

Good morning. My name is Tara Romano, and I am president of North Carolina Women United. We are a coalition of organizations and individuals across the state working for the full social, political and economic equality for all women of North Carolina.

When the 2015 legislative long session began last January, we created a policy agenda containing 35 goals that would benefit women and their families across the state. Recognizing that North Carolina women lead complex lives and fill multiple, diverse roles in our society, we created a policy platform to address many structural barriers to full equality that Tarheel women face; barriers that many times are based on racist and sexist beliefs that have little grounding in reality. Unfortunately, 22 of those 35 policy goals received a failing grade as we look back on the 2015 session.

With nearly 1 in 5 North Carolina women still living in poverty, and almost half of working North Carolina women serving as their family's primary breadwinner, guarantees of a living wage, paid sick days, anti-pregnancy discrimination and equal pay for equal work are critical policy corrections to persistent discriminatory employment practices. Our lawmakers, however, failed not only to proactively pass these policies; but also passed bills further entrenching these harmful practices.

With more than 1 in 5 North Carolina women between the ages of 18 and 64 lacking access to health insurance and quality health care, policies to expand Medicaid, strengthen health education and family planning services, and build healthy environments for families are needed to counteract a system that is more and more set up to treat optimal health as a commodity only the wealthy can afford. Instead, lawmakers again chose ideology over medical science, and barred access to quality health care as a punishment for those they believe just weren't working hard enough. As if the cycle of poor health in a state where nearly half of the workers have no access to paid sick days has nothing to do with why so many struggle to find good jobs.

With women consistently voting in higher numbers than men, aided in part by recently eliminated or reduced voting protections, we need, but did not get, bipartisan policies to restore our access to the ballot and our faith in the transparency of our elections. And with women – particularly women of color, immigrant women, poor women, and queer women – still facing discrimination in public life, we need public policies to help counteract the sexist, racist and homophobic attitudes that are still too prevalent in our society. Our lawmakers instead doubled down on those attitudes, with laws like the anti-immigrant HB318; the magistrate marriage refusal law; and the recently passed HB2 – which not only blatantly discriminates against the LGBTQ community, but also cuts off access to the full range of legal remedies for any employment discrimination.

As it's not yet politically acceptable to admit that some just want to punish women for making decisions they don't like, we've again heard rhetoric that these laws are for the protection of women. As if second guessing their private health decisions and forcing them into dangerous economic situations makes women safer.

We also have a section in our report card assessing policy that attempts to combat the domestic and sexual violence many women face as part of their daily lives. And while we did see some positive policy decisions made in this area, it was mixed with some bad policy choices. In particular, we saw policies that stopped short of applying the needed safety protections to everyone. While these added protections are necessary, it will take more than tinkering with statute language to create safety for the many women being forced to live more and more on the margins of our society by regressive and harmful economic, health care and civil rights policies.

Just as it became the only state to eliminate the state Earned Income Tax Credit in 2013, North Carolina is now one of only four states to require a 72-hour waiting period to obtain an abortion. And like it became ground zero in the struggle for voting rights with the passage the 2013 election law, North Carolina is now being called out and shamed for one of the most egregious assaults on the rights of its LGBTQ citizens. We are finding it harder to believe this is the state where "the weak can grow strong", as our state motto boasts. North Carolina women deserve policies that address the realities of our diverse and complex lives; not policies based on myths, stereotypes, victim blaming and harmful scapegoating. We urge our lawmakers take these realities and complexities into account as they debate policy this session, and to reverse course as soon as they can. Thank you.

