

# **Gender Equity in the Workplace**

## ***A Toolkit for Making It Work for Small Businesses***

*Produced by the Women's Fund of Rhode Island*  
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## Why Gender Equity is A Solid Business Strategy

Women are the largest emerging consumer market – and they care about where their dollars are going. As of 2016, women controlled 85% of all consumer purchases in the United States (Snider & Vanderbrug). Women want to support companies that support women. Companies have an opportunity to promote their business with a loyal consumer segment by advancing women’s leadership. Having women represented, especially at decision making levels will fuel sales and growth.

And diversity is no doubt good for the business bottom line. Since the economic downturn, multiple studies have documented the importance of diverse leadership in business resiliency. Companies need leaders with diverse perspectives, experiences and styles to solve complex problems and innovate. In a 2015 study published by MSCI, companies with gender diverse boards outperformed male-only boards by 30%! In addition, companies with female CEOs were shown to reduce volatility on investments by 56%. *Forbes* agrees that greater workforce diversity boosts the economy because there is an increased pool of talent from which to draw, leading to an improved allocation of talent.

**Finally**, women are a growing force in the skilled and educated talent pool. By increasing the financial strength of women through equitable workplaces, they can provide a valuable economic stimulus to our communities. “Advancing equality is associated with a variety of positive macro-economic impacts, including higher gross domestic product (GDP).” (IFC, 2) Various studies indicate that if we were to close the gender wage gap today, we would have an additional 5-9% growth in GDP.

Companies who focus on gender equity will be more competitive in attracting and retaining this needed talent. **And it’s not just women who pay attention to gender equity; men are looking for more parity in paid leave, work-life balance, and equal opportunity.** The bottom line: people are paying attention to gender disparities more than ever and your business has an opportunity to get out in front.

## The Reality For Women Today

In the last 10 years, 2 million more women than men graduated from college in the United States and 70% of high school valedictorians were women. Women make up 50% of the entire labor force for the first time ever in history and yet, find themselves overrepresented in some low-wage occupations while underrepresented in many positions of leadership and power. According to the 2017 Status of Working Women in RI report, local women make an average of 88 cents to the dollar to their male counterparts, even when you control for factors of job title, hours worked, education and experience.

That wage gap increases when you consider the income of women of color to their white counterparts. In fact, the *2015 Women in the Workplace Survey* found that women are 15% less likely than men to be promoted and make up just 17% of the

executive suite. Business leaders say they want to see more women in leadership but claim there aren't any candidates. Women say they want to advance, but there aren't any opportunities. Obviously leaders and employees are talking past each other – but why?

There are many stereotypes that attempt to explain this phenomenon, mostly insinuating that women choose to adjust their career plans and reduce their workloads to spend more time caring for their family. Other myths include that women are less interested in holding leadership positions, or are incapable of doing so, and many other myths that we've all heard numerous times before. But the facts don't back up these myths. And, it's not only women and their families that are paying the price for this gender inequity - the number of women in leadership positions in a company or on a board has a significant effect on the success of that business.

## **What Businesses Can Do**

While many companies name gender diversity as a high priority, most employees believe that advancing women is not a boss' priority. Many times there is a lack of understanding about this problem or how to fix it. Managers and corporate leaders may not recognize that their actions and company policies can be creating unintended barriers for women in the workplace. This toolkit is designed to make the case for gender equity as a business necessity and will provide some concrete steps that can be taken to become an equitable business.

There are 3 sections to this Toolkit: 1) Recruiting Women to the Workplace, 2) Hiring and Promoting Women in the Workplace, and 3) Keeping Women in the Workplace. Under each section there are specific methods that your business can use to address these challenges in the workplace. We have listed suggested steps by the level of resource investment required, so your business can consider your capacity when taking on these issues. We encourage you to read this Toolkit, design a gender equity plan with your staff, and put it into action. We think you will see for yourself how it improves employee and workplace morale, and over time, your bottom line.

## **How to Use this Toolkit:**

Within each section, you will find best practice recommendations, based in policy, research, and interviews with employers. Under each recommendation are three levels of recommendations, based on capacity and level of resource investment required. *Recommendations at each level are not mutually exclusive*; your business may choose to implement some low-capacity and some high-capacity steps, based on your own unique situations.

We do hope that you will give us feedback on this toolkit so that we may continue to improve upon it over time. Please send your experiences or recommendations to [\*\*info@wfri.org\*\*](mailto:info@wfri.org).

## Section 1: Recruiting Women to the Workplace

### 1A: Expose young women to your field of work, workplace and company

There are many fields of work that are regarded as “women’s work” or “men’s work” and often times we find ourselves continuing these stereotypes by pushing young people in one direction or another. It’s important that we talk to youth about all types of careers and fields of work, regardless of gender, to encourage them to explore a wide range of careers.

By providing programs for younger women to learn about your field of work and company, you can broaden their horizons and expose them to a career they might never have thought of for themselves. These types of programs are a win-win for businesses and the youth engaged in them. Participants will be able to learn about the company’s mission, their goals, and the types of activities they are involved in, and the company will have a unique opportunity to market themselves to a talented new workforce while showing their commitment to gender diversity.

Establishing initiatives for younger women fosters economic growth by providing potential female employees with an education about the company, networking opportunities, and access to the companies’ resources. These initiatives can also help these young women learn more about their interests and help them pinpoint what they would like to do within the company. Lastly, programs such as these can expose young women to female role models in fields within the company, helping them to see themselves in that line of work.

#### *Steps to take:*

**Low Capacity:** Hold or participate in a job fair that shares information about your business and the positions in it. A job fair is a great opportunity for people to discover what they are really interested in and it also gives them a chance to see the job options that are available to them in your business or field. Help participants understand what background, education and skills are needed to be successful. You could also consider a live or online information session about your company and your field, specifically targeting young women who want to know more about your work.

**Medium capacity:** Seek out existing internship or job mentorship/training programs that are offered for young women, and partner with the program managers to highlight your business. Forming a partnership with a training center would be mutually beneficial as you are helping young students find and plan their careers. You’re providing an important service to your community and identifying and molding potential employees for yourself.

**High capacity:** Coordinate your own job training, internship, or mentoring programs for youth. Advertise at local high schools/colleges and use to recruit women to the company to open them up to a new field of work. Paid

internships give low income applicants a choice between a minimum wage job with limited growth opportunities a way to explore a path to better paying careers without sacrificing income.

### **1B: Eliminate negative female perceptions in the workplace**

Employees, and especially managers, need to be aware of unconscious gender bias and stereotyping that is common in many workplaces. A 2015 Pew study claimed that four out of 10 people surveyed said that there are double standards for women seeking the highest levels of leadership in politics or business. Women feel like they have to outshine their male counterparts in order to be recognized as an equal worker, but women and men both overwhelmingly doubt that women are being treated unfairly in the workplace. Gender bias can be deeply rooted in the competencies that organizations value in a leader, which tends to associate men with leadership skills and positions over women. Organizations must be vigilant in identifying and eliminating these stereotypes if they want to counter gender bias and take advantage of their full talent pool.

#### ***Steps to take:***

**Low capacity:** Send managers to training on creating supportive environments, and addressing inappropriate workplace interactions. Encourage women to attend, pay them for their time, and reward them for their participation. Connect female employees with leadership development and training programs that help them improve their financial, negotiation, communication, and leadership skills; invest in their participation by flexing schedules, allowing use of paid time off, or providing tuition reimbursement. A supportive environment benefits all employees and promotes employee diversity and retention.

**Medium capacity:** Have an employee work group develop and share policies and best practices to promote a culture of respect and equity and gender equity. Provide paper materials (e.g. flyers, brochures) to make all employees feel more comfortable in their workspace. These paper materials would be intended to fulfill the same mission as workshops. The main idea is that women need to look at their workplace as an open space where they can openly discuss any gender problems that arise within their workplace.

**High capacity:** Offer on-site training workshops that discuss gendered perceptions and implicit bias to help employees of both genders feel more comfortable in their workplace. These workshops should go beyond sexual harassment, and help employees to understand how to create supportive and respectful environments for all employees. They should also help employees understand appropriate ways to address and resolve conflicts when they arise.

### **1C: Provide training and support for women with lower skills or less education**

Women with lower educational attainment or less work experience have a hard time breaking into the workforce. While all women are underrepresented in many fields and in leadership across the board, women of racial and ethnic minority groups are more likely to spend their working years in low-wage jobs with less chance of advancement. Investing in these women helps get at two important equity issues: 1) the perspective that a diverse workforce is beneficial to business resilience and 2) the long-term success of your business. So finding a way to help these women beat the barriers makes good business sense.

#### ***Steps to take:***

**Low capacity:** Instead of requiring a GED, which eliminates a potentially qualified applicant pool and prevents many low wage workers from finding employment, consider requiring a National Career Readiness Certificate instead. Offer females in job training and alternative education programs the opportunity to job-shadow employees. Job shadowing helps future employees see how the workplace works, and understand the soft and hard skills necessary for workplace success. It also helps employees get a good feel for future applicants beyond an interview setting.

**Medium capacity:** Offer internships for women to improve their skills in your specific field. Focus not only on the job skills, but also on the other things prospective employees may need to know to be successful, for example: how to dress, what to say when answering the phones. Paid internships help ensure that lower income women and those with financial responsibilities can participate.

**High capacity:** Develop a program to provide new or prospective lower skill workers with training, mentorship, and advice from successful female employee. Allow the participants to shape the program, and involve line managers in the curriculum and feedback process. Incentivize participation creatively through contests, competitions, and opportunities to work on alternative projects. Low wage workers are often unable to take advantage of tuition reimbursement programs because they require the employee to pay the costs up front. Consider offering tuition pre-pay programs, where the employer covers the costs upfront. If a 529 Plan is offered, provide an employer match for education and training of employees and dependents.

## Section 2: Hiring and Promoting Women in the Workplace

### 2A: Advance equity in your hiring practices

There are conscious and unconscious biases that can influence our decisions and actions, which result in hiring and promotion patterns that tend to favor men at every level. To ensure the selection of diverse talent, businesses need to carefully review their hiring practices and identify barriers and opportunities for improvement. The hiring process is extremely important in creating equity since starting salaries are the floor from which all advancement is made.

#### *Steps to take:*

**Low capacity:** Be transparent about the required education and background experience that a candidate needs in order to be considered for the position, and include a salary range or starting salary to ensure that women and other underrepresented candidates ask for a fair starting wage. When employers set pay levels for new employees based on pay from previous jobs, this perpetuates the gender wage gap. Make fair offers based on work experience, demonstrated skill sets, anticipated employee value and market averages.

**Medium capacity:** Conduct panel interviews when possible. Have hiring committees that include at least one male and one female. Put structures in place so that names are removed from resumes before the first cut is made so the gender is unknown to the person reviewing the resume. Have candidates demonstrate skills such as writing or coding samples, creating planning documents, etc...

**High capacity:** Incentivize Human Resources department or similar staff to take trainings focused on eliminating bias during interviewing and encourage them to test out what they learn. Conduct regular audits of new hire demographics, starting wages, and promotion/retention practices.

### 2B. Close the wage gap!

In 2017, the gender wage gap for white women in RI is .88 to a white male \$1, .77 for an african american woman to a white woman and less than .50 for a hispanic/latino woman. Nationally, the wage gap is .80 for women to \$1 for men. The difference is enough to groceries for a family of four over the course of a week and could be all the difference for a low-income worker.

Employers should conduct regular compensation evaluations for employees of all levels to watch for patterns of inequity and ensure that everyone is being paid fairly for their position, skills and experience. When employees know they are respected and appreciated by making a fair wage, it improves workplace morale and makes for more loyal and productive employees, which saves companies money in the long run.



### ***Steps to take:***

**Low capacity:** Businesses should do everything they can to ensure they're giving all employees a fair wage for their work regardless of gender, and they shouldn't ban employees from talking about their salaries. Wage and benefits should be clearly detailed in an offer letter signed by both parties and evaluated on a regular basis. Create an open workplace environment where employees feel comfortable and free to communicate with their boss about a compensation issue. It should be made clear that there will be no retribution for having these conversations with your boss or coworkers. Conduct regular employee reviews with potential for raises rather than waiting for employees to bring up the issue.

**Medium capacity:** Instead of basing starting pay on salary history which perpetuates the gender wage gap, base pay on market averages for starting pay in that position.

**High capacity:** Create a committee to evaluate salaries on a regular basis and make recommendations for how to monitor and close any existing wage gaps. Publish findings and changes to all employees. Develop an employee compensation review board to make recommendations, recognizing that many people value time and other benefits as much or more than salaries.

### **2C: Advance and highlight female senior leaders**

Ensuring that women are as equally represented as men in senior level positions is important to the productivity and efficiency of a workplace. To create equal representation of women at the senior level, businesses need to provide structural supports to move women up the talent pipeline. Businesses need to support women in their advancement, and can increase the number of women in senior positions by actively recruiting women to executive level and board positions. They can also include women on senior search committees. Lastly, businesses can achieve equitable gender representation on compensation committees.

### ***Steps to take:***

**Low capacity:** Develop a workplace in which lower level staff members feel comfortable to approach management and higher level staff members with potential issues, and where inter-department discussion and training is encouraged. Establish mentorships or a program that would pair up lower staff with higher staff in a way that's less formal than a sponsorship program, but allows for higher level staff to provide informal advice and support to help them move up in their careers.

**Medium capacity:** Create a leadership development committee or employee resource group that is responsible for assessing where a company is in terms of gender equity and representation in leadership. This committee would

survey staff, set goals on how to increase women in leadership roles, and identifying reasons why women are underrepresented in leadership in the company and ways to reduce these challenges.

**High capacity:** Create a sponsorship program designed to help actively guide women up the career ladder in the company. In this program, high level female executives identify and sponsor junior women, work closely with them to improve their skills and offer them practical advice. Executives and their sponsors should be given paid time to work together to create and implement development plans and stretch activities to grow skills.

## Section 3: Keeping Women in the Workplace

### 3A: Provide fair, flexible, and predictable scheduling

In order to retain highly valued employees, workplaces need to accommodate the needs of their staff around scheduling. One major reason many women give for leaving the workforce or leaving full-time employment is the lack of clarity or flexibility around schedules. Many types of workplaces can accommodate employee schedule needs, from small retail and food service establishments to large manufacturers. When flexible work arrangements are available, both employers and employees benefit. When they are not available, employees may be pushed out of employment altogether or be forced to choose work below their skill and experience level. This can lead to a loss of human capital for the whole economy.

With women making up more than half of the workforce, employers need to pay close attention to what motivates women to choose one employer over another. Employers need to be clear about the availability of alternative work arrangements, paid and unpaid time off, flex time, and the opportunity to take emergency leave when an unforeseeable issue arises. It is important that workplace practices applying to everyone and are not considered exceptions for women only.

#### *Steps to take:*

**Low capacity:** Ensure that your workplace is a flexible place and provide clarity and uniformity around the types of schedules that are available and how shifts are assigned. Be sensitive to how schedule changes may impact employees and their families by providing work schedules two weeks in advance, including work shift and location and/or guaranteeing a minimum number of fixed hours per week. If overtime is required, provide a minimum of three days' notice to workers who will be expected to work the extra hours. This allows employees to make any necessary family care or transportation arrangements. Consider allowing employees to shift-swap to cover illness or emergencies; clarify expectations around notifying supervisors of any changes.

**Medium capacity:** Show respect and support for your employees' lives outside of work. Provide employees a certain number of "early dismissal days" that they can use to attend school events, family dinners, community functions, or other outside events. Be clear about whether this time is paid or unpaid and ensure that employees and supervisors understand the request and approval process. Don't terminate an employee for a single illness or family emergency. As many low-wage workers rely on public transportation to get to work, which can sometimes cause delays beyond their control, allow a time buffer at the beginning of their shift before penalizing them for lateness.

**High capacity:** Establish and communicate clear policies around schedule flexibility, acknowledging that employees have responsibilities outside of the workplace as well. Where possible, allow employees to request flex schedules,

provide paid time off to support employee wellbeing, and provide clarity about expectations around schedule changes, requested time off, and total hours worked. Cross-train employees in multiple roles so they don't have to be sent home during slow periods.

### **3B. Offer child care options for employees:**

In most households, whether women are working or not, they're still taking on the bulk of family care responsibilities. In addition to that, the cost of childcare per year can be more than the annual tuition paid at a community college. When child care responsibilities become unmanageable and the costs of child care is too much for a family to consider, many women end up opting out of the workplace to care for their children. However, there are a number of ways businesses can reduce the stress and burden of childcare for employees, making it easier for them to meet the needs of their workplace as well.

#### ***Steps to take:***

**Low capacity:** Offer a workplace environment where supervisors are trained to manage a flexible workforce, and employees know they won't be penalized when childcare issues arise. Employees need to know their employer understands that kids can occasionally make you late, or sometimes you need to leave early or work from home to care for a sick kid. Paid or unpaid time off should be provided as appropriate, and employees and supervisors should understand that requesting or utilizing these flexible workplace policies will not negatively affect their job or how they are evaluated as workers.

**Medium capacity:** Offer stipends, discounts, or reimbursements to soften the expenses of childcare, or allow employees to "cash out" paid time off for childcare subsidies. Provide emergency childcare options for those times when plans fall through and make child care referral assistance available. By addressing equal pay and job advancement issues and reducing the cost burden of childcare, you can help keep women from feeling forced out of the workforce because of the insufficient proportion of their income to expenses.

**High capacity:** Businesses could offer onsite child care so parents spend less time driving kids back and forth to child care, and can occasionally drop in to have lunch or snack time during a break from work, increasing employee satisfaction. There are many models from fees based on income level to a free service included as part of a benefit package.

### **3C. Keep pregnant women and new mothers in the workplace:**

During a pregnancy, there are a number of easy and no-cost accommodations that you could provide for your employees that would enable them to have a healthier pregnancy and work safely, longer into their pregnancy. In today's world, more women are working while pregnant, work longer into their pregnancy, and are highly likely to return to their job after childbirth. It makes good business sense to

accommodate a good worker during a brief period of time like a pregnancy, as the costs of hiring and training a new employee are high, and these accommodations can have no cost. Rhode Island law now articulates the steps businesses must follow and the types of requests employees may make to ensure a healthy working pregnancy. And of course it's the right thing to do for the health of the employee and her child.

***Steps to take:***

***Simple accommodations everyone should (and must) offer:*** Time to sit during a long standing shift (or provide a stool to sit on during shift); extra bathroom breaks; allow worker to carry water during shift or to take extra water breaks; unpaid time off for pregnancy related doctor's appointments; unpaid time to pump breast milk after childbirth and a private space to do so, unless you can demonstrate that it is an undue hardship to your business to do so. *Please contact the Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights for more information about fair employment practices including pregnancy accommodations.*

**High capacity:** Change job duties to accommodate for limitations to job responsibilities like lifting or working with hazardous materials; adjust schedule to account for morning sickness or tiredness; provide additional paid time off for doctor's appointments for pregnancy or postpartum care.

**3D. Provide earned sick time**

The most common reason women ask for days off is to care for sick children or elderly parents. Women are often penalized for days missed without a doctor's note. Obtaining a doctor's note for a cold or short duration illness can be costly for those without health insurance or who have high deductibles/co-pays, especially when the purpose for the visit is only to get a doctor's note.

***Steps to take:***

**Low capacity:** Permit workers to use unpaid or paid time off to care for loved ones rather than restricting it to personal use and don't require a doctor's note for absences of less than three days.

**Medium capacity:** Allow workers to take PTO or sick days during the 90-day probationary period without penalty.

**High capacity:** Provide earned sick time to workers who have at least 90 days of employment, including part time employees. This can be pro-rated based on the number of hours worked.

**3E. Provide paid family leave**

We have all had at least one experience in our lives when our changes or crisis in

our family lives has made it harder to deliver our best in our work lives. Sometimes this is a new baby or adopted child, other times it may be a parent's illness or a medical complication with a spouse.

During these times, giving employees the time they need to meet their family responsibilities and reorganize their lives has benefits for both parties. For the employee, it relieves them of the additional stress of their work, allowing them to be present for their family and able to contribute to what is needed in their home life. For the employer, the short-term challenge of replacing an employee for a brief period of time is rewarded by improving workplace morale, and getting an employee that returns to work more focused and productive. And employers also save money by not hiring and training at least one other worker to take the place of an employee who just needed a leave.

### ***Steps to take:***

**High capacity:** Businesses should create and offer their own paid family leave program for employees, in addition to the benefits that are already offered by the state.

**What everyone can do:** Businesses should encourage employees to use family paid leave benefits when they are needed, work with employees to make the transition in and out of the workplace as easy as possible. Make sure that the Human Resources department or other staff person who interacts with your staff around time off understands the law and how it applies in these situations. Any applicable paid or unpaid family leave policy should be prominently posted in the workplace and found in the employee handbook.

*RI State Law offers a paid family leave program to bond with a new child or care for a seriously ill loved one while getting partial pay reimbursement and. Employees are also offered unpaid time through the federal Family Medical Leave Act. Please contact the Department of Labor and Training for more information.*

### **3F. Other Ideas to Consider**

**Low capacity:** Have benefit resource navigators on-site helps women access services they need to get by, without taking travel time away from work, including benefits, financial concerns, health issues and planning for the future. These types of on-site navigation programs are often available through your payroll company or other types of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs).

**Medium capacity:** Research shows that the EITC tax credit is one of the most effective measures in improving a low income family's economic security. But many low-wage workers are not aware that they are even eligible or don't

know how to apply. Provide access to tax prep and EITC consultants on site to ensure that low wage employees are getting the most out of their tax returns.

**High capacity:** Women on average have 177% more debt than men due to lower wages and higher child care costs. Although saving for retirement is an important goal, their more immediate need may be paying off student load debts. Provide an option to divert the 401k contribution from employers to student loan repayments.

## Section 4: Workplace Gender Equity Audit Questions

While many companies name gender diversity as a high priority, many times there is a lack of understanding about the problem or how to fix it. Managers and corporate leaders may not recognize that their actions and company policies can create unintended barriers for women in the workplace.

The following list of questions is designed to help you consider how equitable your workplace or organization is. It is meant to help you think about policies and procedures that can develop and measure gender equity. We encourage you to answer these questions as best you can, seeking assistance from human resources or your leadership team where you are unsure. You do not need to answer all of the questions.

1. Do people in senior positions demonstrate commitment to and leadership on gender issues? (if yes, how is it demonstrated)
2. Does your company/organization have written policy/policies that affirm a commitment to gender equity? (This commitment could be contained in diversity policy statements) Is it visible? How is the commitment demonstrated?
3. Is gender equity mentioned as a priority in the strategic plan?
4. Does your company/organization set specific success measures for gender equity principles?
5. Is there a budget allocation for staff training or other workforce development activity in gender equity? What percentage of employees have participated?
6. Are job descriptions gender neutral?
7. Is action taken to mentor, recruit, promote and retain women in senior management positions? If yes, are these embedded into policies & procedures?
8. Do you track the advancement of women and people of color within your leadership pipeline? How?
9. Do you offer mentoring programs to all employees? If yes, please describe.
10. Do you offer rotational training such as stretch assignments, short term development assignments or emerging leaders into client facing roles to women?
11. Do you offer essential business skills training, such as IT certification or financial skills for non-financial employees to women?
12. Does your organization conduct an annual pay equity analysis by race and gender? If yes, do the results of the equity survey get shared with all managers that have budget and hiring responsibilities?
13. Do you offer flexwork and/or telecommuting? If yes, please describe your policy.
14. Do you offer family leave beyond legally required minimums for both men and women?
15. Do you offer paid time off (including paid sick time) to all employees?



16. Do you offer child and eldercare assistance such as referral services, subsidized care or work/life supports?
17. % of women who work full time for your organization? Women of color?
18. % of women who are new hires? Women of color?
19. % of women who are senior managers/directors? Women of color?
20. % of women who are at leadership level (Board, C-Suite, Senior Executive) Women of color?
21. % of resumes received for leadership positions each year from women vs. men?
22. % of women in pipeline for senior leadership consideration?
23. % of women in senior leadership succession plan?
24. % of women in leadership training programs?
25. % of women promoted when considering total # of promotions?
26. % attrition gap between women and men (# of retained women/total # of women-# of retained men/total # of men)?

## **Appendix: Further Learning**

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