

## Policy Research for Social Change

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I'd like to give you a brief overview of what the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) does and relate the work I do there to some of my experiences at Yale University. I'll begin by describing how and why we got IWPR going and end with some of the challenges we face at IWPR today in bringing research to bear on the policy process in a way that will improve women's lives in the United States and throughout the world.

I was the primary founder of the Institute in 1987, but I did have help from many friends. One was Terry Odendahl, an anthropologist who studies women's giving and philanthropy. She helped me write the first proposal and shop it around to foundations in New York City—she said she was tired of my talking about it for several years without starting it, so she really provided the catalyst that got it off the ground. In that regard I should mention that it has always seemed to me that men are actually pretty good at starting things. They just get some stationery, put their name on it, and they have that center or business rolled out.

Women are a little more hesitant to do that, to take that economic risk, though I also believe women are much more likely to take other kinds of risks, such as supporting unpopular causes. Among all entrepreneurs today, two-thirds are male, and only one-third are female, but women are the fastest growing share of entrepreneurs—perhaps eventually they will catch up with men. Our entrepreneurship in starting IWPR has been successful, but it was not without disappointments in those early years.

To return to my narrative about IWPR's start-up, in her research, Terry had found a philanthropist who said she wanted to start a feminist think tank that addressed economic issues from a radical perspective and had the means to do so; Terry thought she might be a good match with our interests. When I was in graduate school in the late 1960s and early 1970s, radical economics and feminism were both in the academic air—radical political economy was quite a popular, if minority, discourse within economics, especially among entering graduate students. Women's studies was in the very exciting phase of just beginning, when everything about women was a new discovery, and it too was attracting many graduate students. I had thought at the time, while in graduate school, that we needed a feminist think tank focusing on economic issues affecting women. I thought it should look at class and race as well as gender and try to contribute knowledge that would be useful to the women's movement, but I'm sure I never got beyond that rather vague concept at that time.

As for some of the early disappointments, I can assure you that that particular philanthropist didn't actually bankroll the Institute (she later started her own organization), but her gift of several thousand dollars was the first one and did get us going. We were able to find enough funding to set up an office and keep it going during that first year by assembling many gifts and start-up grants of that size and smaller. IWPR's total revenues (and expenditures) in its first 18 months were about \$150,000—now its annual budget exceeds \$2 million. The Institute has grown from myself working part-time with a temporary assistant to 27 staff, including 10 Ph.D.s in different social sciences, and 15 members

of the Board of Directors from all sectors—private, nonprofit, and public.

When we first named the Institute we called it the Institute for Feminist Policy Research. That name was scary to every potential funder with whom we spoke. There are now some successful, primarily academic, research centers with the word feminist in their names. But back then, in 1987, that name was so threatening, so indicative of the fact that we could not possibly be serious social science policy researchers, that it lasted only about a day as I recall. Our current name has served us well in that it clearly indicates what we do, but since much of our work necessarily compares women with men, many people probably don't realize how much research we do on men as well as women.

Let me describe IWPR's mission and program areas. We try to provide cutting-edge research to evaluate the economic impact of existing and proposed policies on women and their families. We work in five program areas, as you can see in Figure 1. The first three capture our focus on economic issues. We study such issues as equal pay, welfare reform, and childcare subsidies. Most of our work over the years falls in these three areas. We also examine economic aspects of health and safety, such as women's access to health insurance and the economic costs to society of domestic violence. We are also increasingly working in the fifth program area, that of civic and political participation, because we would like to understand why, when, and how people

**What We Do?**

IWPR research is focused on the following five program areas:

- Employment, Earnings, and Economic Change
- Poverty, Welfare, and Income Security
- Family and Work
- Health and Safety
- Democracy and Society

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Figure 1

## Starting IWPR

- To address women's economic, social and political disadvantages
- To use education for public good
- To fill an obvious gap in Washington—the conduit of rigorous social science studies on women's policy issues
- To build the intellectual capital of the women's movement
- To unite intellectuals, activists, and policy makers to improve the status of women

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Figure 2

participate and what impact their participation has on the adoption of progressive public policies.

To comment for a moment on women and politics, I don't think we can just assume that "women" equals "good" or women equals pro-peace, anti-poverty, or pro-children. For example, women were very strong participants in the Ku Klux Klan. That was one of our own local terrorist organizations and, yes, women can be terrorists. So we cannot assume that all women are more in favor of peace, social spending, public education, and strong government that protects women and families. But, the research shows that women *are* more in favor of these things on average. At IWPR, we would really like to understand this phenomenon better. It is an area where we might well be able to cooperate fruitfully with researchers at Yale University.

There are many reasons the Institute was needed fifteen years ago, as shown in Figure 2, and all of these are still valid today. First, women's status is still very much lower than men's; women still lag behind men economically, politically, and socially. Let me comment on women's economic disadvantage for a moment. Women are still earning only about 75 cents for every dollar a man earns, that's for full-time, year-round work. Among older single women, more than 65 years of age, 40 percent of women are poor or near poor living on less than \$10,000 per year, compared with fewer than 13 percent of men in that same age

group. These facts would be shocking if we weren't so familiar with them. They cry out for social change and for public policies that can fundamentally alter these facts.

Let me address the second reason listed in Figure 2, using education for the public good. I am someone who has *always* thought that the point of getting an education was to use it for the public good. I'm not sure where that idea came from, but I imagine my public school teachers had a lot to do with instilling that value in me. I grew up poor. My mother, for most of my life, was a single parent raising two kids on a near minimum wage job. I think that's why I felt that economics would be a useful field for me. Somehow, I got the idea that there was something about the economic system that creates poverty and wealth and determines who has which, and it would be important to figure that out. When I came to Yale as a graduate student I was not committed to earning a Ph.D. In fact, I thought I would probably stay for one or two years and earn a Master's degree. I had been working as a research assistant here in New Haven, putting my husband through law school, and I realized a Master's degree would allow me to get a better job, such as teaching at a community college where I could also be involved in political organizing.

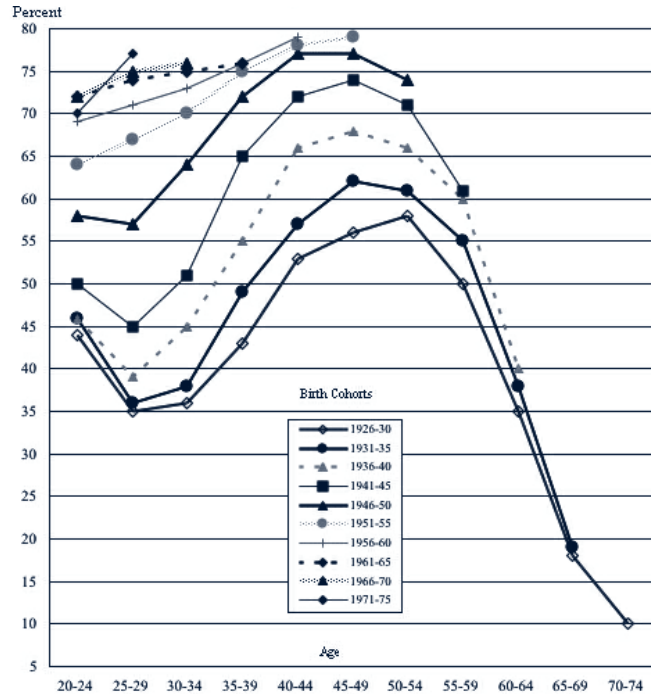
But the intellectual and political ferment that was going on at the time here at Yale hooked me. My time at Yale was a highly political time. I entered in the fall of 1969 and finished in 1974. It was the Bobby Seale/Black Panther trial, it was Vietnam, Cambodia, and anti-war activity. New Haven Women's Liberation had started to meet in the city in 1969, participating in Women vs. Connecticut and the campaign to desegregate Mory's. We shortly formed the Yale Graduate Students Women's Alliance, in which women studying in different departments at Yale got together usually about once a month to discuss our studies, our personal lives, politics, careers, and our futures. Instead of getting an M.A., which I thought was going to be my union card to get a decent paying job so I wouldn't be poor, I realized I could use a Ph.D. for social change. I went on to earn my Ph.D. in economics, writing a dissertation on women.

Another motivation for starting the Institute and focusing on economic issues was the obvious gap in policy analysis in Washington (see Figure 2). I saw a market niche that needed filling. Of course, there were then, and still are now, other think tanks focusing on women, but most of them were not doing rigorous, quantitative, social science studies focused on current policy issues, especially those policies that particularly affect women, such as child care, paid family leave, and equal pay. I thought a new think tank could fill this gap. I realized there was both a supply, competent social scientists who had learned to view the world through a gendered lens, and a demand for such research, a group of policy makers, men and women in Congress and in Statehouses across the country, who wanted to develop policies to improve women's lives, even if for no other reason than that women's votes might be very important in re-electing them (really a perfectly sound reason for public policy in a democracy!).

It was very difficult to convince funders that this niche was unfilled, that it was not already being met by the existing think tanks, and that it needed to be filled. But fortunately over the years and with the really hard work of the board and staff we have been able to do that.

Other important reasons for starting the Institute include building the intellectual capital of the women's movement to increase its effectiveness, and bringing together researchers, activists, and policy makers to improve women's lives. One motivator or contributing factor in starting the Institute, and one not included in Figure 2, is my willingness to take risks and start something new, something I alluded to briefly earlier. My growing up with a single mother in near poverty can explain my choice of study and my desire to use my education to make life better for women. My mother's family in Southern Germany consists of small farmers and businesspeople, so perhaps I had a childhood familiarity with business. But one of the other exciting things about my time at Yale may have contributed to my entrepreneurship. In both the economics department and women's

### Trends in Labor Force Participation Rate for Women, 1950–2000, by Birth Cohort



Source: Social Security Administration, 1993; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1996; U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, 2018.

Figure 3

studies more generally, students were creating their own courses because we found what we were being taught lacking.

Many graduate students in the economics department rebelled against the mainstream neoclassical economics courses we were taking. We created our own study groups and seminars and found faculty members willing to sign off on them so we could receive course credit. The second semester of my second year I took three independent studies, reflecting my participation in those student-led seminars. We also created our own courses to study women. There were virtually no women faculty here, not only in my department, but also in all the others. There were no courses on women to take, and if you were interested in learning

about women you had to invent courses. Francine Blau, now the Francis Perkins Professor of Economics at Cornell University, was a “faculty wife” here at Yale. She was finishing up her dissertation at Harvard University and it dealt with women’s earnings and the sex-segregated nature of the labor market—women tend to work in one set of jobs while men tend to work in other higher-paying jobs. She developed and taught the first senior seminar in Yale College on women and economics—a new senior seminar required a lesser level of faculty approval than adding a course to the regular curriculum did. As a graduate student I assisted informally in that seminar and then went on to teach it myself. After I stopped teaching it, one of the new assistant professors in economics, Marsha Goldfarb, taught it and it eventually became a part of the regular curriculum in economics. That was an exciting development. A group of women law students got the Law School to recruit a part-time teacher to come and teach the first course at Yale on women and the law. The same kind of thing was going on in English, History, Political Science, and Sociology. In a sense we took our education into our own hands, and we succeeded in helping to transform the curriculum at Yale and elsewhere. That was an early exciting example of entrepreneurial success. Of course, over the years I’ve come to value and recognize how much of what I learned from the mainstream has been very useful to me as well, but I do think that the experience of doing something important myself stood me in good stead in starting the Institute, as well as at many other times in my life when something established needed to be challenged.

Earlier, I briefly described IWPR’s five program areas. Now I want to discuss a few examples of our work in more detail. Figure 3 presents data on women’s participation in the labor force over their lifetimes as they age for different cohorts of women, women born every five years between 1926 and 1970. This figure, more than any other data I could display, shows why we need a public policy think tank focusing on women’s lives. The increase in women’s labor force participation over this period has been phenomenal and our public policies have simply not adjusted to

this new reality. While these data are for the United States, many other countries have experienced the same phenomenon and some have adjusted their public policies more successfully than we have, while others have done an even worse job.

The bottom lines show the labor force participation of the earliest cohorts of women, born in the 1920s and 1930s. As young women, in their twenties, only about 45 percent of them worked in the labor force. Then as they aged and had children, their labor force participation fell even lower, to about 35–40 percent. As their children got older, their labor force participation rose to almost 60 percent and then tailed off again as they neared retirement. Compare that experience with women born in the 1960s. They start out their careers with labor force participation of more than 70 percent; there’s no drop-off in participation during the childbearing years. Labor force participation continues to increase as these women age, and will likely slow and fall as they near retirement, just as men’s labor force participation does. Each new generation of women has worked more than the previous one; yet despite this long standing and steady change, our public policy has simply not kept up with this trend. A lot of the work we do at the Institute is designed to develop a sense of what kind of public policies can really help us to adjust to this reality.

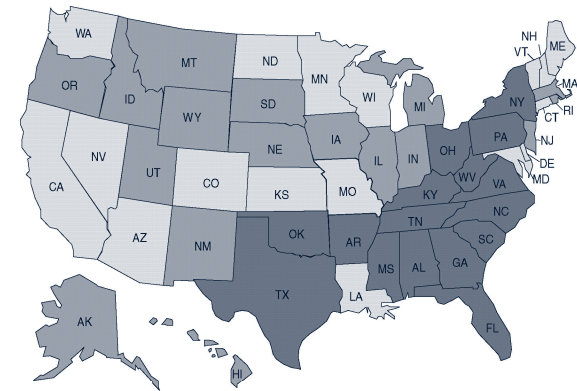
Figure 4 provides some information about an important IWPR project, *The Status of Women in the States* reports. We will

**Status of Women in the States**

- Analyse and disseminate information about women’s progress in achieving rights and opportunities
- Identify and measure remaining barriers to equality
- Provide baseline measures and a continuing monitoring of women’s progress throughout the U.S.
- 42 individual reports published in 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2002
- 9 will be published in the 2004 series, for a total of 51 (including the District of Columbia)
- A national overview report is updated every two years

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Figure 4



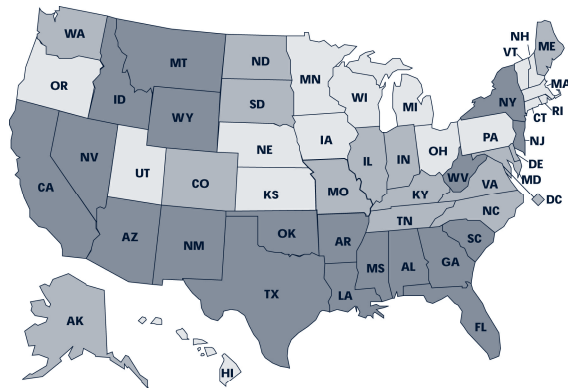
Map 1

have published reports on all fifty states and the District of Columbia by 2004. In this project, we collect and present data on key indicators of women’s status in five different domains: economic, social, political, legal, and health. Using these indicators we rank and grade the states and compare them to one another on these different dimensions of women’s status. Map 1 presents data on women’s political participation. What we can see is that the worst of the states, the more darkly shaded areas, are generally in the South, while in the Northeast and the far West women usually fare better. Map 2 shows the percent of women with health insurance, and you can see that where women’s political participation is low they also have the worst access to health insurance coverage.

We believe our work makes a difference, but it is very hard to prove that any intellectual work makes a difference. Commissions on the status of women have been established in some very unlikely places, such as Mississippi and Louisiana, at least partially because of our work in those states. We make sure that we disseminate our work to policymakers in the states and in Washington, D.C. We also work closely with advocates who can often use our research results to support the policies they are working for.

At IWPR we consider both the research itself and creating a community to produce and use research equally important. We maintain two electronic list-serves which serve this broader community, and we also host a biennial conference that brings researchers, advocates, and policymakers together—the June 2001 conference attracted nearly 500 participants. Our list-serve on women and poverty is used by activists, academics, policy researchers, congressional staff, and journalists. A journalist might use the list-serve to find welfare clients to interview. A welfare recipient might describe her situation and get help to resolve it. For example, one low-income mother said she was trying to finish college but her case worker was trying to make her drop out because of “work first” policies. Other participants on the list-serve were able to help her by finding out what the regulations in her state actually required. She was able to stay in college. Anyone can sign up to participate in IWPR’s list-serves by checking our website: [www.iwpr.org](http://www.iwpr.org).

I want to end with a discussion of some of the challenges we face at IWPR because these occupy me intellectually every day: how to choose our research questions; how to maintain our credi-



Map 2

bility as social science researchers without losing sight of our social change goals; how to fund our work; and how to maximize the impact of our work.

We have found in our work that one of the best ways to choose research questions is to listen to what the advocates who are trying to bring about social change say they need. They are the ones on Capitol Hill lobbying or trying to convince corporations or labor unions or even the women’s movement that this would be a good policy change and should have priority. What kind of research would help them make their case? To do this we go to twice as many meetings as anyone else! We go to all the advocacy and policy meetings in Washington, D.C., and in many of the states to keep abreast of policy developments and advocates’ needs, and we try to go to all the major professional and scientific meetings to keep in touch with research developments in our disciplines.

Unfortunately, some people assume that if we have “women” in our name, and if we work with advocates, we can’t really be researchers. They assume we are not conducting research but must know the answer we’re going to get before we start out. Of course, that is not the case. I like to wear the clothing of the objective, Yale-trained labor economist who is not biased—especially when I testify—just as all the researchers from all the other think tanks do. But we all know that the real truth is that everyone brings their own biases and their own values to their research. We are taught to use research methods that are designed to help us find the truth of the issue, and we all must sort out our biases from our findings. The main difference between researchers at IWPR and other researchers is not in how we design research studies or go about conducting them, but in which questions we choose to ask. We are answering questions that most other researchers do not ask. We apply the same scientific methods that anyone else would apply (although occasionally we have to invent new methods in order to get at some of our questions). We share the same standards of social science work that other social scientists share.

Some think tanks are now being called “advocacy tanks” because there seems to be a think tank on every side of every question. I believe that the Institute for Women’s Policy Research has been able to maintain its credibility as a genuine social science think tank much like the Urban Institute or others, because of the kind of social science work that we do and the care with which we do it. We do indeed sometimes get answers to questions that we don’t expect. We do not suppress those studies, although we may not go out of our way to highlight them in certain situations. Once early on, we had a conflict with a funder who expected us to find a particular answer—that out-of-pocket health care costs were going up in a recession as the cost of health care was rising and insurance coverage was falling. Unfortunately we didn’t find that answer—it turns out that some health care expenditures are discretionary, they can be put off, so out-of-pocket costs actually fell in the recessionary period we were studying. But because the sponsor didn’t like the answer, they didn’t fully fund the work we had done. Those kinds of things do happen. We just have to maintain our vision, our independence as a think tank, and our standards of quality, so that we can continue to do the kind of work we can be proud of as professional social scientists.

How can we fund our work? Individuals are very important. Individuals not only make decisions about their own purchases and charitable gifts but they also make decisions for their organizations. I thought what the artistic panel said this morning was wonderful: if you support women artists, buy their poetry books or their paintings. If you support the kind of policy-relevant research I have been describing you can become a member of IWPR’s Information Network. You can also become a member of the other organizations we’ve heard about today, the Children’s Defense Fund and the Natural Resources Defense Council to name just two. For all of these groups, individuals are a large source of support and the number of supporters is an indicator of the impact of the work—members are a good way to spread the word. Many of IWPR’s members are professors who use our research in their teaching, so our work is continually reaching new audiences.

How can we ensure that our work has impact? We have learned over the past fourteen years that there are two different aspects of our work that give it impact. One is the specific number our research sometimes generates: How much will a new policy cost? How much is it costing us now not to have a policy? A dollar sign on a policy proposal can really have a big impact, particularly on Capitol Hill or in state legislatures. The other is when our work is strongly supported by an accepted concept.

I will give one example that illustrates both aspects. One of IWPR’s very first studies in 1987 was on the value of establishing a policy of providing unpaid family and medical leave for workers. Of course, we all know that unpaid leave cannot be taken by everyone who needs it because some cannot afford to give up the pay to take the leave. But what the proposed bill, made law in 1993, did do was to guarantee a worker a job to come back to, a right they hadn’t had previously. Even very low income workers have to take leave for some events, such as the worker’s own serious illness, the birth of a baby, a parent’s death, a child’s serious injury, and so on. The Family and Medical Leave Act guarantees they will have a job to come back to.

Our study showed how much money workers lose, particularly women workers, when they have babies but do not have leave and do not have a right to return to their job. That number turned out to be higher than an estimate made by the U.S. General Accounting Office of what it would cost employers to provide the unpaid leave. In other words, it would cost businesses less to provide the unpaid leave than it was costing workers not to have it (because workers were losing jobs and having to find new jobs and losing earnings as a result). This is the kind of situation in which the businesses should be forced to provide the leave, because the winners can afford to pay the losers and society comes out better in the end. That number was very, very important at that time in enabling the bill to be passed in both houses of Congress.

But we realized another interesting thing during this policy debate: that number wouldn’t have made any difference if there

hadn't been 20 to 30 years of feminist scholarship around the concept that women have the right to work and to be paid fairly for their work. If we had said 20 or 30 years earlier that women lose money when they have babies, everybody would have laughed. They would have said: "Of course, when you stop working you lose money." Thirty years earlier, virtually the only maternity leave we had in this country was that women quit and hoped their husbands could support them. Women didn't have to be fired; they just quit because they knew their job wouldn't be there if they tried to return. You quit and stayed home, because for most workers there was no maternity leave. Of course, women lost money when they had babies. But 30 years later when the concepts of discrimination in the labor market, equal pay, affirmative action, and equal employment opportunity had become well established, then it became possible to make an issue of the fact that women do lose money when they have babies if they have no jobs to which to return.

In work like ours, both the concept and its practical application—the number—whether measured in dollars or not, are important. The concept comes from the development of theory, from all of the academic scholarship that goes on around the world. Sometimes that scholarship doesn't seem all that relevant to our daily work, but in a fundamental sense it is. That is one of the reasons why we very much see ourselves at IWPR as trying to pull all the constituencies together to produce research that can make a difference in women's lives: the intellectuals with the activists and the policymakers.