

Forum finds that New York City women working full-time at low-paying jobs can not lift their families out of poverty.

(New York, NY) On Thursday, February 1, 2001, The New York Women's Foundation forum "Women and New York City's Low Wage Labor Market: Is a Living Wage Possible?" examined how many women struggle in low-paying jobs with no control over their time and working conditions. Further, these women - the working poor- are unable to stretch their wages to meet the costs of their families' most basic needs.

The New York Women's Foundation (NYWF) gathered several organizations and individuals to discuss the deepening of poverty among low-income women in New York City.

The forum tackled the central notion that women's economic self-sufficiency is almost impossible to achieve for low-income women because a full-time low-wage job does not provide a family-sustaining wage. Mary Burns, Co-Director of Maura Clark-Ita Ford Center from Brooklyn, said, "Women are simply not paid enough for the work they do.

They hold down full time jobs, balance work and family, but at the end of the month they do not make enough for their families to live on." New York Women's Foundation Board member Marion Kaplan added, "The recently published report "The Self-Sufficiency Standard for the City of New York" by The Women's Center for Educational and Career Advancement gives a new meaning to the concept of a living wage. The Standard is based on the amount of income required to meet basic needs such as housing, food, childcare, transportation, health care, and taxes, without public or private assistance. According Standard, an adult with two school age children living in Brooklyn should be making \$21.11 an hour to be self-sufficient."

Demonstrated through the stories and actions of women working in low-wage jobs, there was an urgent appeal to increase wages, provide adequate working conditions, and gain control over their time. "I worked six days a week, from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. as a childcare worker, and for this I was paid \$2.20 per hour. My boss said that my wages were more than fair because they were higher than what I was making in Hong Kong. My argument to her was that I am not spending my U.S dollars in Hong Kong. I have bills, rent, and expenses here," said Carol de Leon, Program Coordinator of CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities.

More and more women are forced to work longer hours with sub-standard pay and are still unable make ends meet. Many women are working in sweatshop conditions that dehumanize the physical and emotional spirit. “Increase in work hours not only locked us up inside the factory but also ended up robbing us of our health. Gone was the concept of working an eight-hour-day and having a little bit of time for your life,” said Sau Kwan Yu, garment worker and Board member of Chinese Staff and Workers’ Association. She added “We have a right to work a 40-hour workweek at a living wage.

We need to have control of our life and our time. Women’s work, whether in the home or at work, must be valued and counted.”

The NYWF adopts one strategy to support women in low-wage jobs: to support training for nontraditional employment. Nontraditional occupations have well-established career ladders, comprehensive benefits, and high pay. “The Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW) training program prepared me for a job that turned my life around. I am now a Local 3 electrical apprentice. I am making \$16.25 with a chance to make even more. I have full benefits, job security, and a chance to complete a masters degree,” said Melissa Webster, a NEW graduate. Eloisa Gordon, Board member of The New York Women’s Foundation, concluded

“There is a moral commitment to lift the floor for working women, and there is no excuse for poverty during these economic times. We should move beyond the bare minimum and expect fair rewards in income and work protections and create opportunities for working women to achieve economic self-sufficiency.”

The New York Women’s Foundation is a cross-cultural alliance of women helping lowincome girls and women in New York City to achieve sustained economic security and self-reliance. The Foundation pursues its mission through grantmaking, advocacy, and public education.

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