

Enough Said

Young Women Talk About School, Work, and Becoming Adults: *Why We Should Listen and What We Can Do*

Many young women in Vermont describe themselves as ill-equipped and under-prepared for the challenges of school, work, career, economic independence, and adulthood—absolutes that await them in the not-too-distant future.

Reflecting upon their educational experiences and job histories in nine listening sessions and in written surveys, two hundred young women, ages 15-25 from Brattleboro to St. Johnsbury, the majority from families of limited financial means, articulated a host of concerns:

- minimal exposure to a broad range of careers and professional female role models
- few personal allies to provide support
- lack of practical skills related to personal finance
- fears around how to live independently
- relational aggression among their peers
- limited expectations for work that taps into talent and passion

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While Vermont should be proud of its high school graduation rate – at 91.4% the highest in the country – a number of signs indicate that we have more to do to ensure that the next generation is ready for college and/or work. This report, *Enough Said*, considers how well we're preparing young women, who are twice as likely to live in poverty as their male counterparts, to make informed, deliberate choices about education and work and to shoulder the financial responsibilities of adulthood. The unfortunate answer: not well enough

Young Women Told Us...

**...they are ILL-EQUIPPED TO
MANAGE WORK & MONEY**

“I don't have a clue what kind of income I need to be bringing home weekly/monthly in a job in order to have my own apartment, buy food and necessities.”

Most young women with whom we spoke expressed feeling unprepared for the most basic tasks of adulthood – writing cover letters and resumes, researching careers, making a budget and living within it, opening a bank account and balancing a checkbook, shopping for groceries, buying a car and renting an apartment, filling out tax or financial aid forms.

**...that ALLIES &
SUPPORTIVE NETWORKS
ARE IN SHORT SUPPLY**

“I get along better with guys...girls are just horrible to each other.”

None of us “makes it” without allies – peers, parents, teachers, mentors, and others from whom we can accept criticism and who believe in our talent, and inspire our best effort. Indeed, when asked about the

factors most important to their future success, 60% of survey respondents identified “a supportive network of family and friends.” Yet concerns about relational aggression among girls and young women emerged over and over again as a serious impediment to developing needed self-confidence and supportive networks.

**...that they have
LIMITED EXPOSURE
TO WORK AND CAREER
OPTIONS**

“There's the tech center where you can get a taste of a trade and learn things that can help you in the future but it's not like they are making you (try it) so enrolling has to come from your own self-awareness...it's all on your own shoulders.”

Indeed, how *does* one know she wants to be an auto mechanic if she hasn't handled a socket wrench or crawled under a car? The obvious answer: exposure. In all of the listening sessions we conducted, participants talked about wanting to interact more with “real people, to hear their stories about what they do, and what they feel passionately about.”





...that they are **SHORT** ON EXPERIENCES THAT ENGAGE AND MOTIVATE

“I didn’t go out of my way in high school to try new things or to figure out what makes me tick. I never really connected to much of anything.”

Those with whom we spoke found it very hard to talk about careers and education in anything but imprecise terms. Although they could list fields in which they were interested, or certifications or apprenticeships that seemed intriguing, few could say very much about *why* they were of interest. Most could not articulate what they ultimately wanted from a career. Overall, it was hard to keep the discussion focused on the topic. Their vagueness reflects more than lack of exposure. It reflects limited experience in activities that engage talent and passion and inspire their best effort.

What We Can Do

Nurturing the full potential of Vermont’s native talent requires that we redouble our commitment to what young women told us they *need*:

-  **practical skills related to personal finance and living independently;**
-  **allies who will provide support and advice;**
-  **exposure to a broad range of careers and professional role models;**
-  **real-world opportunities that challenge, stretch, and engage**

Why We Should Listen

Tomorrow’s economy will demand individuals who think expansively, solve problems, are comfortable with ambiguity and can work collaboratively. Vermont will need a workforce that is persistent in the face of failure and flexible in the wake of change. The creative forces that underpin a robust economy – entrepreneurial innovation, scientific discovery, a willingness to take risks – are fueled by emotional engagement, the freedom to experiment and fail, and a clear sense of purpose.

The full report (**which can be found at our site www.vtworksforwomen.org**) offers recommendations for how we can do more to help young women realize their personal potential – and maintains that we *must* do more if Vermont is to realize its full economic promise. Our state is too small, and frankly too gray, to waste a single drop of talent.

Vermont Women’s Fund, **Vermont Works for Women**
Serena Foundation, **Bari and Peter Dreissigacker,**

Call To Action

The title of this report, Enough Said, reflects the fact that much of what it says isn't new. We have heard these themes before – through our own experiences, through our children's experiences and from what we have read in the media. It reflects our sense that it is time to stop talking and take action.

The ultimate value of this report lies in its ability to prompt action. Some of the recommendations demand strategic investments in programming or changes in policy or priorities. Many cost nothing and require only our steady and firm resolve – as parents, teachers, policy makers, business leaders, community based organizations and neighbors – to nurture the potential in our midst.

The first step is for each of us to tell our own story about our work and interests, about the regrets or unanticipated joys that have punctuated our work lives. Our stories can prompt young women to think differently or to bolster their resolve when patience wears thin. Story telling is an act of communion; it can forge relationships that sustain our energies and leaven our perspective.

In the coming months, Vermont Works for Women and the Vermont Women's Fund will launch an initiative we're calling **The 50% Solution**. Women now provide almost 50% of the nation's labor – and 36% of an average family's income. Addressing women's poverty isn't just a women's issue – it's an economic one. Vermont will reach its full potential only when women and girls can live up to theirs.

To find out more about how *you* can be part of **The 50% Solution**, contact Tiffany Bluemle, VWW's Executive Director, at 802.655.8900. Or send an email to us at tbluemle@vtworksforwomen.org.

WHO WE ARE

Since 1987, Vermont Works for Women has offered opportunities for women and girls to discern their potential and explore their interests; to build confidence through mentoring, coaching, and embracing new challenges; to develop skills through hands-on training; and to navigate the often difficult transition home from prison. Each year, our programs enroll close to 1,000 women and girls, ages 11-60, from diverse backgrounds, living in Vermont communities. State and national organizations – among them the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, the National Transitional Jobs Network, KeyBank, the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, The Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce and the John Merck Fund – have recognized VWW as a leader in innovative program development. Four programs have been featured in national publications; two have been replicated in other states.

**Please join us. Together,
we can make Vermont
Work for *all* Women!**



**VERMONT
WORKS
FOR WOMEN**

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www.vtworksforwomen.org

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