

A VOICES FROM THE FIELD REPORT

# BLUEPRINT FOR INVESTING IN GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

SEPTEMBER 2015

THE NEW YORK  
WOMEN'S  
FOUNDATION®

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## THE VOICES FROM THE FIELD SERIES

The New York Women's Foundation's ***Voices from the Field*** series is comprised of four Blueprint for Investing in Women reports that explore the position, needs, and strategies for supporting the security and contributions of low-income NYC women during one of four major developmental periods (i.e., ages 0-8, 9-24, 25-59, and 60+). The series is based on a "Voices from the Field" approach that draws on data obtained from academic and policy research and from interviews with a cross-section of on-the-ground leaders – including members of each age cohorts. Its goals are to: (1) broaden understanding of the key role and issues of NYC's low-income girls and women; (2) stimulate broad, productive discussion of how best to support those roles and address those issues; and (3) catalyze bold investment into promising strategies and solutions.

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FOR INVESTING  
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*EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

**SEPTEMBER 2015**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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*“I’ve been taking care of my little sister for forever, and it is hard work, believe me. It’s being a role model, making decisions, setting priorities, saying what the limits are, and getting things done for someone else. It’s time to think of caregiving as leadership training.”*

– Participant in a focus group of black teen girls<sup>3</sup>

According to the 2010 census, New York City is home to approximately 800,000 girls and young women, ages 9-24.<sup>4</sup> Nearly 75% in that group are girls of color (black, Asian or Latina). Nearly 40% are immigrants or the daughters of immigrants.<sup>5</sup> And a significant segment lives in absolute or near poverty.<sup>6</sup>

The simple math tells us that low-income young women and girls comprise less than 10% of NYC’s total population. But that raw statistic gives little indication of the outsized importance of this group. Enter any low-income immigrant community or community of color, and you will see girls shouldering huge responsibilities from a very early age with minimal acknowledgement and minimal support. Barely into their teen years, they are minding younger siblings and manage major household chores. In mid-adolescence, they are taking on low-paid after-school jobs to supplement household incomes. As soon as they master English, they are serving as translators, interpreters and advocates for older relatives. And – barely out of their adolescence – many are raising children of their own.

**Low-income girls from communities of color and immigrant communities shoulder huge responsibilities from a very early age – generally with minimal acknowledgement or support.**

## THE POTENTIAL, THE CHALLENGES, AND THE OUTCOMES

Experts in the field of youth development agree that the decade and a half between nine and 24 is a coherent and pivotal period in a young woman’s development. That – while the beginning and end-points of that trajectory may be worlds apart – certain traits persist across the full time span. And that those traits are eminently well suited to the tasks of mastering knowledge, building skills and acquiring healthy habits.

In particular, the experts note that throughout these years of maturation girls naturally possess huge stores of mental, physical and creative energies, coupled with a willingness to channel those energies into structured academic, artistic, and athletic pursuits. They care deeply about social issues and want to make a difference in the world. They are open to new ideas and also brimming with ideas of their own. And, while still deeply attached to their primary caregivers, they are eager to build relationships with others and to move towards greater independence.

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from: Institute for Women’s Policy Research. *Black Girls in New York City: Untold Strength and Resilience*. Black Women for Black Girls Giving Circle. Washington D.C. 2009

<sup>4</sup> See Citizens Committee for Children New York: <http://data.cccnewyork.org/data/map/98/child-population#10/16/1/16/14/a>

<sup>5</sup> See: *ibid*: <http://data.cccnewyork.org/data/map/98/child-population#11/17/2/18/14/a>

<sup>6</sup> See: *ibid*: <http://data.cccnewyork.org/data/map/96/child-poverty#9/11/1/14/14/a>.

At the same time, however, the experts caution that girls' ability to parlay their innate assets into long-term health, stability, and economic security depends upon whether they are supported by certain key resources, opportunities and protections. In particular, by:

- Committed, caring adults who validate their sense of self-worth and their aspirations.
- Solid housing, good nutrition, and viable venues for exercise.
- Safety from violence and abuse – and help maintaining autonomy over their own bodies.
- Appropriate academic preparation and coaching.
- The chance to explore and hone diverse talents and competencies.
- Assistance gaining entrée to viable higher educational, vocational, and employment paths.

And, the experts invariably conclude, our society generally and tragically fails to provide low-income NYC girls with that critical foundation of supports. Instead, it leaves most of those girls to contend with a range of acute, poverty- and bias-related challenges, threats, and deprivations:

- Caregivers too overworked, over-stressed, and under-supported to provide consistent reinforcement.
- Pervasive messages denigrating their gender, race, ethnicity, roles and abilities.

- Deteriorated housing conditions; high levels of pollution; limited access to good nutrition; and poorly-maintained, unsafe parks and recreational facilities.
- Ubiquitous violence, bullying, sexual pressures – and outright sexual assault.
- An infrastructure of public services – schools, youth development programs, child welfare services, employment training programs – that were rarely crafted with their specific situations in mind; and that continue to pay little strategic attention to their particular challenges, preferences, and strengths.

The experts aver that – up to a point – the hurdles, resource deficits and responsibilities provide the white heat in which this group's internal resiliencies are forged. That low-income immigrant girls and girls of color tend to become highly self-reliant at a very young age. That they capably manage multiple tasks, navigate diverse cultural and linguistic realities, and bridge the distance between family constraints and the demands of the broader world.

Inevitably, however, the stressors and shortfalls also take deep tolls. Girls who begin their lives in deep poverty are rarely enabled to climb out of that poverty. Those who begin their lives in danger and deprivation are rarely enabled to build lives of solid emotional and physical health.

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A few key statistics illuminate these tragically missed opportunities and sobering results:

- **More than 40% of NYC’s black and Latina girls – and comparable percentages of girls from several new immigrant communities – are denied the care and reinforcement they need to finish high school.**<sup>7</sup> Across the board, those girls’ graduation rates are higher than those of their male counterparts – and also higher than they were ten years ago. Nonetheless, the figures remain appalling. What is more, in too many cases, high school graduation is as far as those girls get. Most receive little guidance towards accessing college, high-quality vocational training, or promising career tracks. And –

absent those crucial advantages – most are left to take whatever low-wage, non-secure jobs they can find. And our society is left without the advantage of their fully-developed talents, skills, and leadership abilities.

- **Low-income teenage girls across all racial and ethnic backgrounds have stunningly poor rates of nutrition and fitness, high rates of asthma and obesity, and high rates of depression.**

NYC’s young Latinas have the highest rates of suicide attempt of any group of teens; fully one in seven tries to take her own life.<sup>8</sup> And – notwithstanding recent progress in the area of reproductive choice – each year, as many as 10% of Latina and black teens still become pregnant; and several thousand take on the relentless responsibilities of motherhood at a point at which they, themselves, may still need considerable nurturing.<sup>9</sup>

- **Several thousand girls a year – almost all girls of color – are pushed into the City’s foster care and juvenile justice systems or into the commercial sex trafficking industry** by ruthless sexual exploitation sustained from earliest childhood. And – once within those grim domains – only the strongest and luckiest truly exit or fully heal. A significant number of the adult women who cycle between the streets and the City’s shelter, psychiatric, and criminal justice systems were once members of this cohort of girls.<sup>10</sup>

**More than 40% of NYC’s low-income black and Latina girls – and roughly comparable percentages of girls from several new immigrant communities – are denied the care and reinforcement they need to finish high school. And even those who manage to graduate are rarely guided into viable college, vocational training, or career tracks. Absent those critical advantages, those girls are left to take whatever low-wage, non-secure jobs they can find. And our economy is denied the advantage of their fully-developed talents, skills, and leadership abilities.**

<sup>7</sup> See Table 1, in Appendix D, taken from Kemple, James J.; *The Condition of New York City High Schools: Examining Trends and Looking Towards the Future*; Research Alliance for New York City Schools; NYU Steinhardt; March, 2013; [http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research\\_alliance/publications/condition\\_of\\_nyc\\_hs](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/condition_of_nyc_hs); and Shih, Howard and Peiyi Xu; The State of Asian American Children; Asian American Federation; NYC, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> 2013 CDC Youth High Risk Behavior Survey: <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/YRBS/>

<sup>9</sup> These statistics are calculated based on Table PO10. Live Births and Pregnancy Rates/Teens Age 15 – 16 of the *Summary of Vital Statistics 2012; City of New York; Appendix A: Supplemental Population, Mortality and Pregnancy Outcome Tables*, Bureau of Vital Statistics, released by NYCDOHMH in January 2014

<sup>10</sup> Hines, Elizabeth G. and Hochman, Joan. *Sex Trafficking of Minors in New York: Increasing Prevention and Collective Action*. New York Women’s Foundation: 2012 ; [http://nywf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/NYWF\\_Sex-Trafficking-of-Minors.pdf](http://nywf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/NYWF_Sex-Trafficking-of-Minors.pdf)

## RESPONSES TO DATE

A core group of institutions – a few public schools, a handful of after-school efforts, a small range of health-care service providers – offer programs specifically designed to develop the assets and address the challenges of New York’s diverse low-income girls and young women. And – overwhelmingly – the participants lucky enough to be served by those programs seize the opportunities they are given and run with them. They improve academically. They enter and complete college at measurably higher rates than their unsupported peers. They create and lead projects of strong benefit to themselves and their communities. They evolve into accomplished artists and athletes. They exercise greater reproductive choice and if they do bear children in their teen years – they manage those children’s needs with greater confidence and skill. They move from trauma to healing, from homelessness to housing stability, from suicide attempt to emotional stability. They build more viable employment paths.

But these strategically-deployed and impressively-successful programs remain *absolutely the exception*. For the most part, policy-makers, providers and funders across the public, nonprofit and philanthropic sectors continue to presume that this population is “doing okay,” fail to notice when it isn’t, and fail to commit themselves to rectifying the situation.

**For the most part, policy-makers, providers and funders across the public, nonprofit and philanthropic sectors continue to presume that low-income girls and young women are “doing okay,” fail to notice when they aren’t, and fail to commit themselves to rectifying the situation.**

In low-income areas, public schools tend to care more about boosting girls’ test scores than about protecting their safety, reinforcing their diverse strengths and talents, or guiding them into appropriate higher education or vocational programs. Few publicly-supported youth development providers focus specifically on promoting girls’ leadership skills and interests. Fewer still strategically address the barriers that can limit their progress. The foster care system has not historically offered robust, gender-specific guidance and support to the adults who take responsibility for girls while they are in that system; is rarely able to provide robust and necessary developmental support to girls placed in individual foster homes; and cannot typically ensure viable housing options for girls leaving the system.

And, finally, most of the City’s workforce development programs are ill-equipped to serve out-of-school/out-of-work youth in general – and young out-of-school/out-of-work women, in particular.

Basically, in short – in the words of one leading advocate – girls of color and immigrant girls remain “a footnote” on the public agenda.

# CONCLUSION

## THE CALL TO ACTION: THE BLUEPRINT FOR INVESTING IN LOW- INCOME GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

For nearly thirty years, The New York Women's Foundation has pursued a multi-front agenda of highlighting the critical roles of NYC's low-income women and girls, fighting for the policies and garnering the funding required to promote their progress, and collaborating with the grass-roots organizations that best understand and support their needs.

The Blueprint that follows was crafted using the same approach as The Foundation's core thought-leadership and grant-making work. It is grounded in a review of the available data and literature and in interviews with top academics, government officials, nonprofit and foundation directors, teachers, youth workers – and with the girls and young women who are ultimately the most authentic experts on their own lives.

It is clear that it will take ongoing partnership with this full array of stakeholders to ensure that every New York girl can grow up in health, safety and economic security. This Blueprint is offered as a first step towards galvanizing the coordinated attention, discussion and commitment towards achieving the necessary broad-based change.

The Blueprint's sector-by-sector recommendations include:

### NON-PROFIT: Sector-by-Sector Recommendations for Action

- Train staff and leadership in all organizations serving youth around the particular needs, strengths and situations of diverse groups of low-income girls.
- When formulating programs for girls, seek guidance from seasoned and successful providers of girl-focused services, and – even more importantly – from the girls themselves.
- For providers supporting women's employment – focus more strategically and proactively on the particular needs of out-of-school, out-of-work (OSOW) young women, ages 16-24.

## PUBLIC: Sector-by-Sector Recommendations for Action

### CONTINUE IMPROVING OVERALL CONDITIONS IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES, THROUGH:

- Ongoing and expanded enforcement of housing code standards.
- Ongoing and expanded enforcement of environmental protections and standards.
- Robust expansion of access to nutritious food and safe and well-equipped recreational facilities.
- Development of strategic, community-informed and -guided violence prevention efforts.

### TAILOR DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (DOE) APPROACHES TO MORE SPECIFICALLY SUPPORT GIRLS' CHALLENGES, STRENGTHS, AND LONG-RANGE PROSPECTS OF ACADEMIC AND ECONOMIC SUCCESS BY:

- More rigorously enforcing the Title IX legislation that was put in place to protect girls from bullying, violence, and sexual assault; and adopting restorative justice practices that incorporate student perspectives into shaping rules and consequences – and robustly support students' developmental and behavioral needs.
- Directing professional development towards helping teachers to better: (1) support diverse learning styles and levels of academic preparation; (2) provide vibrant and diverse opportunities for girls' leadership; (3) frame learning experiences within projects that strongly incorporate individual inquiry, teamwork, and concrete, real-world applications; (4) address behaviors that reflect intense personal challenges.
- Creating or reinstating high-quality arts, sports and community service programming through both internal curriculum expansion and strategic partnerships.

- Expanding the cadre of school-based guidance counselors – and increasing training and support for those counselors.
- Expanding and tailoring school-based efforts (e.g., the new career and technical assistance programs (CTEs)) in ways that will provide girls with strong entrée into promising “non-traditional” (and well-paid) employment tracks.

### TAILOR DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (DYCD) APPROACHES TO MORE PROACTIVELY SUPPORT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN BY:

- Building the ability of staff members from contracting organizations to: (1) take into account the particular interests, strengths, and needs of diverse, low-income girls; (2) proactively include girls in key leadership and program-planning roles; and (3) promote gender respect and equity in all program activities.
- Increasing investment into high-quality programming for high-school-age students; and better addressing the factors (e.g., responsibility for minding younger siblings or for earning money; parental concerns about the hours or location of programming) that can impede teenage girls' participation in that programming.
- Increasing investment in the Summer Youth Employment (SYEP), the Out of School Youth (OSY) and the Young Adult Internship (YAIP) programs– with a strong emphasis on linking girls to living-wage jobs and industries.

**MAINTAIN AND FURTHER STRENGTHEN THE YOUTH- AND GIRL-FOCUSED PROGRAMS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE (DOHMH), BY:**

- Continuing to expand school-based clinical and mental health services and reproductive health services.
- Continuing to expand and strengthening school-based – and general public – campaigns against cigarette smoking and substance abuse.
- Working with Latina-serving organizations to create suicide prevention programs for the girls of that community, and expanding collaboration with the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) to strengthen developmentally-focused mental health supports for girls in the foster care and Close-to-Home (CTH) systems.
- Expanding school-based sexual education programs and working with ACS and DYCD to provide better options and supports to girls whose situations put them at particularly high risk of coerced, unwanted, or premature pregnancy and parenting.
- Expanding the *Nurse-Family Partnership* program that provides information, coaching, linkages, and hands-on role modeling for young, first-time mothers.

**STRENGTHEN THE CAPACITIES OF ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN’S SERVICES (ACS) TO SUPPORT GIRLS IN FOSTER CARE AND CLOSE-TO-HOME (CTH) PROGRAMS, BY:**

- Providing in-depth, gender-specific training and supports for the staff members, foster parents, and biological parents who have a role in caring for girls who have experienced ruthless abuse, deprivation and violence.
- Increasing the access of girls who are placed in individual foster homes to youth development services that can promote healing; provide a

sense of community; and reinforce academic, creative, athletic, self-defense, and independent living skills.

- Giving renewed consideration to the ways in which programmatically rich, well-staffed, community-based, community-supported group care might be the most promising and viable option for an expanded segment of the teenage girls in the foster care system.
- Working with the City, housing providers, and youth development organizations to expand the supply of well-designed and comprehensively-supportive affordable housing for the girls who exit those systems.

**IMPROVE THE CAPACITIES OF THE DEPARTMENT OF SMALL BUSINESS SERVICES (SBS), THE HUMAN RESOURCES ADMINISTRATION (HRA), THE NASCENT OFFICE OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, AND INDIVIDUAL WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS TO BETTER SERVE THE NEEDS OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL/ OUT-OF-WORK (OSOW) YOUNG WOMEN, BY:**

- Promoting system-wide understanding of the particular needs (e.g., training, child care, leadership development) and potential situations (e.g., homelessness, trauma, sexual exploitation and violence) of this population.
- Ensuring that linkages between SBS and Community Partners include providers with the specific commitment and capacity to support those needs and situations.
- Creating similar collaborations between Community Partners and HRA – and continuing to expand the definition and flexibility of the activities mandated for cash assistance recipients.
- Sharing information about and connections to “decent-wage” jobs across all relevant City agencies and expanding City support for employers willing to work with this population.

## PHILANTHROPIC: Sector-by-Sector Recommendations for Action

- Spearhead a broad-based, unflagging campaign bringing together policy-makers, heads of key City agencies, heads of major and community-based nonprofits – and diverse low-income girls and young women – to create more appropriate policies and programs for this population.
- Underwrite the development and dissemination of position papers and evaluations of promising approaches, the creation of forums, and the establishment and promulgation of guidelines and training materials for relevant providers.
- Seek out and support effective individual nonprofit programs, and – also – partnerships promoting better service delivery.
- Fund advocacy organizations working to create and expand public policies and programs benefiting diverse groups of low-income girls and young women.

## RECAP OF BLUEPRINT TAKEAWAYS

- Girls and young women represent a critically-important group within low-income immigrant communities and communities of color.** From their very earliest years, those girls provide essential caregiving, advocacy and wage-earning assistance to their families; and – as they grow up – they almost inevitably evolve into the principal (or sole) family providers and support systems in those communities.
- A combination of pernicious, intersecting factors – poverty, racial/ethnic prejudice, gender bias and societal neglect – place enormous barriers in this population’s way.** Low-income New York girls grapple with pervasively denigrating messages and poor environmental conditions. They face strong threats of violence, ubiquitous sexual pressures, and – all too often – outright sexual assault. And they negotiate a service infrastructure that was never crafted to address their particular situations, needs, or potential. While most manage to survive, few achieve truly robust long-term health, safety or economic security; and many enter adult lives of chronic homelessness, exploitation, and abuse.
- A determined but highly circumscribed group of providers are serving this population with impressive success.** By listening to low-income girls’ and young women’s own voices, tailoring services to meet their specific needs, and tapping their powerful innate ambitions and strengths, these providers are boosting academic performance, reinforcing leadership skills, measurably increasing health, supporting strategic choice, and positioning this population for better long-range educational and employment opportunities. They offer an invaluable, proven set of best practices to build on. But they remain the absolute exception – and the numbers that they reach remain tightly circumscribed.
- Investing boldly and strategically into supporting low-income girls and young women offers the unparalleled opportunity to produce game-changing results.** Besides increasing the overall quality of life for those girls, it will expand the skilled labor force that our economy so desperately needs; tap huge new wellsprings of enterprise, creativity, and leadership; and improve overall odds for the children that those girls will eventually raise – often singlehandedly. It will help shrink the homeless shelter and public assistance systems that are the last resort for so many sexually traumatized and educationally deprived girls, once they reach adulthood. And it is the most promising route for finally reducing the generation-spanning, citywide 20% poverty rate that is rooted in decades of indifference to this critical group of New Yorkers.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The *Blueprint for Investing in Girls and Young Women* is based on the input of the leading experts in the field of youth development, health, foster care, juvenile justice, and education. More than a hundred and twenty advocates, philanthropists, scholars, service providers, and government officials – key staff members of the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), Department of Education (DOE), the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) and the NYS Office of Family and Children’s Services (OFCS); leaders of several major funding and advocacy institutions; and staff and girls across schools, health clinics, and youth-serving organizations in every corner of the city – generously shared their knowledge, experience, and insights. Their guidance was invaluable to this report and is deeply appreciated.

Strong thanks are also due to the staff of NYWF – who offered exceptional collective and individual guidance on early report outlines, presentations, and drafts; and whose ongoing work in support of the city’s low-income girls and young women continues to be groundbreaking and inspiring.

There is clearly still much to be done in support of the current and future economic security, safety, health, and contributions of our city’s girls and young women. But there also exists a robust and diverse cadre of organizations, funders, policy-makers and individuals channeling their best energies and thinking towards reaching those goals. The approaches of these far-seeing providers and activists are proven; their achievements are impressive; their methods offer clear guidance for expansion and replication. It is up to us, as a society, to better recognize, reinforce, and build on their efforts and vision.

## ABOUT THE NEW YORK WOMEN'S FOUNDATION

The New York Women's Foundation (NYWF) was launched in 1987 as an alliance of women of diverse means and backgrounds leveraging their collective resources to promote broad-based economic progress and social justice. The Foundation works on a range of interrelated fronts (workforce development, violence prevention, reproductive health and choice) to advance the economic security of low-income women and girls, and – thereby – the economic strength of the city as a whole.

All NYWF's efforts reflect the conviction that women are the best experts on their own positions, situations, and goals. Its programs are carried out in close partnership with grass-roots, women-centered organizations possessing firsthand, authentic knowledge of their constituents' issues. Its events and publications highlight the challenges and celebrate the triumphs of the women leaders who are the bedrock of communities across the city – and the world.

Since its founding, NYWF has built a track record of impressive influence and impact. It is currently the seventh-largest philanthropic leader in New York City's tightly-packed workforce development field. In 2015, it will raise and invest \$6 million into best-practice programs reaching over 350,000 individual low-income women, moving them and their families measurably closer to safety, health, and financial stability.

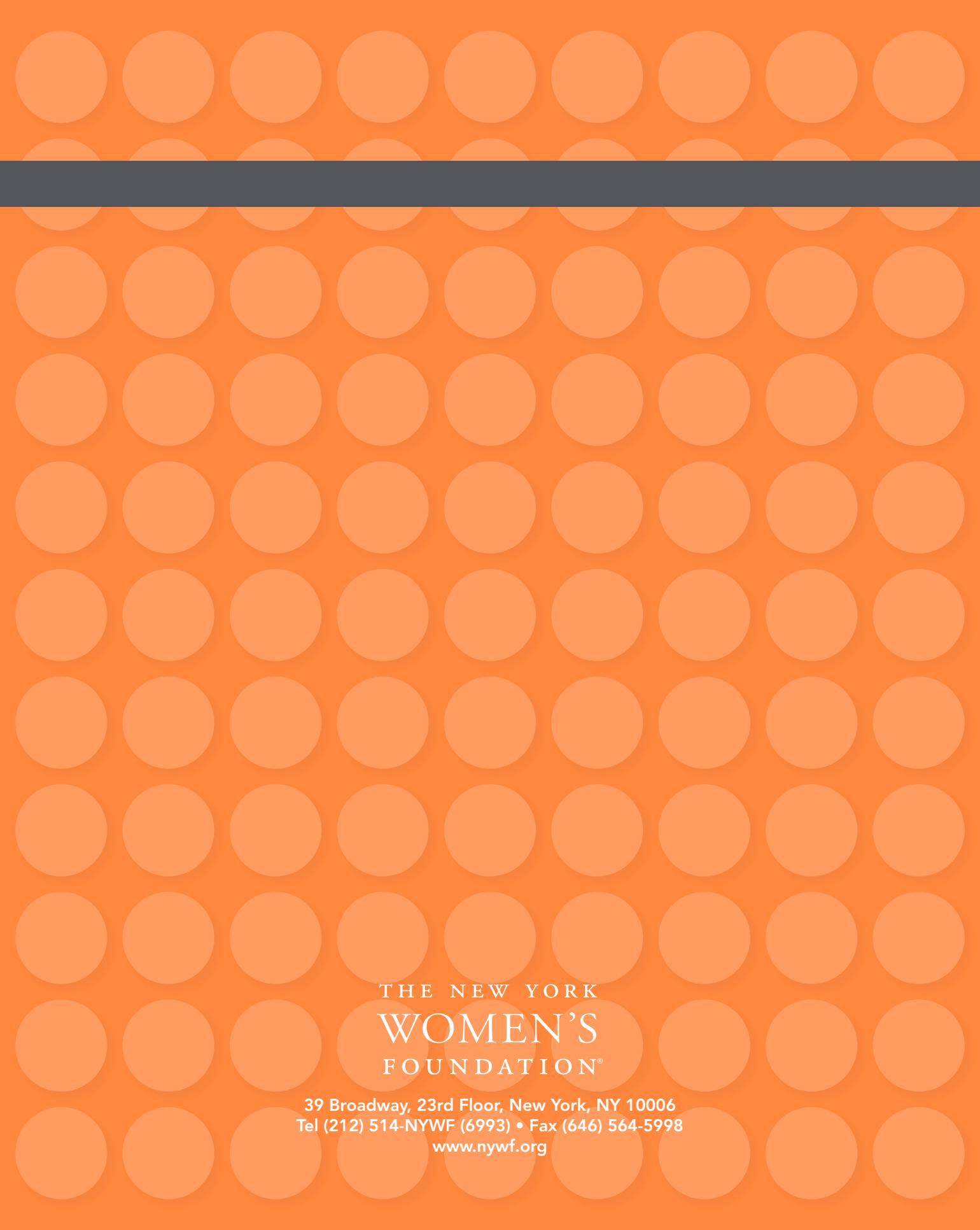
## MISSION

The New York Women's Foundation is a voice for women and a force for change. We are a cross-cultural alliance of women catalyzing partnerships and leveraging human and financial capital to achieve sustained economic security and justice for women and girls. With fierce determination, we mobilize hearts, minds and resources to create an equitable and just future for women, families and communities in New York City.

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<sup>1</sup> New York Community Trust study, 2012.





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