



# The State of Opportunity in America

## Women and Opportunity

*Women have made considerable progress over the last several decades in dismantling barriers to opportunity in education, employment, representation in government, and other domains. But opportunity remains severely constrained for many women, particularly low-income women, women of color, and immigrant women. For example, these groups continue to experience inequitable wages relative to men, often work in female-dominated jobs, face persistent gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace, and increasingly confront barriers to publicly-funded reproductive health care. These are but a few of the signs that opportunity is in crisis for millions of women.*

### Mobility

Everyone who works hard should be able to advance and participate fully in the economic, political, and cultural life of the nation—that is, any child in America should be able to fulfill his or her full potential, and economic status at birth (or gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality) should not pre-determine ultimate achievements.

- *Women-Owned Businesses.* Women-owned businesses remain a much smaller proportion than, for example, women's representation in the workforce. And these businesses are disproportionately concentrated in the services industries, as **nearly 70% of all total net income among women sole proprietorships occurred in these fields.**<sup>1</sup>
- *Wage Distribution.* While women's wages increased at all income levels, women in the highest income brackets enjoyed the greatest real wage gains relative to lower income female workers, and these gains did not eliminate the gender gap in wages. Moreover, Hispanic women remain disproportionately represented among low and very-low wage earners.<sup>2</sup>

### Equality

True opportunity requires that we all have equal access to the benefits, burdens, and responsibilities of our society regardless of race, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, or other aspects of what we look like or where we come from. Ensuring equal opportunity means not only ending overt and intentional discrimination, but also rooting out subconscious bias and reforming systems that unintentionally perpetuate exclusion. It requires proactive efforts to remake our institutions in ways that ensure fairness and inclusion.

- *Employment.* Women remain concentrated in traditionally female jobs such as service sector, clerical, and administrative office positions. Nearly one in four nursing and residential care workers are African-American women, **over 80% of office and clerical workers are women**, and Hispanic women are disproportionately employed in crop production, agriculture, and personal and laundry service jobs.<sup>3</sup>

### Voice

Americans embrace democracy as a system that depends on the ability of all of us to participate in the public dialogue. This democratic system

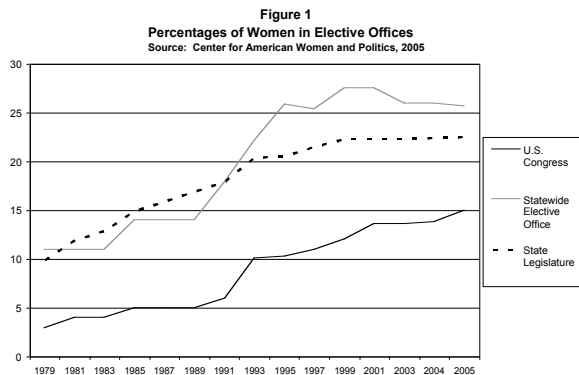
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provides the right to vote and freedom from censorship, as well as affirmative opportunities to participate in the decisions that affect us and to be part of the nation's social and cultural life.

- *Representation in Elective Office.* Women's gains in attaining elective office in the 1970s and 1980s have leveled off, and in some cases have declined slightly.<sup>4</sup>



- *Representation in the Media.* Women continue to face barriers to inclusion in the news media. More than three-fourths of news stories contain male sources, but only one-third include a woman as a source. Just over two in five newspaper stories contain a female source.<sup>5</sup>

### Redemption

Over the last two decades, the scope of the criminal justice system has been expanded as a means of social control. But this expansion has had a dampening effect on opportunity. Opportunity is threatened by high rates of incarceration and the disproportionate impact of the criminal justice system on low-income communities of color.

- *Incarceration.* The criminal justice system responds to women offenders more harshly than it did three decades ago. The rates of women convicted of homicide are at their lowest levels since 1976 yet **the number of**

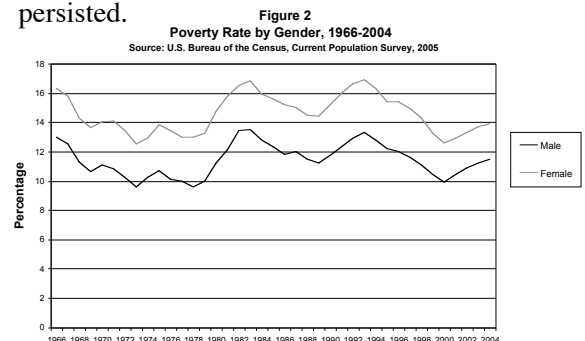
**women sentenced to death has increased more than fourfold since 1980.**<sup>6</sup>

- *Treatment and Service Needs While Incarcerated.* Forty-Four percent of women under correctional authority report that they have been physically or sexually assaulted at some time in their lives. About half of women in state prisons had been using drugs or alcohol at the time they committed the offense for which they were incarcerated. **About seven in ten women involved in the criminal justice system have minor children.** And in 1997 an estimated 2,200 women in state prisons, about 3.5% of the female inmate population, were HIV-positive.<sup>7</sup>

### Security

Americans believe that we are all entitled to a basic level of education, economic well-being, health care, and other protections necessary to human dignity. Without this security, it is impossible to access society's other rights and responsibilities or to enjoy full opportunity. Moreover, international human rights commitments—many of which were initiated by the United States—obligate our nation to ensure basic levels of healthcare, housing, and income security.

- *Gender Gaps in Poverty.* The poverty rate has increased for four consecutive years, from 11.3% in 2000 to 12.7% in 2004, and the gap in poverty between women and men has persisted.



Annually since 2000, **23% more women than**

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**men have been among the ranks of the impoverished in the United States**—a gap that, by and large, has not changed since 1966.<sup>8</sup>

- *Housing.* Women age 35 to 44 are twice as likely as men to experience severe housing cost burdens. **One-quarter of the nation's single mothers spend more than half of their income on housing**, compared to one in ten households headed by single fathers.<sup>9</sup>
- *Physical Safety.* Almost one-quarter of women in the Justice Department's National Violence Against Women survey reported that they had been raped or physically assaulted by a spouse, co-habiting partner, or date at some point in

their lifetime.<sup>10</sup> Domestic violence is the largest single cause of injury to women age 15 to 44 in the United States, constituting 20% of nonfatal violence against women in 2001.<sup>11</sup> **Almost 5.3 million incidents of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) occur each year** among U.S. women age 18 and older. An estimated 1.5 million women annually are victims of rape or sexual assault by a domestic partner. Many are repeatedly assaulted, resulting in about 4.8 million intimate partner assaults per year.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusions and Recommendations

*Without a renewed national commitment and concrete policy changes to reverse these negative trends, the promise of opportunity for all is at great risk for this and future generations. Fulfilling the promise of opportunity for all will be one of the great challenges of the twenty-first century. It will require bold leadership from our government, civic, and business leaders, creative and effective solutions, and the sustained political will of the American people. Fortunately, however, a significant body of pragmatic policies has proven effective in expanding opportunity in concrete and measurable ways. The State of Opportunity report recommends six types of policy approaches:*

- Regularly assess the impact of public policies on opportunity;
- Modernize safety net programs that help people meet their basic needs, starting with equitable and affordable healthcare for all Americans;
- Build Americans' skills to adapt to a globalizing economy, evolving technology, and an increasingly diverse population;
- Renew a commitment to human rights in the United States;
- Prioritize crime prevention and rehabilitation over increased incarceration; and
- Protect voting rights and promote political participation.

<sup>1</sup> Small Business Administration, "Dynamics of Women-Operated Sole Proprietorships, 1990-1998," March 2003, [www.sba.gov](http://www.sba.gov) (4 October 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Economic Policy Institute analysis of Current Population Survey data, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, *Women of Color: Their Employment in the Private Sector*, July 2003, [www.eeoc.gov](http://www.eeoc.gov) (21 September 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Center for American Women and Politics, "Women in Elective Office, 2005," [www.cawp.rutgers.edu](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu) (31 August 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Project for Excellence in Journalism, *The Gender Gap: Women are Still Missing as Sources for Journalists*, May 2005, <http://www.journalism.org/gender.pdf> (11 August 2005).

<sup>6</sup> L.A. Greenfeld and T.L. Snell, "Women Offenders," Bureau of Justice Statistics (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, December 1999 [revised October 2000]).

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2004*, Current Population Reports, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> The Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, "The State of the Nation's Housing, 2004," [www.jchs.harvard.edu](http://www.jchs.harvard.edu) (11 July 2005).

<sup>10</sup> P. Tjaden and N. Thoennes, "The Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey" (Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> American College of Emergency Physicians, *Domestic Violence*, [www.acep.org](http://www.acep.org) (4 November 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Intimate Partner Violence: Fact Sheets," October 2005, [www.cdc.gov/ncipc](http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc) (4 November 2005).

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