

Empowering Women's Voices Subcommittee

"The Dissent Sisters"

Final Recommendations & Report

I. Challenge

Challenge: Nurturing women and girls' voices from the playground to the boardroom as the foundation to empowerment.

40 interviews were conducted with women, men, girls and boys around the issue of empowerment. We learned the following:

1. There are different areas of empowerment.
2. Ideas and practices around empowerment begin during youth.
3. A woman's empowerment is influenced by her other characteristics (race, sexuality, etc.).
4. Support is important to feel and be empowered – from women and girls, but also from men and boys

Although empowerment can be broken into several classifications, a common definition was that empowerment meant you were comfortable speaking up and that you were heard.

"I believe that empowerment means that you feel comfortable enough to share your opinion and thoughts without being dismissed or judged. I also think that your thoughts, ideas, and opinions are taken seriously and considered for full merit."

Empowerment is the foundational piece of nearly every women's issue – having a voice that is both acknowledged and heard in order to achieve: women's equal leadership, pay equity, safety and holistic health. Interviewees shared that their voice and empowerment began when they were young and were encouraged by parents, teacher, peers, etc. The intersectionality of other aspects of their identity play roles as well. We also learned much about empowerment by looking at examples of women experiencing disempowerment.

a) There are different areas of empowerment

Actionable - internal (how you feel), positional (what your job or station gives you), and being permitted to be empowered.

Intersectionality - It's not just limited to being a girl or a woman. Race, age, education, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity, socio-economic class—it all plays a part.

Ownership - Men and women both have a role in women's empowerment - and disempowerment.

Obtain & Retain - Barriers are everywhere, but so are the areas of support. There are institutional and community programs and resources. Each of us has an influence, no matter our role or position.

b) Ideas and practices around empowerment begin in the youth.

An early theme that emerged was that ideas and practices around empowerment begin in the youth.

“Women (or men for that matter) who were not raised to think they could do anything they want to [are not empowered]. Even though my mom was a stay-at-home mom, she and my dad always told me that I could be whatever I wanted to be. They let me explore my neighborhood on my own, let me ride my bike everywhere, let me play sports, had me take music lessons, dance lessons, taught me how to fix things, bake. I was just exposed to a lot of different things and it was always reinforced that if I wanted something, I had to work for it. I never really thought about not being able to do something. It's only been recently that I recognized an experience as being one where I am not empowered and it has been tumultuous for me.”

c) A woman's empowerment is influenced by her other characteristics (race, sexuality, etc.)

“I think women that have challenges with feeling empowered are those that are not inspired as a child. Many of these women come from a low socio-economic background, have family drug use, or unstable housing.”

“There are a lot of women in minority races and sexualities that aren't as empowered as straight white women.”

d) Support is important to feel and be empowered.

As to how to address the issue, there were varied suggestions, but all centered around creating environments where girls are taught responsibility, are supported and are encouraged to participate and share. Women and men both play important roles in this development – whether as parents, educators, neighbors or volunteers.

During our interviews, children told us the following:

Q. How could you/we let girls know it's ok to have a voice/opinion?

A. I think they do, they are just too scared to speak up.

Q. What obstacles do you see girls face that boys don't face?

A. Gossip, telling lies about each other. Boys get along.

Q. What would help girls who don't speak up?

A. If other people spoke up for them maybe they would start speaking up too.

Adults echoed those thoughts:

"I think finding places to expose the young adults to positive environments that embrace differences is critical. Role playing how to handle situations that are not favorable is just as important. Mentoring young women to help them improve self-confidence and foster an environment of success."

"I think educating males on the "stereotypes" in society regarding assertiveness by the female population is critical. I do not think it would be the same education as ethnic differences, but it would be similar. The crucial point would be to present the facts and not make the situation personal; meaning you cannot have the appearance that a single person's behavior is being attacked."

"I think it is important to teach/preach personal responsibility, tolerance, empathy, compassion and that those things are important to our shared human experience."

"We need to be our own examples by lifting up other women. This is the heart of women's empowerment for me—women supporting women."

"Learning it at home and at a young age. Having examples of men who can expose them to that."

Our research and interviews led us to a common theme – support in childhood. Interviewees indicated empowerment of the voice was tied to childhood and the developmental years. Primarily, were girls permitted and encouraged to have a voice? Therefore, our team's first goal will focus on connecting volunteers and mentors to existing programs that serve young people. We will identify organizations, agencies and schools to share opportunities to get involved in encouraging and empowering our girls and boys to create generations of strong girls who find their voice on the playground and retain it into the boardroom.

II. Community Input

"Individual minds have preconceived notions and myths that need to be unpacked to ensure a meaningful conversation. We need someone to set the table and invite people to it."

Our team interviewed 40 women, men, girls and boys who were diverse in terms of age, race/ethnicity, LGBT, marital status, socio economic status and education level.⁶

Not counting schools, we identified 27 organizations throughout Hamilton County that offer services that would overlap with our initiative of working to strengthen girls' voices. Partnering with these organizations is key to maximizing effort and preventing redundancies.

⁶ See Appendix DS1

III. Recommendations

Recommendation

1. Hamilton County should devote a standalone portion of the County Website for the Commission on Women & Girls. This will include updates on the work of the Commission, and information about existing programs offered by Hamilton County and area nonprofits. The website will contain women's stories of empowerment. The website will also include informational resources and connections to volunteer opportunities to support women's safety and empowerment.

We recommend an initiative of the Board of County Commissioners facilitating community partnerships where we can connect volunteers with resources and with organizations for meaningful work to support girls, and a campaign to encourage volunteers and finding spaces to encourage conversations about empowerment.

Recommendation

7. The Commission on Women and Girls should continue to assemble informational resources to assist and empower women in the workforce, which can be shared on the Commission's website.

Additionally, with support from the Board of County Commissioners, we recommend that the Commission on Women & Girls work on an initiative to recognize individuals and organizations that exemplify women's/girls' empowerment and create a toolbox to empower women in the workforce.

Respectfully Submitted,

Empowering Women's Voices Subcommittee

"The Dissent Sisters"

Eileen Trauth, Woman Chair

Jai'la Nored, Woman Chair

Claire Wagner, Girl Chair

Sheryl Long

Jackie O'Connell

APPENDIX DS1

Dissent Sisters Interview Demographics

People interviewed: 40

Gender

Women: 24

Men: 2

Girls: 6

Boys: 8

Race/Ethnicity

White: 28

Black: 8

Asia-Pacific: 1

Mixed race: 3

Age

Children (under 18): 14

20s: 4

30s: 8

40s: 7

50s: 5

60s: 2

Socio-economic

Highest Education

Graduate school: 8

College/equivalent: 13

High School: 6

Student: 14

Social Class

Professional/upper middle class: 9

Middle class: 20

Lower middle class: 4

Marital Status

Married: 15

Divorced: 2

Single: 21

Sexual Orientation

Straight: 35

LGBT: 3