



PROMOTING OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUNG WOMEN AND GIRLS

For many young people it can feel like the system is rigged against them. According to a May 2017 survey, a majority of young adults aged 18 to 34 say that the country is currently on the wrong track (sixty-four percent of African Americans, 63 percent of Asian Americans, 67 percent of Latinxs, and 54 percent of whites).

They know it doesn't have to be this way and they are looking for policy makers to stand up for them. Young people understand the need for policies that will work together to help them succeed and create a more just and fair future. They are students, workers, and parents and they expect policy makers to address their multiple needs.

Young Women Need Policies that Will Work for Them

Young women and girls face unique barriers—from school pushout, to being unable to access healthcare, to unfair wages—that make it harder for them to succeed. Unfair and discriminatory policies can keep young women and girls from making the best decisions for themselves about their education, health, jobs, families, and futures.

From a young age, girls, and girls of color in particular, are subject to harsh and discriminatory discipline policies that can force them out of school and have long-lasting effects on their futures. Pregnant and parenting students—whether in secondary school, college, or grad school—may also face discrimination or be denied simple accommodations that would allow them to remain in and succeed in school. College students may be unable to access necessary reproductive health care services. Many young people are also at risk of having health insurance companies reveal their private health information to their parents, which can keep young people from getting the care they need. Young people also need fair pay to help support themselves and their families, yet many states allow them to be paid a wage that is lower than the minimum wage.

Schools, health care providers, and employers should not stand in the way of young people working to secure their futures, and government should help eliminate these barriers. Lawmakers and advocates who want to support young people must put forward a progressive policy agenda that tackles these issues to help them get a good start in life rather than deny them opportunities.

Policies that will work together to support opportunities for young women and girls include:

Ending Discriminatory Discipline Policies: Discriminatory discipline policies can push girls out of school with long lasting effects on their education. Black girls and Native American girls, for example, are more likely than white girls to be suspended from school, even though they are no more likely to misbehave nor is their misbehavior more severe. Instead, girls of color are more likely to be suspended for minor offenses like dress code violations, or subjective offenses like “defiance.” This keeps girls out of the classroom, making it harder for them to succeed and increasing their chances of dropping out or being involved with the juvenile justice system. States can reverse this trend by replacing these policies with programs that identify and address the underlying problems that contribute to perceived misbehavior.

Addressing Sexual Assault in K-12 & Higher Education: Violence starts early. One in five teen girls report being sexually assaulted—similar to the rate of women who are sexually assaulted in college. Thus, waiting until college to talk to students about sexually hostile attitudes is too late. To ensure all students have a safe and healthy learning environment, states should require schools to teach consent and healthy relationship behavior; conduct climate surveys to gauge whether students feel safe in school or on campus; and enhance legal anti-harassment protections for students.

Supporting Pregnant and Parenting Students: Students who are pregnant or parenting often encounter hostile



schools and teachers who punish them for missing class because of their pregnancy or because of their child's illness. States can implement basic protections that enshrine and improve upon federal requirements by requiring schools to excuse pregnancy-related absences and absences to care for children. This will ensure that pregnant and parenting students are able to take care of themselves and their children while continuing to succeed in school.

Ensuring Access to Reproductive Health Care on College

Campuses: Students should be able to make decisions about their education, careers, and family planning on their own terms and timelines and yet, they continue to face significant barriers to accessing many reproductive health services. States can use their authority to regulate self-funded student health insurance to ensure coverage of comprehensive reproductive health care, and states can also ensure access to comprehensive reproductive health services at campus health centers, or referrals to these services when appropriate. Coverage of health care and access to health services facilitates the decision-making that empowers college students to take charge of their health, education, and future.

Protecting Medical Privacy for Adolescents and Young

Adults: Everyone, including young adults and adolescents, needs to have their privacy protected when they access health care. Yet, health insurance companies are allowed to share health care information with other individuals, like a parent or spouse. This could keep young people from seeking health care, particularly reproductive health care. States can protect patient privacy by enacting laws that will allow patients to request that insurance companies send information directly to them rather than the policy holder. This is a common sense protection that will protect the privacy of young adults and adolescents who are insured through their parents, spouses, or other family members.

Raising the Minimum Wage and Ending Abusive Work Schedules for Students and Young Workers: While young people represent a relatively small share of the low-wage workforce overall, most young people who work receive low pay. For example, while teenagers represent just under 10 percent of the total working people who would benefit if the federal minimum wage rose to \$15 by 2024, nearly 80 percent of all teens who work would get a raise if the minimum wage went up to \$15 by 2024 because their current wages are so low. Many young people are working to help support their families or to pay for college—but teens and students are often subject to carve-outs that allow employers to pay them even less than the minimum wage. They are also more likely to work in jobs that have unpredictable work schedules which can make it incredibly difficult for young people to succeed in school, participate in extracurricular school activities, or pursue post-secondary education or training. States can improve economic security for young people and their families by raising the minimum wage and eliminating the lower minimum wages applicable to youth, students, tipped workers, and other groups; and by implementing baseline protections to give working people a voice in their schedule and more predictable and stable work hours.

The National Women's Law Center can help you craft a legislative agenda that is specifically tailored to your state. NWLC can:

- **Provide research to identify specific needs or gaps in policies;**
- **Assist in crafting legislation;**
- **Provide state level data analysis;**
- **Help connect you with other advocates, legislators, and experts; and/or**
- **Create supporting resources including:**
 - o **Sample graphics and tweets;**
 - o **Talking points; and**
 - o **Fact sheets.**

If you are interested in pursuing a policy agenda to improve the lives of young people in your state, please contact the National Women's Law Center by e-mail at roadmap@nwlc.org or by phone at 202-588-5180.

