

CREATING GENDER PARITY IN SECTOR INITIATIVES

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Introduction

Demand-driven workforce development initiatives hold great promise for moving low-wage individuals into family-supporting jobs. However, because of their prevalent focus on high-wage, high-skill industries, most sector projects target male-dominated industries—industries that do not currently offer equitable earnings or advancement potential for women workers. Ensuring that women benefit equally from sectoral approaches requires gender-sensitive models that acknowledge and combat the systemic barriers present for women in nontraditional training and employment (occupations in which women comprise less than a quarter of the workforce).

The purpose of this document is to provide workforce development and sector professionals an outline of the key components of a gender-responsive sector project. The paper will first provide a brief overview of the severe under-representation of women in the high-wage, high-skill sectors often targeted for demand-driven workforce development initiatives. It will also explore some of the reasons behind women's lack of representation in these lucrative and stable careers, highlighting the most common barriers faced by low-income women seeking to train for and enter nontraditional employment. The second part of the paper will discuss the ways these barriers should be addressed in sectoral projects to ensure that women benefit equally from these successful workforce development projects. While the identified elements would ideally be included in program design from the start, they can also be incorporated into any existing sector project to promote women's equal entrance into and success within the selected field.

PART I

The Rise of Sector Initiatives

In recent years, discussions around workforce development have included concerns over a skilled

worker shortage and its potential negative effect on America's global competitiveness in a changing world economy. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, the ten fastest-growing occupations during the next decade will require a postsecondary degree or job training.¹ The number of jobs requiring at least an associate's degree or vocational award will grow by 16 percent in that time.² Nearly half (48 percent) of current jobs require skilled workers—those who have earned at least a high-school diploma but less than a four-year degree.³ While a full quarter of Americans are in the ranks of the working poor,⁴ employers across the country have reported a lack of skilled workers to fill open positions.⁵

In response to this need, many workforce development organizations are focusing on sector initiatives: industry-based, demand-driven training programs that connect job seekers to employers. Sector approaches focus on emergent high-skill industries in the local economy and create training programs that help to move low-wage, low-skilled job seekers into positions within those industries. These training programs target jobs that offer family-supporting wages, opportunities for advancement, and a path out of poverty. Sector projects involve a variety of stakeholders or partners, including community or technical colleges, community-based organizations, local government representatives, economic development offices, and local workforce investment boards or One-Stop employment centers.

Sectoral initiatives also work to encourage systems change within the chosen sector, most often by improving the working conditions and opportunities of prospective and incumbent workers in the industry in ways that also benefit employers and the local economy. While the benefits to workers from this kind of systems change is clear, employers also benefit from a diverse workforce, increased retention of employees, and increased productivity of employees.

The potential of sector initiatives from both the

the workforce and the economic development standpoint has encouraged millions of dollars of investment by States, the federal government, and national foundations in demand-driven workforce development projects. In 2007 the Annie E. Casey, Ford, and Hitachi Foundations and the U.S. Department of Labor announced the creation of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, a \$50 million, five-year effort to strengthen and expand workforce initiatives around the country, with a particular focus on sector-based programs. This investment alone is slated to help 50,000 individuals enter career-oriented jobs.

Lack of Gender Parity

While large-scale investments into effective workforce development initiatives are promising, without specific programmatic elements included, these trends in workforce development are unlikely to benefit women workers to the same degree they benefit men. Gender disparities in sector projects are particularly problematic because women comprise the majority of the low-wage workforce, the very population whose employment prospects sector initiatives strive to improve.

Sector projects by definition focus on high-wage, high-skill, and high-demand occupations and industries—which tend to be largely male-dominated—and thus, women may have limited access to and less success in these projects. Some may be discouraged by untrained program staff or may self-select away from a training program that is nontraditional for their gender, while women who choose to participate in the program are likely to face systemic barriers to placement, wage equity, retention, and advancement common to women in male-dominated fields. (See “Women’s Barriers to Success in Nontraditional Employment” below.) Left unaddressed, these barriers prevent low-income women from fully reaping the benefits of participation in sectoral initiatives.

Even successful sector projects can fail to achieve gender parity in outcomes. For example, as a recent paper published by the Crittenton Women’s Union⁶ points out, examination of performance data from The Aspen Institute’s Sectoral Employment

Development Learning Project (SEDLP) reveals a significant discrepancy in outcomes for project participants when analyzed by gender. The project as a whole saw an impressive increase in participants’ median annual income from an average of \$12,295 to \$17,363 one year after training and to \$21,216 two years after training. And indeed, women participants’ income increased by nearly \$4 an hour in those two years, from a baseline of \$7.32 to \$11.06. Astonishingly, though, this increased wage is still lower than that of the average male who had yet to begin any training; men’s median baseline wage was \$11.26. Even two years after the completion of targeted, demand-driven training, women participants were still at a financial disadvantage compared to the average male participant before training. These performance data, especially in light of the large investments being made in sector projects, powerfully underscore the importance of designing projects that acknowledge and address systemic biases against women in the workforce and that stress gender parity as a performance goal.

Women’s Under-Representation in High-Wage Sectors

The great majority of women (80 percent) are clustered in just 20 of 420 occupational fields, many working jobs characterized by low wages and limited opportunities for advancement. (See Table 1 on the following page.) Given women’s segregation into lower-paying service jobs, it is no surprise that male-dominated industries are more popular for sector initiatives which target emergent high-skill areas. In fact, the four industries most often selected for sector projects are health care (36 percent), manufacturing (27 percent), construction (7 percent), and information technology (IT) (5 percent); of these, three are male-dominated.⁷

But as Table 2 (also on the following page) shows, women are doubly disadvantaged in the current sector environment. Not only are they grossly underrepresented in the higher-paying manufacturing, construction, and IT industries, but women’s wages in each of these industries are significantly lower than men’s—by as much as \$523 a week in the IT field. Furthermore, even in

Table 1. Top 10 Industries with Highest Concentration of Female Employees

Occupation	Total Women Employed (in thousands)	Total Employed (in thousands)	Percent Women	Women's Median Weekly Wage
Secretaries and Administrative Assistants	2,578	2,668	97%	\$597
Elementary & Middle School Teachers	2,081	2,595	80%	\$847
Registered Nurses	1,773	1,965	90%	\$976
Nursing, Psychiatric, & Home Health Aides	1,174	1,344	87%	\$416
Customer Service Repre- sentatives	1,085	1,570	69%	\$521
Cashiers	1,074	1,459	74%	\$344
First-line Supervisors/ Managers of retail sales workers	1,004	2,352	43%	\$538
First-line Supervisors/ Managers of office and administrative support	990	1,396	71%	\$675
Accountants & Auditors	942	1,519	62%	\$858
Receptionists & Information Clerks	940	1,019	92%	\$480
Average Wage				\$625
Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Household Data Annual Averages 2007				

Table 2. Top Five Targeted Industries for Sector Initiatives

Targeted Sector	Total (in thousands)	Number of Men (in thousands)	Percent Men	Average Weekly Earnings	Number of Women (in thousands)	Percent Women	Average Weekly Earnings	Difference in earnings	Difference in annual earning
Manufacturing	8389	5992	71%	\$641	2396	29%	\$443	-\$198	\$10,296
Health care	2187	261	12%	\$522	1926	88%	\$447	-\$75	\$3,900
Construction	7227	7071	98%	\$648	156	2%	\$573	-\$75	\$3,900
IT	2976	2245	75%	\$1244	731	25%	\$721	-\$523	\$27,196
Average wage							\$546		
Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Household Data Annual Averages 2007									

healthcare, the one sector women dominate, women's wages continue to fall below men's by an average of \$75 a week—nearly \$4,000 a year.

More startling, however, is the fact that women's average weekly earnings in these high-wage, high-growth sectors are less than their average weekly earnings in low-paying, female-dominated jobs: \$546 a week compared to \$625. This gives women little incentive to enter into sectors targeted by workforce and economic development projects: such an action

could very well leave them worse off than when they started. The combination of occupational segregation in targeted sectors and the wage gap both inside and outside them make ensuring gender parity in sector projects absolutely critical for low-income women.

Women's Barriers to Success in Nontraditional Employment

Women are underrepresented in high-wage, high-skill occupations partly because they face extensive

barriers to placement, retention, and advancement in these industries. Whether due to concerns around transportation and child care, or to systemic biases inherent to the workplace, very few women manage to succeed in male-dominated sectors. Women's under-representation in these occupations is not only detrimental to their personal economic security—continuously excluding half of the working population from these growing, lucrative careers also negatively impacts the economic development of individual communities and the global competitiveness of the U.S. as a whole.

It is important to note that while these barriers are a hindrance to all women, they often have an even greater impact on low-income women—the very demographic that sector projects aim to help. Recognizing women's barriers to high-wage, high-skill employment is a critical first step to designing sector training programs that achieve gender parity in outcomes.

Family Care Responsibilities

Women are more likely than men to have family care responsibilities; in fact, research suggests that between 59 and 75 percent of family caregivers are women.^{8,9,10} Caregiving responsibilities significantly impact women's employment choices, security, and advancement.

For instance, one in four women leaves her job around the time of the birth of her first child,¹¹ and among mothers with children younger than one year old, only 53.8 percent are in the labor force.¹² When these women seek re-entry, they face substantial barriers to employment; only 74 percent succeed in re-entering the workforce and only 40 percent make it back into full time employment.¹³

The lack of safe and affordable child care services is also an issue for many women in deciding whether or when to return to work.¹⁴ And, child care restrictions often inhibit women from taking jobs with extremely early, late, or long hours, often a requirement for jobs in the construction and manufacturing fields.

Additionally, nearly half (43 percent) of private-sector U.S. workers do not have access to any paid sick

leave.¹⁵ When workers without sick leave stay home to take care of a sick child or relative, they risk losing their jobs. One case study found that job loss due to family illness is twice as likely to happen to women workers as men¹⁶—ostensibly because women are so much more likely to be their families' primary caregivers.

Women's caregiving responsibilities also extend to elderly parents, a fact that can have direct implications for job advancement. As a result of elder care responsibilities, one-third of caregivers decrease their work hours, 29 percent pass on promotions, training, or assignments, 22 percent take a leave of absence from work, 20 percent switch from full-to part-time employment, 16 percent quit, and 13 percent retire early.¹⁷

While caregiving responsibilities can limit a woman's advancement and persistence in all sectors, when a woman enters a male-dominated sector these caregiving responsibilities set her apart from her male coworkers and can lead to employer bias, especially if she is one of the only women on a job site.

Sexual Harassment

The prevalence of sexual harassment in male-dominated workplaces influences women's employment retention. The construction industry offers a good example: according to a 1999 report from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 41 percent of female construction workers had suffered from sexual harassment, including unwanted physical contact and sexually suggestive comments.¹⁸ Female construction workers have filed the second largest number of sexual harassment complaints with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission of workers in any industry.¹⁹ Hostility at work can have a profound impact on the safety and persistence of female construction workers; in fact, there is currently a 60 percent attrition rate for female apprentices.²⁰

Glass Ceiling

Women who do persist in nontraditional employment continue to face barriers to advancement into their company's and industry's top spots. The glass ceiling is particularly apparent within the nontraditional

industries most often targeted for sector projects; women make up 23 percent of managers in manufacturing,²¹ twelve percent of managers in construction,²² and just six percent of CEOs in information technology.²³ This dearth of women in leadership positions makes the advancement of other women up through the ranks that much more difficult.

PART II

Components of a Gender-Responsive Sector Project

Creating a sector project that achieves gender parity in outcomes requires that the barriers to women's entrance, retention, and advancement within nontraditional sectors be acknowledged and directly addressed in program design. This section outlines various program elements that can be incorporated into any sector project to encourage equitable outcomes for both low-income women and low-income men.

Recruitment

Create gender-neutral marketing materials and class descriptions.

To equally encourage both low-income women and low-income men to consider participating in sector-based training, all class marketing materials, fliers, and class descriptions must be gender neutral. Paper and web-based materials should also include photos of women, men, and minorities in training and in employment situations for the selected sector.

Conduct living wage assessments with all program participants during the intake process.

As was demonstrated above, there are stark differences in starting wages, long-term earning potential, and advancement potential between female-dominated and male-dominated industries. Additionally, due to their often-present caregiving responsibilities, low-income women require family-supporting wages to ensure economic security for themselves and their families. For women to make an educated choice about participating in sector training, it is critical

that they understand their income needs and their earning potential in various occupations. Having these numbers down on paper can also be a helpful tool for retention during the training program, and may remind women of increased financial security that working in nontraditional employment can bring.

Training and Service Delivery

Include child care and transportation supports in the training.

There is a high likelihood that women participants will be the primary caretakers for children. Without access to safe and affordable child care during training, these women will be much less likely to begin and to persist in the program. Reliable transportation is also necessary; lack of transportation can be a significant barrier to training for participants, especially in rural areas. One of the most critical design elements of a gender-sensitive sector project is to build supports for child care and transportation into the training from the start.

Research the potential of on-site child care provision, and at the very least ensure that case managers have the ability to make referrals to safe child care facilities. If possible, offer stipends to help defray costs to participants for child care and transportation for training. And finally, work with participants to make long-term plans and back-up plans for transportation and child care needs once they are employed.

Incorporate a respectful learning environment policy into training and use it to educate all participants about sexual harassment and hostile work environments.

To encourage retention and completion of the training program among participants, it is important to set a tone of respect and safety at the start of the training program. Setting out a policy or ground rule for students during the training can also serve as an introduction to educating program participants about what constitutes sexual harassment in the workplace, and providing suggestions on ways of dealing with it. Pointing to employer partners' written sexual harassment policies and grievance procedures, and inviting employer partners to speak to students about the importance of a professional and safe workplace

can help enhance participants' understanding of this often-ignored issue while also drawing employers' attention to the topic.

Employer Partnerships

Ask employers to demystify the application, hiring, and advancement process in their companies.

It is critical for workforce development and other intermediary organizations to have complete clarity about the application and hiring process used by employer partners. If a formal process does not already exist, intermediaries should work with employer partners to establish specific written hiring and advancement guidelines, and incorporate the necessary skills or application requirements into the training process from the start. Formalizing advancement policies can also take the form of creating specific career ladders, a great recruitment and retention tool for employers to use with both job seekers and incumbent workers.

Defining and openly advertising both hiring requirements and advancement benchmarks will not only promote better performance outcomes for job seekers and employers; it is also an effective means for reducing systemic biases against women throughout the hiring and advancement process.

Employer partners must have gender-neutral employee handbooks and policies.

When reaching out to employer partners, intermediaries should request to see copies of employee handbooks and policies. These should be written using gender-neutral terms, and should clearly address discrimination, sexual harassment, and hostile work environments. A no-tolerance policy around these topics is ideal, and employers should also provide guidance both on how employees can confidentially report sexual harassment and discrimination and how cases will be handled by the employer. Intermediaries should critically analyze the wording, language, and completeness of all policies and handbooks, and provide suggestions to employers if there are inaccuracies or potential points of confusion.

If a potential employer partner does not have an

employee handbook, or does not have specific policies related to sexual harassment and discrimination, intermediaries should help craft these policies and documents or ensure they are created before forming a partnership.

Help employer partners establish a safe work environment.

It's important to acknowledge that women's entrance into male-dominated workplaces may not be completely smooth. In sectors like construction or policing, harassment on the job can not only impact workers' job performance, it can also create an unsafe working environment. When intermediaries are working with employer partners to place women in male-dominated workplaces, employers should be encouraged to set a tone of no tolerance from the start in relation to any hostile or unprofessional behavior on the job site. Employers should be prepared to clearly articulate and demonstrate their expectations to their employees. Additionally, supervisors and managers should receive training, or at the least, direction from the company, on how to handle hostile workplace behavior.

Employer partners should offer employee benefits packages.

All employer partners should offer standard employee benefits such as group health insurance, retirement plans, and paid sick and vacation hours. Be sure to ask employer partners if they allow employees to use their sick leave to care for sick children and family members; this is a benefit that can especially influence the employment retention of women workers.

Depending on the work site and the sector being targeted, employer partners may also be able to offer family-friendly employee benefits, such as job sharing, flexible work hours, telecommuting, or on-site child care. At the very least, workforce intermediaries should share information with employer partners about these options, and the impact they could have on employee retention.

Employer partners should track pay equity among employees.

Research has proven the prevalence of the gender wage gap. Before partnering with any employer,

intermediaries should ask about pay equity among the company's employees, and whether these numbers are tracked regularly. If employers have never checked the numbers, encourage them to do so, and stress that partnership with your organization hinges on their ability to provide an equitable workplace for all employees.

Intermediaries should also suggest measures that employers can implement to maintain wage equity among employees. This may include a set wage for new employees based on experience level, clearly identified and published standards for earning a promotion, and uniform practices for awarding raises. Perhaps most importantly, intermediaries should encourage employers to regularly analyze the wages of employees in their companies, and to ensure that individuals performing equal work are receiving equal pay.

Encourage employers to adopt mentoring programs.

Mentoring programs—both formal and informal—are a great way to build a support and training system for new employees, and can impact a company's bottom line; in a recent survey, 77 percent of companies interviewed reported that their mentoring programs increased employee retention.²⁴ According to a recent Catalyst study, the benefits of mentoring are particularly strong for women of color.²⁵ Tracking women of color in management over a three year period revealed that 70 percent of the women who had mentors received promotions during that timeframe, compared with just 48 percent of women without mentors. Additionally, the study revealed that the greater the number of mentors a woman had, the faster she advanced up the career ladder. It is not necessary to pair women with other women for this kind of program to be effective; whenever new employees are provided a support system on the job, they are more likely to get information they need, feel confident in their role, and grow within a company.

Evaluation

Make achieving gender parity in outcomes a goal from the start, and include both qualitative and quantitative measures of goal attainment.

Your project evaluation should include both

qualitative and quantitative measures of the extent to which your sector project achieved gender parity in outcomes. Quantitatively, you should disaggregate data by both sex and race of participants and thoroughly compare their recruitment rates, placement rates, starting wages, and retention rates. Distributing questionnaires to participants will yield qualitative data on their comfort level during the training and on the job, their work environment, and their intentions to remain in the position and in the industry. Similarly, questionnaires to employers will provide you information on their perceptions of the hiring process, their impressions of their new employees, any issues or conflicts that have occurred, and any support they might need from you in the future to mitigate potential issues. Taken together, this information will provide a broad picture of the equity your sector project was able to achieve, and highlight places for adjustment and improvement.

Share evaluation results with your employer partners and other project stakeholders.

Sector projects are a group effort and involve multiple stakeholders. Sharing the results of your evaluation with them helps further engage them in the process, and makes them accountable for the process. By reviewing the successes together, and acknowledging places where there is room for improvement, the goal of gender equity in outcomes will continue to be a shared one.

Conclusion

Sector projects hold great promise for low-wage, low-skill individuals, employers, workforce development professionals, and the economy as a whole. Indeed, significant success has already been achieved in sector projects across the country. But as promising as they are, sector projects continue to operate in a workforce system that is biased against women.

Without thoughtful, purposeful design elements included, these projects run the risk of continuing the trend of women's exclusion from and inequity within the pool of high-wage, high-skill workers.

While each of the suggestions provided in this paper would directly combat the barriers that frequently

prevent women from persisting and advancing in nontraditional fields, by taking into account the needs of families as well as individual workers, they would also positively impact all employees in the selected industry.

One of the most distinct differences between traditional workforce development projects and sectoral initiatives is the latter's overarching goal of achieving systems change in the way an industry recruits, hires, and promotes low-income individuals.²⁶

Given the current environment for women who are seeking to enter nontraditional employment, achieving gender parity in job placement and retention is systems change that is long overdue.

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