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Esther Peralez-Dieckmann: Santa Clara County women, especially Latinas, still face Challenges

By Esther Peralez-Dieckmann

Special to the Mercury News

Posted: 04/16/2012 07:27:57 PM PDT

Updated: 04/16/2012 07:27:57 PM PDT

Santa Clara County history is filled with great women leaders. At one point there were so many female elected officials in this region, it was dubbed the "Feminist Capital of the World." It is one of the few counties in the country with an office for women and girls – the Office of Women's Policy, which has provided regional leadership on issues affecting women and girls and has received national recognition for its efforts to address the needs of incarcerated women and other key work.

Santa Clara County is considered a model system for collaboration to combat domestic violence and human trafficking. It is home to an award winning Commission on the Status of Women, whose early advocacy for women in the family court and criminal justice systems led to statewide reform efforts and legislation.

In spite of these accolades, women and girls in Silicon Valley still face many challenges and inequities. Last month the Office of Women's Policy, with help from 32 local experts, released the "State of Women and Girls in Santa Clara County," a report on how women and girls are faring in four key areas: education, economics, health and violence and crime. The findings are both hopeful and troubling.

We have closed the achievement gap between girls and boys K-12, and women now earn more bachelor degrees than men. Yet we continue to see under-representation of women in higher wage, nontraditional sectors such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Women face a persistent wage gap, earning 23 percent less than men for the same job in 80 percent of the labor categories in the U.S., and the wage gap in Santa Clara County is higher than the national average.

The number of girls who are overweight is declining, but the prevalence of overweight-obese women has increased in recent years and currently represents 49 percent of all women. Women report poorer physical and mental health than men do.

Educational data reveal racial and ethnic disparities and inequities that put certain groups of women at a much greater disadvantage. Latinas are less likely to be kindergarten ready, most likely to become teen mothers and, along with African-American girls, are least likely to graduate.

Not surprisingly, Latinas make up the largest percentage of low-wage workers and are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice and adult correctional systems in Santa Clara County. Clearly, addressing the needs of Latinas should be a community priority not only due to the cost of these problems but also the missed opportunity to tap into girls' full potential.

Women are a formidable and growing economic force. Globally, they represent the largest market opportunity. It is anticipated that women's consumer spending will rise to \$28 trillion in the next few years. Studies show that investing in women and girls reduces poverty, stimulates the economy and results in better health and nutrition for families. Significant improvements in GDP have been observed in countries where women are given access to capital, education and training.

Recent studies show that companies with women in leadership are more successful during tough economic conditions, and are able to have higher percentages of profits and assets than other companies. However, women's ability to advance is compromised by discrimination, inequity or lack of opportunity.

We all want to move our economy forward, put Americans back to work, and have a healthy, safe and prosperous future. But we will never get there if we continue to leave women and girls behind.

Esther Peralez-Dieckmann is a mother and is the director of the County of Santa Clara Office of Women's Policy. (The "State of Women and Girls" report is available at <http://owp.sccgov.org> and comments may be directed to owp@ceo.sccgov.org.) She wrote this for this newspaper.
