



WOMEN
CREATING
CHANGE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A BLUEPRINT FOR WOMEN'S CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN NEW YORK CITY

Toward a More Just and
Equitable Democracy

June 15, 2021

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This publication was developed under the leadership of Deborah Martin Owens, Chair, Women Creating Change (WCC) Board of Directors. It was produced by Carole Wacey, President & CEO; Lea Giddins, Program and Policy Manager; and Vayne Ong, Program and Policy Fellow.

In addition, there was important input provided by former Program and Policy Manager Stephanie Silkowski, former Program and Policy Fellow Anna Makogon, and former Program and Policy Intern Julia Coccaro. We also thank WCC Board Members Barbara Allen, Julia Kagan Baumann, Theresa Bertrand, Amy Oshinsky, and Laura Wolff for reviewing this publication; Anat Gerstein and Barsamian Communication for their support reviewing and designing this publication; and staff members Anya Berdan, Senior External Relations Manager; Anita Kwok, WCC Intern; and Anita Mathew, Operations Manager, for their contributions to this report.

WCC is grateful to the esteemed external reviewers¹ Jacqueline M. Ebanks, Executive Director, Commission on Gender Equity, Office of the Mayor of New York City; Lurie Daniel Favors, Esq., Interim Executive Director, Center for Law and Social Justice, Medgar Evers College, CUNY; Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Ph.D., Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University; Julie Poncelet, Ph.D., Action Evaluation Collaborative and Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs; Dr. Sarah Sayeed, Executive Director, Civic Engagement Commission, Office of the Mayor of New York City; and Joanne N. Smith, Founder, Girls for Gender Equity, for sharing their valuable feedback on this publication.

WCC is indebted to countless women activists, writers, thinkers, and scholars, particularly Black, Brown, immigrant, and LGBTQ women, and gender nonconforming and non-binary individuals. This paper builds upon lessons learned from the women, past and present, who found ways to be civically engaged despite the barriers. We are also grateful to Kimberlé Crenshaw and Cathy Cohen, whose work directly inspired and shaped the development of this publication. WCC is honored to have this platform and we are committed to practicing our values of equity and justice, inclusivity and intersectionality, accountability and transparency, and learning and listening.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021, a record number of women are running for office, Kamala Harris has become our country's first woman—and first Black and South Asian woman—to become Vice President, and Stacey Abrams and activists across the United States are transforming voter engagement and standing up for equal rights. We are at an important moment in our country's history, as we confront a devastating pandemic and bear witness to the consequences of systemic² racism and social injustice. While a change in leadership at the federal, state, and city levels will not solve our most fundamental problems, it offers potential and promise.

In New York City, a majority of City Council seats (39) will open up at the end of 2021, which is both a great opportunity and a risk for women's representation in the Council. While election results will determine the gender breakdown of these offices, the level of interest illustrates that women are determined to engage civically and serve in public office.

Possibilities for women in this country abound. Yet the promise of the possible requires all of us to invest in the futures of women who seek to run for office, become civically engaged, or yield changes in their communities and in society at large. Even with a record number of women seeking elected office, women are underrepresented at every level of government and confront harmful gender stereotypes and other barriers to participation on a daily basis. Our country is also witnessing the steepest number of hate crimes in more than a decade, a disheartening trend that has not eluded New York City.³

Women Creating Change (WCC) is committed to expanding women's civic engagement to bring about a more just and equitable city. The purpose of this document is to understand how social and economic inequities shape women's political participation, to inform WCC's programmatic and policy priorities, and to urge our partners (past, current, and future) in the nonprofit, public, and private sectors to join us in our mission to foster women's civic engagement and build a more equitable New York City.

The paper aggregates research and data from WCC's internal strategic planning process, a literature review, and developmental evaluation⁴ led by Dr. Julie Poncelet of the Action Evaluation Collaborative and the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs.

Why WCC, and why now? WCC was founded in 1915 as the Women's City Club of New York, by predominantly wealthy white women, to bring together women who were interested in improving New York and to collectively promote the well-being of the city. For more than a century, WCC's volunteer members advocated for pressing issues of the day, including labor rights, children's rights, health and housing, public education, environmental justice, and literacy. After a notable history of advocacy for civic issues in New York City, WCC's membership and impact plateaued early in the 21st century. In 2018, aspiring to overhaul its vision and mission, WCC evolved to become a more inclusive organization focused on the needs of women in our city and not on our membership.

After an extensive strategic planning and research process, WCC embarked on this new path, changing its vision, mission, and name. The goal is to shift power to women who have been excluded from full civic participation: Black, Indigenous, Asian, Hispanic, Latinx, low-income, immigrant, LGBTQ, disabled, incarcerated, primary caregivers, wage workers, and gender non-conforming or non-binary individuals. We believe everyone should have the knowledge, resources, and connections to advocate for stronger communities, for improved quality of life, and for better democracy. This paper is an acknowledgement that we as a city and an organization have much work ahead if we want to make a lasting, positive impact.

WCC defines “civic engagement” as the set of behaviors, attitudes, and actions related to participation in one’s community in pursuit of equity, accountability, wellness, and justice. The outcome of improved civic engagement is a democracy that meets everyone’s basic needs and ensures all community members have the power, tools, and skills to participate in collective decision-making.

WCC’s research over the past two years found that many women are civically engaged, but they often experience barriers to civic participation as a result of fundamental societal inequities and oppression. The exclusion of women, particularly those from low-income and under-resourced neighborhoods, from civic processes is historically linked to larger systemic barriers such as racism, classism, and sexism. As a result, women regularly encounter barriers to civic engagement including:

- Burden of work and care
- Gendered stereotypes
- Lack of civic education
- Political exclusion
- Protest suppression
- Inadequate funding

In response to barriers to civic engagement, this paper offers recommendations to help chart a path for collective action (see Table 1). WCC recommends solutions for:

Nonprofits (Including WCC) and Community Organizations:

Expand civic education programs, account for time, energy, and financial constraints in programs and engagement opportunities, provide culturally specific and widely accessible materials, incorporate an expansive definition of civic engagement into programs and policies, build mutually supportive partnerships, foster more opportunities for women to build relationships and leadership skills, and build a repository of information, tools, and actionable civic engagement opportunities in New York City.

Government:

Expand voting access and rights, improve the city’s election infrastructure and voter data analysis, ensure a fair and accurate U.S. Census and redistricting process, end policing practices like “kettling” that deliberately entrap protestors, increase funding for, and coordination of, civic learning and education opportunities for families and adults, improve government initiatives that aim to expand public participation, and give community boards a greater voice.

Foundations and Private Sector:

Direct more resources to organizations implementing inclusive civic engagement programming, those that conduct work through an intersectional lens, organizations of color and multi-year initiatives, and CBOs focused on movement building.

TABLE 1: SYSTEMIC BARRIERS AND PROGRAM AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Systemic Barriers	Program and Policy Recommendations
<p>Burden of Work and Care</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low Wages • Time Constraints <p>Gendered Stereotypes</p> <p>Lack of Civic Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult and family civic education • Culturally responsive content <p>Political Exclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Census undercount • Partisan and racial redistricting • Restrictive election and voting laws • Underfunded and inefficient local election administration • Government accountability and accessibility <p>Protest Suppression</p> <p>Inadequate Funding</p>	<p>1. Nonprofits and Community Organizations:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1 Expand and create youth, adult, and intergenerational civic education programs that develop women’s skills and knowledge 1.2 Account for caregiving, time, energy, and financial constraints in programs and engagement opportunities 1.3 Provide culturally specific and widely accessible materials that meet diverse backgrounds, needs, and abilities 1.4 Build mutually supportive partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs), civic engagement-focused organizations, and secondary learning institutions 1.5 Incorporate an expansive definition of civic engagement into programs and policies 1.6 Foster more opportunities for women to build relationships, community, confidence, and leadership skills 1.7 Build a repository of information, tools, and actionable civic engagement opportunities in New York City <p>2. Government:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1 Expand voting access and rights 2.2 Fund and improve the city’s election infrastructure 2.3 Improve voter data analysis: The New York City Campaign Finance Board (NYCCFB) should conduct an intersectional analysis on voting rights data in the upcoming Voting Analysis Report 2.4 Ensure a fair and accurate U.S. Census and redistricting process 2.5 End policing practices like “kettling” that deliberately entrap protestors 2.6 Increase local and statewide funding for, and coordination of, civic learning and education opportunities for families and adults 2.7 Improve government initiatives that aim to expand public participation 2.8 Give community boards a greater voice in advocating for the constituents and neighborhoods they represent. <p>3. Foundations and Private Sector:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3.1 Direct more funding to organizations implementing inclusive civic engagement programming and those that conduct work through an intersectional lens 3.2 Fund organizations of color 3.3 Fund multi-year initiatives and CBOs focused on movement building 3.4 Establish complementary programs and services that support civic activities

With the combined efforts of the nonprofit, philanthropy, private, and government sectors, we can advance the civic engagement of women toward the betterment of our city, our state, and our country. WCC will focus on collaborating with:

- CBOs (including faith-based institutions) that are led by the communities they represent
- Funders committed to racial justice, gender equity, and social justice
- Elected officials and government agencies committed to more equitable and just women’s civic engagement

- Advocacy coalitions focused on policy changes formulated by the populations most affected
- Individual New Yorkers and other partners who want to get involved and share values of equity, justice, inclusivity, intersectionality, accountability, transparency, learning, and listening

WCC is committed to learning and evolving to develop the partnerships, tools, and resources needed to effectively advance women’s civic journeys. Our hope is that all sectors will join us in emphasizing the importance of women’s civic engagement to collectively envision a more just and equitable society.



ENDNOTES

- 1 External reviewers' participation does not constitute an endorsement of the content of this paper.
- 2 Key terms are bold and underlined when they first appear and linked to the Glossary at the end of the document, but please note that the Glossary applies to the whole document.
- 3 "US Hate Crime Highest in More than a Decade – FBI," BBC, November 17, 2020, <https://cutt.ly/dxHNGau>.
- 4 "Developmental evaluation provides evaluative information and feedback to social innovators, and their funders and supporters, to inform adaptive development of change initiatives in complex dynamic environments. Developmental evaluation brings to innovation and adaptation the process of asking evaluative questions, applying evaluative logic, and gathering and reporting evaluative data, to inform and support the development of innovative projects, programs, initiatives, products, organizations, and/or systems change efforts with timely feedback." Michael Quinn Patton, Kate McKegg, and Nan Wehipeihana, "Developmental Evaluation Exemplars: Principles in Practice," in *Developmental Evaluation Exemplars: Principles in Practice*, New York: The Guilford Press, 2016, p. V.



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