more traditional women described feeling misunderstood by others. One participant explained it this way.

When they look into us they say, "Well how can you be a part of a church that puts women so far down? You know, they want you to stay home." It's not the same comparison. I mean, if anything, we are taught that we are very valuable, sometimes even more so than our counterparts. (LR2)

WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE

Almost 75% of the women who completed the demographic survey for this project had been part of the workforce for 10 years or more. This indicates that the focus group participants had significant work experience to tap into when discussing issues of women in the workforce. Interestingly, participants' views on women in the workforce varied significantly. One set of participants felt strongly that women should be encouraged and pushed to live up to their "potential" and achieve high positions that have traditionally been held by men, while another believed that women shouldn't compete with men, and that a woman's first priority should be to care for her children and family. Other participants fit somewhere between these two lines of thought. The following themes arose from the discussions on women in the workplace.

Having Choice Versus Having to Choose

One word came up throughout each of the focus group discussions: choice. Two sides of the concept of choice became clear. One is the importance for women to be able to choose

whether to pursue a career, stay home with children, do both simultaneously, or do one and then the other.

Participants felt strongly that this is a decision that should be made by the individual woman and whomever else she chooses to include in the decision. They said that choice is influenced by the flexibility of the work environment, the amount of support from the partner or family, the financial situation, and a woman's personal priorities.

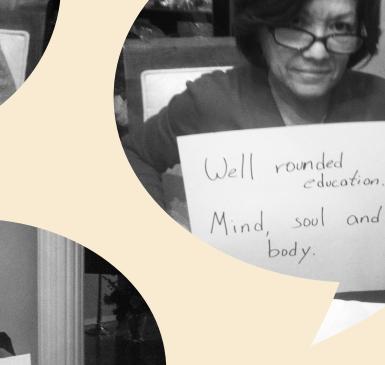
Right now I think women have the choice. It's not like it used to be. Before you didn't even have a choice. I can make the choice. It can be either way. I can choose to stay home and that can be my choice. Or I can choose to get into a career. (FSM)

One of the tenets of our faith is our agency to make choices. And I think that it's evident tonight that the choices that people are excited about making and actually choosing and the results of those deal with marriage, and children, and family, and the caring and nurturing of not only the person, but the entity—the family, the marriage—whatever that might be. (LR2)

The second aspect of choice that women discussed in the focus groups was the obligation to make trade-offs, or the need to choose between focusing on a career and focusing on a family. The feasibility



Better education for our generations





of "having it all" was a point of debate. The prevailing sentiment was that a focus on children and family should come before furthering a career. Women spoke of taking time off, going part-time, or rejecting opportunities for professional growth in order to focus on raising their children. A few women said they chose not to have children because they wanted to concentrate on their career.

At the same time, there were participants who felt that women can have both. Most participants agreed that this is becoming easier as technological advancements allow for more work flexibility and husbands and partners begin to share a greater percentage of the home responsibilities. Participants who thought that women could effectively raise children and pursue a career emphasized the need for work flexibility and partner or family support. Some discussed how choices don't necessarily have to be final. A woman can take time off when her children are young and return to the workforce later in life.

You have to lose something. You can't be a good mother and have a good home and succeed. It's something that you're going to have to make the choice. And there's women that are very driven and they will give up their families and their husband and their home. And they do that. (FSM)

I don't know when my second child will come, but I've found myself not putting as much into moving bigger and better in my career. It's a little unfortunate that I have to choose, but my husband actually has now exceeded me in earning potential. So that's my trade-off, I guess. And it is my choice, and I'm glad that I don't have to, but it's still kind of a struggle because I want it all. (BVL)

Working from home is a blessing, and not many have that blessing. Flexibility means I can be there for my kids. Be part of the PTA and attend class events. There are other times when I have meetings and things to go to when I can't be there, and I depend on other mothers who got flexibility. To me flexibility is worth more than the amount of money I get on my paycheck. (HLN)

I chose to step out of the workforce for a while to raise my boys, and I didn't see it as a bad thing, or not using my education at all. And then when I wanted to re-enter the workforce, that was a positive, too. I think that you make choices as you go along. It's not like a choice that you have to live with. You can have such a mix these days, which I think is great. (BVL)

Good Ol' Boys Club

Throughout the focus group discussions, many participants discussed how the fact that white men have traditionally held positions of power in Arkansas still impacts women's experiences today. Many women described how a change in culture is occurring, but changes in attitudes take time.



Remnants of the traditional system remain, and many women described situations where they felt promotions or opportunities were given not based on merit, but on connections.

Culture is a huge buzzword. [Where I work] there is definitely a good ol' boy type of culture. It always has been and it always will be because [of the work we do]. My uncles and grandparents were [involved in this work], so I get the culture. They are coming around, but it's going to take a long way to get through a huge cultural change with something like that because it's what we've always done. (BVL)

In general in the workplace or in situations like that the issue is you have the old white guys at the top. So men are comfortable with other men, and they mentor and prop up other men, so it's just more natural. And you step out of the box when you mentor and prop up a woman-or you promote a woman. (ELD)

If I know somebody that knows somebody and he owes me a favor, I'll put him in, and it doesn't matter about your qualifications or your education. It's the good ol' boys. It was here, it is here, and will be here. (HLN)

One woman described how participating in a fantasy football league with her female friends helped her professionally by giving her a chance to engage in conversations that she had previously felt outside of. This example shows how women sometimes feel they must adapt in the workplace to accommodate the existing male setting.

It is really a door opener when you show up to a conversation like that. It's as absolutely silly and asinine as football in the five minutes that the meeting starts, but you show up and you can contribute and it makes a big difference. There's a different level of respect. (BVL)

Perceptions of Female Workers

Participants' statements ranged from regretting the sustained use of stereotypes of women leaders to using those same stereotypes. The majority of women who participated in the focus groups believed that leadership style is unique to each person, and that making generalizations based on gender is a tricky thing to do, but many also said they would prefer to work for a man over a woman. Women leaders in the workplace were often described with stereotypes: as catty and competitive, and moodier than men.

I've spoken with friends about how there are a lot of women in high positions that made it very difficult for the women under them and that a lot of times they've scuttled women's careers of people under them. (LRI) Between women there's always more of a rivalry with that. There is a feeling of competition-I can't let her grow because then maybe she'll get higher than me. (FSM)

Since there's less women in those positions, some of these women feel like they really are something important, superior to everybody else. They finally got it. They are finally there. (FSM)

In every group, participants discussed the need for women to stop the rivalries and work together to support each other and help each other grow.

A lot of times as minorities you may not feel comfortable in a room full of all white men. So I think it's our job to make sure that we're mentoring young women to feel comfortable in different positions. And I don't think that we as women period do that enough, and I don't think as minorities we do it as much as we should. (ELD)

Women's ability to both pull ourselves up and support each other is absolutely critical to driving differences and changing some of these statistics. (FAY)

Few focus group participants reported experiencing direct sexism or gender discrimination in the workplace, but many discussed barriers or difficulties at work due to being a woman. One of these was the persisting perception that women are second-income

earners, and therefore may not need a higher paying position as much as man who is seen to have greater responsibilities. These women discussed what they saw as a bias that works against female workers.

I had a boss say when we were hiring people and comparing a man and a woman for a position, "Well he has to support a family." And I just about came unglued because I thought that is not fair at all for you to offer him more money than you would offer me because I'm a second income earner. That should not come into play. (BVL)

I definitely think that there is a bias there. If you've got a 25-year-old man and a 25-year-old woman and they have both just gotten married. It may not be spoken, but employers probably take that into consideration when deciding who gets the job. (ELD)

The difficulty of being a female leader was also brought up in many of the focus group discussions. Participants often felt like they were in a lose-lose situation where they had to act a certain way to be taken seriously, yet they would be seen as cold or rude if they weren't friendly. In almost every group a participant mentioned how strong women are often thought of as being too aggressive, while strong men are just seen as good leaders.

Some women leaders may try and be hard just like their male counterparts in order to avoid

that stereotype of being seen as emotional or being seen as weak. So even if that's not their true leadership style, they need to do that in order to remain in competition with their male counterparts in similar leadership roles. (FAY)

I've been coached at work about needing to be nicer in emails. No, I don't. This is work, and I take it very seriously. I've worked really hard to get where I am, and I don't want anybody to take that away from me. And I don't want anybody to perceive that I'm too young or too incapable of doing something because I'm a female. So no, I'm not going to use the smiley faces. (BVL)

There's also just that whole attitude that if you're a woman in power then you're just a bitch, but if you're a man in power you're just-a man. (FAY)

PERCEPTIONS OF FAIRNESS

Issues of fairness came up in a number of the focus group discussions. Participants described how they want to be treated as equal to men, and some spoke out against policies that appear to favor women based only on their gender.

Family-friendly policies were often discussed as women's issues, with maternity leave in particular causing some mixed feelings. While participants often discussed how flexible leave policies are beneficial to working mothers, many also mentioned how it can cause strain in the workplace. These women didn't

"...there are a lot of women in high positions that made it very difficult for the women under them."

"...it's our job to make sure that we're mentoring young women..."

"...I just about came unglued because I thought that is not fair at all..."

"These women didn't want to be viewed as less capable or less committed...because they were having or raising children."

want to be viewed as less capable or less committed than their male counterparts because they were having or raising children.

I think women are getting promoted in this area because of mandates from higher-ups that they have to promote a certain amount of women for diversity quotas, which is irritating. I want to be promoted on the basis of what I do, not my gender. (BVL)

When you work for a company, that company needs a certain amount of work to be done. If we choose to take three to seven months off, that work either isn't getting done, or it's being piled on other people. So I do think that's hard from the employer's perspective. (BVL)

We don't have flexibility where I work. I'm okay with it. It is what it is. If I want to do a job, then I need to be there to do it. I don't ask for flexibility at work or have it perceived that I want it because that makes me unequivalent. I don't want to be perceived differently or treated special. I want to be treated the same way everyone else is. Unless it was across the board, I wouldn't want that. (ELD)

WOMEN IN POLITICS

There was an overall consensus among the seven focus groups that Arkansas needs greater representation of women in politics. Participants agreed that only women truly understand the experiences of being a woman, and this perspective is important when determining policy and making decisions that will affect women all over the state. The following quotes reflect participants' first reactions in discussing women in politics.

Why only men? That's only one view. There's another option. Women can give another perspective. (FSM)

I think women would naturally be great leaders. Naturally, because we're nurturing, because we care about families, because we care about children. (LR2)

Having women at the table just sort of seems fundamental. If you're talking about reproductive rights, women's health, women in the workplace, for heaven's sakes, having a bunch of men without a female perspective is absurd. And I don't care that they love their wives and daughters, you still need to have women as a part of that discussion. (FAY)



WHY WOMEN DON'T RUN

While participants want more women in politics, they recognized that a number of barriers exist that keep women from running for political office. Some of the barriers are the same for men and women. Participants discussed how running for office is increasingly expensive, and there was a perception that one practically needs to be independently wealthy to be able to pay for it. The time commitment, especially for legislators, is another barrier. Many said that people don't often have the job flexibility or financial capacity to take off work for weeks or months at a time. Other barriers discussed were more dependent on gender.

The Culture of Arkansas Politics

The culture of politics was seen as keeping many people from running for office, but participants speculated that the nature of the "game" probably plays a role in low female participation. First of all, representation in Arkansas politics has traditionally been white and male. Some participants mentioned that the relative newness of having female representation can make voters less likely to support women and may discourage women from getting involved.

The ruthlessness of politics was also discussed as a barrier to female engagement. Some participants believed that the emotional nature of women makes them less interested in such a competitive activity. One participant said that while she believed there should be more women in politics, she didn't think she could ever vote for a woman president for this reason. The following quotes represent some of the discussions on barriers for women's participation in politics.

Knowing that she wasn't going to have the backing, and that in many counties in Arkansas—where I'm from is very rural—there's no way that she would feel she would even have a fighting chance. (BVL)

I think it's more so that we don't set high standards for ourselves to go out there, because I don't see many women running for those positions here in Arkansas. I see mostly men. (HLN)

Women want to do what's logical and what's best for everybody and if you've got to fight the people who don't want that, it's just not worth your time. You can spend your time making a difference in another area, like through foundations or doing volunteer work. (ELD)



THE STATUS OF WOMEN AFFECTS THE OVERALL ECONOMY OF THE STATE.

I've been approached about running. Then when I go to the meetings I realize that I am too emotional for that. All of the frustration, all of the bickering. I would carry that with me all the time. So I made a decision that I can't be on that committee because of my emotions. Even though I think I might have some insight that could be helpful, but emotionally it would be draining. And I have enough sense not to do that. (HLN)

The Scrutiny

With social media and the 24-hour news cycle, the media can now be more invasive into candidates' lives than ever before. Minute details of a public figure's past and present can be publicized instantly. Many participants expressed that this scrutiny is often worse for women than men. One woman made the point that in our society, a woman's reputation is simply more fragile than a man's. While men can throw fits or show lapses in moral judgment, many said, a woman who cries is deemed too emotional to be an effective leader.

The things that go with politics—the idea that you get picked apart completely. There's a lot of women for very very good, sound reasons are going, "Why exactly do I want to put myself in that? Why would I put myself and my family there?" Where the ego-driven desire to have the role may not be as strong. (FAY)

They're not going to treat them the same. Men can do things like be unfaithful and get away with it. Women can't. And even women will judge women. It's not only men. (FSM)

They are going to be scrutinized in a way that men are not. And things that might be your past indiscretions are going to be magnified whereas the man's indiscretions are "well what's new?" There's a whole other standard for women to put themselves through. (LRI)

Family Responsibilities

Many participants described how the same barriers women have for attaining more competitive positions in the workplace also apply to running for office. They said since women still do the majority of the work in the home and the caregiving for children and aging parents, running for office would be difficult for the family and would involve greater sacrifices. Groups discussed how a woman would need strong support from her partner and family to be able to run and serve.

One reason is that most women don't have wives. Many of the politicians have someone at home taking care of the kids, taking care of the house, taking care of their laundry, taking care of their travel, being their hand-maiden virtually and very few women have that luxury. I mean, even when I was working, my husband was wonderful, but I still would have loved to have a wife. (LRI)

A woman politician had to be driven. You know what I'm saying? She had to make a choice. You have to give up family, give up personal life to be able to be in that same position as guys. She will need a good partner. (FSM)

FUTURE RESEARCH

Focus group participants were also asked to discuss issues related to women they would be interested in learning more about. This feedback will be used to guide the future work of the Women's Foundation of Arkansas. In regards to the 1973/2013 report, participants were interested in breaking down the variables that influence pay to determine if gender wage gaps are caused by discrimination or other factors. A few women discussed how it would be necessary to take into account how women's interests

and family priorities may lead them to take lower paying positions.

One group of women discussed the need for an emphasis on how the status of women affects the overall economy of the state. They wanted the report to go further in describing why people should care about these issues, how they affect not only women, but everyone in Arkansas.

Topics of interest for future study ranged widely, but two common themes involved the education and work opportunities available to Arkansas women. Many participants wanted research to delve deeper into the problems women face to determine root causes and find effective solutions.

FUTURE RESEARCH

These potential research questions were discussed:

- What is the situation for women in Arkansas who re-enter the workforce after taking time off to raise children or care for aging relatives? What are the difficulties involved? How are their careers and incomes affected?
- 2. What are the experiences of immigrant women in the state? What is the status of immigrant women in relation to women in general?
- 3. Why do a number of young women in the state drop out of high school? What do these girls mention as contributing factors to their

decision? What are their recommendations for helping girls stay in school?

- 4. What is the status of female entrepreneurship in Arkansas? What can be done to help women obtain loans and grants to encourage entrepreneurship?
- 5. How can work and leave policies be structured to be more family-friendly? How can Arkansas businesses be encouraged to revisit those policies and see the benefit of more familyfriendly policies?





MORE WORK SHOULD BE DONE TO LEARN ABOUT THE PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN.

LIMITATIONS

As shown previously, around 70% of focus group participants reported a household income over \$50,000, which is above the average Arkansas household income. Also, 33 of the 51 participants responded that they hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Given the relatively low rates of college graduation by men and women in Arkansas, these figures indicate that participant demographics are not what would be considered average for Arkansas women. More work should be done to learn about the perceptions of women with low-income or low educational attainment.

While women of color were included in this project, the way race and ethnicity impact women's issues and perceptions was not truly broached in this report. More work should be done to initiate this conversation, and describe how these factors influence the status of women in Arkansas.

In focus group research there is the potential for participants to be swayed by the group they are in to agree to or say things they may not say on their own. There may also be individuals who are not as comfortable sharing in a group setting. To try to avoid these limitations, attempts were made to ensure that participants felt the environment was a safe one for sharing honest opinions.

THESE ISSUES AREN'T BLACK AND WHITE. WE MUST WORK TO PROVIDE WOMEN WITH OPTIONS TO MAKE CHOICES AS THEY WISH.

CONCLUSION

The seven focus groups conducted across Arkansas provided a chance for women in several communities to share their experiences as women and discuss their opinions on issues related to women. While general themes regarding choice, fairness, and individuality were commonly agreed on, most discussions provoked disagreement among groups, within groups, and even contradictions within individuals.

As a few focus group participants noted, these issues aren't black and white. Women's decisions are based on a number of variables, and are often constrained by the availability of resources—money, support, and time—and the culture of the community of which they are a part. As a state, we must work to provide women with the education and support, and particularly the options, to make choices as they wish.





