

EXCLUSIVE Power Play: Reversing the Recession's Toll on Women

By Catherine Epstein



Influential advocates met last week in New York to address the economic security of women and their families. Journalist Catherine Epstein reports on their deliberations—and the people they hope will join the conversation.

A lunchtime breakout session at the NCRW economic summit. Photo by Julie Simeone, NCRW

Since the onset of the recession in 2008, the number of unemployed American women [has risen](#) by 2.8 million. This has substantial implications for American families, since one in three working mothers was the only jobholder in her family last year, and on average women still earn 77 cents for every dollar earned by men. Over a third of women today [say they have \\$500 or less in savings](#).

In short, the recession has been rough on women, despite media hype about the (poorly punned) “mancession.” Enter the [National Council for Research on Women](#) (NCRW) and their recent summit, “[Reinvesting in Women and Families: Developing an Economy for the Future](#).” The convening, led by NCRW President Linda Basch, aimed to identify and change what inhibits programs trying to benefit low-income women, and gathered experts from all over the country to make a workable plan. The charge was ambitious, but for the women in attendance, uphill battles are their bread and butter.

To build effective programs, according to several speakers, efforts designed to increase women’s economic security must better focus on women’s actual situations and needs. As [Ms. Foundation](#) CEO Sara Gould said, “those most directly affected by the problem have to be part of the solution.” For example, in employment training, said Avis Jones-DeWeever of the [National Council of Negro Women](#), “there have to be jobs at the end of the rainbow”; training can’t be for its own sake. Speaking on the delivery of social services, Lynda Sagrestano of the University of Memphis said barriers would be broken down if women could access multiple services at a central location. “Transportation is a real issue for low-income women,” said Sagrestano, who directs her university’s [Center for Research on Women](#). If women need to travel to myriad offices for the help they need, “where are their kids supposed to be during all of these trips?” she asked.

In order to achieve these transformations in policy, many women said, messaging on the need for these changes must transform as well. Speaking on job creation, Jones-DeWeever pointed to the oft-used phrase, “nontraditional jobs,” which denotes careers dominated by men that are therefore “nontraditional” for women. “When we use this terminology,” she said, “we really ghettoize ourselves. It’s time to tell it like it is— that women have been excluded from these fields.” Miriam Yeung, executive director of the [National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum](#), highlighted the importance of public messaging around health: “The right has been so effective with the message, ‘get government’s hands off health care.’” she said. “We can learn from them how to expose that *corporations* have exploited individuals.”

Communication is also vital within communities, pointed out Sara Manzano-Díaz, director of the [Women's Bureau at the U.S. Department of Labor](#). Highlighting that African Americans and Latina/os are more than twice as likely than white or Asian people to be poor, Manzano-Díaz articulated the importance of role models for at-risk students, and used the example of Jose Hernandez, a Hispanic astronaut who participated in live chats with students in primarily Hispanic high schools over the last few years. That communication, she said, is critical for students of color to understand their own potential.

Illustrated in the person of Anyania Muse, effective messaging also has everything to do with the person delivering it. Five years ago, when she was studying for her masters, raising two children, and needed food stamps, Muse was a client at [LIFETIME](#), an organization that helps single mothers on welfare achieve higher education. She was thrust into advocacy work when LIFETIME Executive Director Diana Spatz was unable to make a fundraising meeting at Wells Fargo one day, and asked Muse to go in her place. Hurrying from dropping her children at school, Muse arrived and made her case. "When I said the word 'welfare,'" she recalled at the summit, "there was an audible gasp in the room." But her presentation worked. "She made a white man cry!" Spatz said. The lesson LIFETIME took was simple, but rarely followed: to prove the worth of your organization to an outsider, "bring someone who was helped," said Muse, who now does policy work for LIFETIME. "Her success is the fruit of your work."

In other words, if powerless women aren't involved in the process of their own empowerment, many critical issues, questions, and complexities are lost. Despite (or because of) the power of the women at the summit, the absence of powerless women seemed to be felt by everyone as conversations continued. As Sagrestano said, "if we as people in power say, 'How can we make this into a grassroots movement,' it automatically *isn't* grassroots, is it?"

Basch underlined the issue as well, arguing that achieving economic security means not only breaking down the silos of different kinds of advocacy work, but "bringing in the women who are most affected by the work." Reflecting on the day as it came to an end, Basch said, "I see this as Step One; now we're moving forward and implementing all these ideas." She was optimistic, due to "the vitality here—there's a real sense of power in the room."

Significantly, that power was represented by a group of women with many different backgrounds, ethnicities, and goals. As attendees noted, critical work remains to increase inclusiveness at summits like this one, but significant progress has already been made—and it's visible.

"Many times when I go to meetings like this, I don't see anybody who looks like me," said Manzano-Díaz, gazing around the room. "I haven't seen such a diverse women's group in a long, long time."

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