

## Microfinancing, STEM Fields and Women November 2013

As we heard from our October speaker, economist Erica Field, micro-finance has such a sterling reputation that most people assume it only creates positive change. But the story is always more complicated and nuanced. Humans tend to learn one “story”, and get attached to one set of facts. However, staying abreast of new research findings stretches our boundaries, poses new dilemmas, and encourages growth. Knowing that small loans given to women are not a panacea, and do not necessarily offer a path out of poverty won’t change my involvement with organizations that offer such loans, but I am heartened that ongoing research may improve the micro financing system. It offers hope to women and their families—and hope has value too. I think that no one was surprised that micro loans resulted in more work for women. It is no different in western nations; research shows that married women who work are still responsible for the bulk of homemaking chores, and have less leisure time than their husbands.

Our November speaker, Betsy Bennett, is a woman of science. Prior to getting into the museum business, she was a middle school and high school math, chemistry, physics, and biology teacher. Throughout her career, Betsy was a one-woman STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) inspiration to many NC girls and women. And her legacy, the Nature Research Center, will only increase interest and exposure to scientific research in our state. Lest we forget, today only 14 percent of engineers are women, and women in computer science and math positions comprise 27 percent of the total number. We live in a world that relies increasingly on these specialized skills but fewer American students are graduating with degrees in STEM fields. In 1985, STEM fields in the US peaked at 24% of all bachelor degrees; by 2009, the percentage had fallen to 18. Hispanics and African-Americans students (both men and women) are underrepresented; each group comprises only 6 percent of STEM fields. (For this reason, I hope that some of our members will help in our spring STEM project, providing support to NCCU). Betsy Bennett is betting that the lure of project-based science will entice the young to see the value of science. Our future depends on it.

I hope to see all our members on Saturday morning, November 16, at Carol Woods. Prepare for an insightful talk with Betsy Bennett! --Bea Keller