TITLE IX AND BEYOND

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How effective has Title IX been since it was introduced 43 years ago?

Title IX is the law that prohibits sex discrimination in education. Since Title IX was passed, we see much less overt discrimination. For example, 43 years ago, before Title IX, colleges could and did exclude women from participation in their courses and even in admissions. We don’t see that kind of discrimination anymore, and in certain ways girls have come a long way in academic achievement. We have seen in those 40 years the academic achievement gap between girls and boys in maths narrow significantly. In fact, there’s not much difference now between high school girls and boys in terms of maths scores, but this is not true for all girls. In fact, girls from low income communities and girls from certain minority groups including African American and Hispanic girls tend to still see significant achievement gaps in our country.

Are there any other gaps that still need to be closed?

Although the overall gender gap has closed, we still see a problem with the number of girls participating in higher maths courses and higher science courses. We have advanced placement computer science (AP CS) courses in our high schools, which are the higher achieving courses. Of the 30,000 students who took the AP CS test in 2013, less than 20 per cent of the test takers were female. Clearly we still have a long way to go, although we have come a long way to date.

Could you highlight sections of US policy that are supporting the American Association of University Women (AAUW)’s mission, and explain whether enough is being done to combat gender biases in science?

Many people misunderstand Title IX and think it applies only to athletics. That is simply untrue. Title IX prohibits sex discrimination in education programmes and activities. The federal statute is very simple, but when it comes down to what’s happening in our schools, colleges or universities, it becomes much more complicated. That’s why the Department of Education plays a very important role in enforcing Title IX. They can, and should, do more to make sure that women in STEM classes and academia are not being discriminated against. Just this past April, AAUW was thrilled when, for the first time ever, the Department of Education produced a document giving Title IX coordinators guidance on what their job is and how they should be doing their job in schools. In that document they cited STEM twice specifically. Every college and every school is required to have a Title IX coordinator charged with enforcing anti-discrimination policies when it comes to gender and sex.

The Title IX coordinators were told in this guidance that they should be looking at the participation rates of girls in STEM classes. If there is a disproportionate number of girls, it is the role of the Title IX coordinator to ask questions such as: should we be recruiting girls to take part in these classes? What are the steps that we should be taking? Are our teachers re-enforcing stereotypes in the way they are treating our children in these classes? Are they encouraging boys to become engineers and girls to become teachers?

It also pointed out that the data that schools report to the Department of Education should be closely examined by Title IX coordinators to make sure that these are accurate data. For example we know that sexual harassment is a big problem in a lot of STEM fields, but is the sexual harassment data being reported in a way that is truthful? Title IX coordinators should be responsible for looking into such areas.

Education is always partly a question of resources and funding. What should the government be paying for in education?

In the US education system, curriculum and policy falls squarely in the role of the state. All 50 states have control over their curriculum and their policy. However, the federal government does have jurisdiction for civil rights, such as the anti-discrimination statute Title IX. So the federal government can, and should, do more to pay for Title IX coordinators and
their training. Just last month, Senator Blumenthal from Connecticut passed a provision in the K–12 bill that the Senate recently voted on, which would provide more money to Title IX coordinators so that they can become trained in best practices and have access to the resources needed to do their job.

How does AAUW work with the government to advocate for issues such as the gender pay gap and influence education policy?

The organisation itself provides money through its fellowships and grant programmes. We provide US $3.5–$4 million each year to help women go into postdoctoral programmes that support their careers. A total of 43 per cent of our fellowships and grants go to women in the STEM professions. We’re putting our money where our mouth is and we believe that people need to encourage and support women who are already going into these fields. Relating to policy, we have a federal shop in which we use volunteers to lobby Members of Congress to ask for greater enforcement of Title IX and more resources for STEM professionals. Additionally, our lobbyists ask for the federal government to use its power in our marketplace to have any federal contractors also comply with our gender equity and anti-sex discrimination laws.

With Title IX, we have much of our STEM workforce located in research labs in major research institutions, colleges and universities who are covered by Title IX. Therefore we have asked for our government to conduct compliance reviews at these research facilities to make sure they employ the number of women that we would expect to see participating in the STEM workforce. If the number is too low, they will investigate what research universities are doing to address this issue. We think that, for example, they should be providing better paid leave and have more consideration for researchers with family obligations. These are all areas that we believe Title IX allows the government to investigate in order to create the climate change that would bring about more women in these fields.

We also have members in 50 states that do the same work as members at both the federal and state level. They ask their states to only contract and work with people who pay equal wages and provide workplace policies that support women, who often have more responsibilities when it comes to dependent care.

To what extent do you believe that US policy changes can contribute to tackling existing problems in the pay gap and other gender biases in STEM workplaces?

Overall, we believe that the government has a role in ensuring educational and economic equity for women. A big part of that is making sure that these career paths are open to women. They can do a better job enforcing Title IX and funding Title IX coordinators. They could use the power of their purse to require that any of the contractors that they deal with have open and transparent wage policies, so that we can see whether or not these colleges and institutions are paying their scientists the same wages. They could pass the Fair Pay Act, which requires transparent policies regarding wages. The federal government could take a look at the grants they award in STEM and conduct an analysis of whether those grants go to men or women. US Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson is trying to push for the STEM Opportunities Act, which we would like to see pass and would require the government to do that analysis.

About AAUW

Since 1881, AAUW has been a leading voice on education for women and girls. It is a non-partisan, nonprofit organisation with more than 170,000 members and supporters in all 50 states. It has 1,000 local branches and over 800 college and university partners. AAUW is one of the largest sources of funding for graduate women, with 43 per cent of our funding going to women in STEM to study everything from aerospace to astrophysics. AAUW fellowships aim to increase participation in areas where women are traditionally underrepresented. There are also STEM programmes for middle school girls as well.

Erin Prangley explains how AAUW fellowships are changing lives

For more than 125 years, AAUW has been a leading source of funding for graduate women, having provided nearly US $100 million in fellowships and grants to over 12,000 women and nonprofit organisations around the world. We started giving grants in the 1880s and Marie Curie was one of the female scientists who received our support. We have a note from her thanking AAUW and saying that without us she would not have been able to purchase her first ounce of radium, which of course led to a lot of her discoveries. Other fellows include Rachel Carson, who wrote Silent Spring, which led to much of the environmental movement. She wrote a letter to us a year before she published her book.

Now, we fund international fellows as well. Women who come to the US to study can apply for funding from us and then take what they learn here back to their country as part of their fellowship. One of those fellows, Jane Chen, through her chemical engineering studies, developed a wax that maintains a constant temperature. This was amazing because she knew that countries that didn’t have stable access to electricity would lose a lot of babies because they wouldn’t have electricity to run incubators at a constant temperature. The wax could be melted over a fire and maintain that temperature for long periods of time to keep premature babies safe. Her innovation has saved countless babies’ lives, and that’s the kind of work that AAUW funds today.