

**New York City Council Committee on Women and Gender Equity  
Testimony Submitted by Student Leadership Network  
March 1, 2021**

Good morning. My name is Laura Rebell Gross, and I am the Senior Managing Director of Girls' Education at Student Leadership Network, formerly known as Young Women's Leadership Network. As a proud Brooklyn native, I began my career as a high school English teacher in New York City, and was drawn to The Young Women's Leadership School (TYWLS) of East Harlem where I served for six years. From there I moved to Rochester, NY, where I was a literacy coach in the Rochester City School District and ultimately co-founded Young Women's College Prep Charter School, which is affiliated with Student Leadership Network, before moving back to New York City and joining Student Leadership Network's central office team in 2013. On behalf of Student Leadership Network and The Young Women's Leadership Schools (TYWLS), thank you to Chair Darma Diaz and all of the members of the Women and Gender Equity Committee for this opportunity to testify about Women.NYC today.

Student Leadership Network operates two programs in New York City that support a diverse pipeline of young people from underserved communities to gain access to educational opportunities that help prepare them to lead successful lives: The Young Women's Leadership Schools (TYWLS), a high-performing network of single gender traditional district public schools, and CollegeBound Initiative (CBI), a comprehensive college access, persistence, and success program for young people of any gender.

In 1996, Ann and Andrew Tisch partnered with the Center for Educational Innovation and the New York City Department of Education to launch The Young Women's Leadership School (TYWLS) of East Harlem, the first public all-girls school to open in the United States in 30 years. Their vision was to provide girls growing up in underserved communities with a high-quality college preparatory education modeled after the finest private schools. Today, Student Leadership Network impacts more than 2,500 students through our five single gender public schools in New York City, located in East Harlem, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens (Astoria and Jamaica). At TYWLS, SL Network facilitates programming that supports the "whole girl" to develop students' competence in four core areas: college and career awareness, STEAM (science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics), health and wellness, and leadership development. We support TYWLS students, teachers, and school leaders through our provision of programs, partnerships, and professional development in these core areas.

The mission of Women.NYC aligns clearly with Student Leadership Network's support of The Young Women's Leadership Schools, and we would be grateful for the opportunity to explore a partnership with the New York City Council's Committee on Women and Gender Equity as well as with Faye Penn and Jasmine Taddeo and the rest of the Women.NYC team to contribute to this resource and share it with young women and gender expansive youth citywide. For example, our team recently developed a suite of free [virtual college and financial aid application resources](#) that could greatly benefit students and their families navigating this process virtually during this most challenging year. We hope that this testimony is a starting point to continue this conversation about ways that we can collaborate to deepen our support of young women in New York City.

Student Leadership Network would be so grateful for the opportunity to cultivate a relationship with the Women.NYC team. Our network has seen the incredible impact of virtual resource provision, especially for our partner school communities who have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. A future partnership with Women.NYC can ensure that we expand our college access resources and guidance to more young women and gender expansive youth citywide. Thank you for your consideration of this testimony, and I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

New York City Council Committee on Women and Gender Equity

Women.NYC

March 1, 2021

Good morning Chair Diaz and the members of the Committee. My name is Faye Penn. I am the executive director of women.nyc. I am pleased to be here with our deputy director Jasmine Baker to testify about the women.nyc initiative, how it started, and what we're doing now.

Women.nyc was officially launched in May 2018, but got its start several months earlier when First Lady Chirlane McCray and then-Deputy Mayor Alicia Glen took stock of the Administration's many innovative and consequential policies that helped advance working women, including Universal Pre-K, the Salary History Ban and Paid Family Leave to name just a few, along with programs such as the game-changing Women Entrepreneurs NYC at the Department of Small Business Services. Many more career and business supports were not gender-specific, but offered free job skills and training in a variety of fields including tech, film and television production, the trades and more. So they decided to create a digital destination where women could access every available career opportunity across the NYC government ecosystem.

Women.nyc would be not only a website that could help women advance in their businesses and careers, it would also be a launchpad for future initiatives. The website was launched in May 2018 and proved to be only the beginning of a much-needed enterprise.

Seven months later, I was hired as the first executive director based on my experience in digital publishing, women's media, public-private partnerships, and entrepreneurship—as a former Brooklyn small business owner. I was attracted to the role for so many reasons, mainly this one: the past few years had seen a flourishing of women's empowerment events and conversations touted as helping women get ahead: *power women this, lady boss that*. But the mostly pay-to-play events did little to help women who needed power the most. I always saw that as a goal of women.nyc -- to repackage and reframe the more helpful aspects of this movement for women who did not have hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars, to spend on networking and coaching.

When I arrived, the Initiative moved from City Hall to the New York City Economic Development Corporation (EDC), where it still lives. Because of its role in equitably seeding growth and new jobs, EDC has been a hospitable place for this work. I was very fortunate that the truly amazing Jasmine Baker Taddeo joined us in July 2019, from a digital communications role at the Empire State Development Corporation. We are the only two full-time staff members on the Initiative.

2019 was a busy year for us. We launched Shop Women-Owned, a partnership with American Express and WE NYC, to promote shopping at women-owned businesses in New York City. In partnership with Google and the Brooklyn Public Library, we also taught 24 New York City mothers Javascript coding for free, with childcare provided, via a New York City cohort of MotherCoders, a San Francisco Bay Area-based tech training program for moms.

In September 2019, we headed to the Bronx Library Center with the First Lady to launch our signature program, Ask for More. This partnership with the American Association of University Women sought to enroll 10,000 New York City women in in-person and online salary-negotiation training. Until COVID-19 put the program on pause, we held regular workshops at libraries, colleges, and universities in all five boroughs, and in collaboration with organizations including the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers, the NAACP, the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, and the Grace Institute, among others. We and our volunteer facilitators taught women of all backgrounds how to fight the gender pay gap by knowing their value and asserting it to current and future employers in a systematic, data-driven way.

To date, we have 6,000 workshop enrollees for the negotiation training in-person and online; pre-COVID, we hosted 23 in-person workshops in 6 months. According to survey data, they attracted a diverse set of attendees: 34 percent Black, 27 percent Latina, 14 percent Asian.

And the program got results. "I attended your salary negotiation workshop last week," one participant wrote. "And in exactly a week, I was able to use the value statement structure to negotiate a 70% increase in my speaking rate. I am more confident about my ability to advocate for myself wherever I go. I am deeply grateful. So glad I made the decision to attend."

While we would never argue that the onus for fixing the gender wage gap rests on women, particularly not on the women of color who face the largest gaps of all, women were hungry for this information. Many of them told us they had never negotiated a salary offer before. Another participant, an operations manager, was prepared to accept a \$60K salary on a new job offer but decided, after taking the workshop, to hold firm at \$80K. She called to tell me she got the job and the salary she wanted!

While our in-person workshops remain on hold, we are exploring ways to continue this very successful partnership with AAUW.

In October 2019, we launched our 30-page guide to free and low-cost tech training in NYC, accompanied by an op-ed I wrote in the *New York Daily News* entitled “Getting Women All in on NYC’s Tech Boom.” Our goal was to help more women explore high-growth and well-paid fields dominated by men: front-end web coding, data science analysis and cyber security.

We also held a NYCHA meet-and-greet with around 70 women to find out how women.nyc might be able to support them in their careers and businesses. We met with fashion marketers, construction workers, catering entrepreneurs, healthcare providers and at least one truck driver.

When we spoke with New York City women at our events as well as numerous external conferences where we were invited to talk about women.nyc, attendees would consistently ask us for more networking and training opportunities and continued access to funding and resources for female entrepreneurs.

In January 2020, we announced the first investment from women.nyc’s We Venture program, an investment consortium made up of EDC and five venture capital firms assembled to support startups led by women and founders of color. We Venture’s first investment was into Cosynd, a company led by Queens native Jessica Sobhraj, which makes the creative copyright process more automated and affordable to a wide group of creators.

In February 2020, EDC’s research team published a report on the economic vulnerability of women ages 50-plus, which looked at the many ways systemic sexism in the workplace and increased caregiving demands contribute to financial

vulnerability for women over time. Not only are women more likely than men to retire with fewer assets, they face a wage gap that grows as they age.

However, one bright spot for aging women is entrepreneurship. With that knowledge, women.nyc announced NewVenture 50+, an entrepreneurial bootcamp for women 50 and up with our partners at WE NYC. We pivoted to launch the first cohort digitally in June 2020, and applications are currently open for our third cohort, beginning March 18. To date, 44 women have successfully graduated the bootcamp.

It's hard to believe that around a year ago, we were still planning a busy calendar of March events for Women's History Month, while hearing about an ominous virus heading our city's way. Like many City programs, COVID's effects were felt deeply by women.nyc. Our in-person salary negotiation workshops ended; our collaborations with other agencies were put on pause; and our in-person events were canceled.

At the same time, the need to help women in the workforce had become ever more urgent. We have all seen the headlines, the unemployment reports, the deeply troubling job numbers of a pandemic that has landed hardest on working women of color.

There are so many data points, but to name a few: Women are being pushed out of the workforce by the hundreds of thousands, particularly women of color. In December 2020, when the U.S. economy lost 140,000 jobs, women of color accounted for all of the losses, losing 156,000 jobs while men gained 16,000.

During the pandemic, our strategy shifted to external outreach and planning for 2021, with an overarching focus on forging professional connections and supporting women in the workplace.

In March 2020, we updated our tech-training guide to feature all-online courses to help New Yorkers gain marketable tech skills while quarantining at home.

We also rolled out a COVID-19 resource guide identifying helpful information, and volunteer opportunities for New Yorkers in need, and those looking to lend a helping hand.

Starting in May 2020, we hosted a series of virtual Women’s Leadership Roundtables designed to surface equity-driven recovery ideas for COVID-19 in the areas of entrepreneurship, workforce development, food & hospitality, philanthropy, public policy, and age equity. The roundtables were attended by various non-profits, public-sector and academic thought leaders, as well as City agency representatives. We shared recommendations surfaced during the meetings with Deputy Mayor Vicki Been and NYCEDC’s internal policy workstreams.

We also used our social platforms to highlight New York City women who were really showing up for their communities during Covid by opening neighborhood fridges, distributing hygiene kits and mobile showers to struggling New Yorkers, providing free therapy to first responders and reaffirming our city’s collective spirit with a “love notes to NYC” campaign that’s now featured on LinkNYC kiosks across the city.

The pandemic also inspired us to return to those conversations we had during our salary negotiation workshops and NYCHA gathering. Given our continuing funding challenges, what could we do -- what resources could we marshal – to help women who were not only overwhelmed by life’s demands, but more in need of career supports than ever?

We came up with two key areas of focus: the childcare crisis and the network gap.

The Childcare Innovation Initiative is a new cross-departmental team at NYCEDC dedicated to closing the data gap on how New Yorkers have been affected by the childcare crisis and thinking through creative ways to expand access to childcare. COVID-19 has crystallized what we already knew: that our country’s approach to childcare – as a private family matter rather an economic development issue – is not only an outside strain on families but a particular hindrance to women’s professional advancement.

This is something at EDC we are spending some time at looking into and look forward to coming back to this committee later.

Our other area of focus is the network gap. When we talk about economic advancement for underserved communities, we often talk about skills training. But that’s not enough. According to LinkedIn research, where you grew up, went

to school and have worked can contribute to up to a 12-time advantage in access to opportunity. The network gap, while not a new problem, is a prominent one; lack of access to strong networks has long been identified as a major contributor to the gender pay gap, the racial pay gap, and the underrepresentation of women and minorities in senior roles in organizations.

We saw this in play in our salary negotiation workshops. Each night, the same thing happened: women would line up to ask us and our volunteer facilitators any number of questions. Some we could answer, and some we could not. It was clear to us that many New Yorkers were not achieving their full promise because they did not have the networks they needed to inform their career decisions. And we also knew from our experience that there were many women who were established in their careers and willing to help.

And so later this year, we plan to launch an all-virtual digital networking hub for NYC-based women to target longstanding gaps in networking, career opportunity, and professional development, particularly for Black, Indigenous women of color. On the platform, emerging professionals will be able to connect with established professionals from NYC companies for mentorship, coaching, and network building. Recently, we secured private funding and, currently, are speaking to prospective tech partners via our public solicitation.

We are also re-upping our public event schedule and have a busy month ahead of us. I'm doing a free workshop called "It's Never Too Late to Pivot" on March 10 as part of a month-long series of free coaching events from an organization called The Female Quotient. On March 19, we are partnering with LinkedIn for an event aimed at job seekers who want to expand their digital toolkits. The event consists of a LinkedIn masterclass, small-group coaching and a year of LinkedIn learning, a platform offering online courses on in-demand tech training. Later this month, we're kicking off a series with Luminary, a co-working space, aimed at forging crucial career connections when it's so challenging to do so. Like all of our events, they will be free and promoted through our channels and our city partners.

I mentioned that I am leading a pivoting workshop, and I just want to say a word about my own turn to public service from the private sector more than two years ago. It took me a while to land here – nearly three decades – and I'm so grateful I did. In all my own career twists and turns, I never could have imagined that my

day job would be working to help to make the city I love so much a place where more women can thrive in professionally. It's immensely rewarding work made better by my partnership with Jasmine, a New York City born and bred talent and an incredible collaborator.

Thank you for offering me the opportunity to share our work. I want to thank the members of this committee as well as the City Hall, City Council and EDC staff that helped bring this hearing to life. We are happy to take any questions you may have.



Dear Chair Diaz and Members of the Committee on Women and Gender Equity, we thank you for your time and the opportunity to share our transformational work at [Women for Afghan Women](#).

Women for Afghan Women's [New York Community Center](#) is the only social service organization serving the Afghan community in New York City. In addition, we serve South Asian, Arab, and other Muslim immigrants thanks to our team's language proficiencies in Dari, Farsi, Pashto, Hindi, Urdu, and English.

As you know, 2020 was an extremely trying year. However, in the midst of this crisis, our team stepped up to the challenge. Last year, Women for Afghan Women supported the highest number of New Yorkers to date, taking on over **4,100 client intakes** and transitioning our **15 programs virtually**.

Women for Afghan Women provides comprehensive programming and services to meet every need in the community including but not limited to: social and legal services including domestic violence case management, youth and adult education programs, seniors support program, monthly women's circle support group, civic engagement initiatives, know your rights workshops, and much more.

Despite the unprecedented crisis brought on by the pandemic, Women for Afghan Women succeeded in continuing our programs for low-income immigrant women and their families. **143 women** participated in our English as a Second Language classes, US citizenship exam preparation, driving exam preparation, and vocational sewing classes. Through our classes, **12** Muslim immigrant women applied for US citizenship with a **success rate of 100%**.

At Women for Afghan Women, up to 85% of the women we serve are survivors of domestic violence and illiterate even in their own language. Many of them are facing compounding difficulties such as the lack of digital literacy, unemployment, food insecurity, mental health challenges, unsafe living conditions, and isolation that make them at risk of not surviving this COVID-19 crisis. Women for Afghan Women has been with them from the beginning, including checking in on survivors of domestic violence every single week to make sure they were safe and to update their safety plans.

Each of our programs builds a foundation for discussing and educating the community on issues of gender-based violence. WAW sees all of its programming as a stepping stone for



survivors to build their confidence, increase their agency, and eventually seek assistance to get out of their abusive situations.

2020 pushed Women for Afghan Women to find creative ways to safely check in with our community members as well as meet their new and evolving needs.

Our team delivered gift packages, essential items, and distributed PPE to almost **600 individuals**, most of whom were women, children, and seniors. During this economic crisis, where the majority of our community members faced unemployment and had no source of income, we provided **187 individuals with emergency cash assistance, and assisted 90 individuals with their cash assistance applications with partner agencies.**

Our comprehensive and life-changing work is illustrated through one of our clients' experience, Husna (named changed to protect privacy):

*During the lockdown, a former student of ours, Husna reached out to WAW for help. Husna's husband had physically assaulted her during a dispute and left their home. He took her debit and credit cards. Her unemployment benefit checks were automatically deposited into a joint account with her husband, which she no longer had access to. This left Husna in a vulnerable position and unable to feed her three children.*

*Our team immediately assisted her to secure her home to prevent her husband from assaulting her again, applied for additional public assistance benefits, and opened up a bank account in her name to transfer her unemployment benefits. WAW provided Husna with \$500 cash assistance to support her family. We continue to follow-up with Husna to provide counseling and have connected her to other financial aid opportunities to cope with this difficult crisis.*

Women for Afghan Women has received domestic violence cases from students who had to build their confidence before seeking help (some for a few weeks and others a number of years). These survivors have shared that it was through our programs where they learned about their rights and found the courage to stand up for themselves and their children.

Our team has worked tirelessly for the past two decades to destigmatize receiving help for domestic violence and speaking up in the community. This work has paid off as seen in the increased reporting from survivors who no longer feel that they have to remain silent and endure their abusive situations.



Women for Afghan Women has also received reports from concerned family and community members, which never happened before because domestic violence was seen as a “family matter.” In addition, in the past few years, WAW has provided support to cases of sexual assault and cases of domestic violence among men.

We also focus a great deal on violence prevention, by discussing healthy relationships within our ESL classes, youth programs, and in local mosques. We have provided trainings to local imams (Muslim religious leaders), and to NYPD officers at the 107th precinct to provide them with a better understanding about how to work with survivors and families from the community that may reach out about domestic violence.

Before COVID-19, through support from the NYC Council’s DOVE Initiative, WAW conducted two family nights at local mosques in Queens, which reached over **300 individuals**. The family nights discussed healthy families, domestic violence, and the resources available to families and survivors. Thanks to this success, Women for Afghan Women will conduct family nights annually at local NYC mosques once it is safe to resume in-person events.

To combat the increased risk for gender-based violence, we participated in over **eleven virtual events and discussions** throughout this pandemic, **5 of these events** focused on raising awareness, providing resources and combating gender-based violence within the community. These five events helped reach almost **6,000 individuals**.

Women for Afghan Women is determined to continue providing holistic and side-by-side support to women and families.

2021 will also be an integral year to ensure we can provide our community with the resources, services, and assistance to recover from the devastating impacts of the pandemic.

We hope for your continued support to implement our critical and comprehensive programs that will impact our community and our City for years to come. Your support will be imperative in supporting underserved New Yorkers, as we navigate recovering from this crisis together.

Thank you for your partnership and for your time and consideration today.