

Carol Penick and Jamie Holcomb

When women are economically secure, so are families

The current recession is affecting everyone, but women are particularly vulnerable to dramatic changes in the economy because they earn lower wages, have higher rates of poverty and are more likely to be caring for children. While women may be more vulnerable, they also have the solutions and are crucial in enabling our economic recovery.

Consider these facts about the status of women in Mississippi:

- According to the Mississippi Economic Policy Center, two-thirds of the state's women with children under age 6 are in the labor force.

- MPEC notes the cost (\$4,960) of sending an infant to a day care center for nine months was more than tuition (\$4,603) at the University of Mississippi for a year in 2007.

- The annual median earnings in 2004 for men was \$33,100; for women it was \$23,200. This is one of the largest wage gaps between men and women of any state in the country.

Investing in women and women-led solutions must be central to any economic recovery plan. Women are capable of forging lasting change, starting with their families, then transforming entire communities. When women are economically secure, families, communi-

ties and nations are economically secure. That's the perspective of the Women's Fund of Mississippi and the more than 130 women's funds from around the world.

Women's funds invest in solutions created by and in partnership with women who are pushed to the margins. We see women as experts and solution-builders who can lead whole communities to security, not as victims or passive recipients.

The Women's Fund of Mississippi invests in organizations like Women in Construction, a nonprofit organization on the Gulf Coast that trains low-income women for careers in construction. WIC has helped dozens of women attain economic self-sufficiency, while also filling the need for a skilled workforce on the Gulf Coast.

It's clear that we must invest in the ingenuity and strength of women. We already know what some of the solutions are. Give women equal pay for equal work — an act that would cut poverty in half. Women still make only 78 cents for every dollar earned by men. Significant wage disparity exists between men and women with the same occupation, educational background and work experience.

Mississippi needs to invest in early childhood education and care now to ensure that we have the human capital to sustain a healthy economy. Mississippi is one of only 12 states with no publicly funded pre-kindergarten program. Because child care enables women to work and has positive benefits for children, investing in early education makes sense.

Women should be engaged directly in the policymaking process as advocates and elected officials. State and local newspapers must include regular female opinion columnists. Females in elected office must find a young woman in the community and become her mentor.

These are a few measures that will help not just women and families, but everyone. Now, more than ever, we must invest in women and their potential as agents of social and economic change.

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Guest columnists