

# CITY LISTENING PROJECT BRISTOL

## WHAT IS GETTING IN THE WAY OF WOMEN REACHING THEIR ASPIRATIONS?

### How can women whose voices frequently go unheard in decision-making contribute towards shaping policy in the city?

In summer 2019 Bristol Women's Voice launched the City Listening Project supported by the government's Gender Equality Office (GEO) to ensure the voices of women, particularly those that frequently go unheard, contribute to better policy-making. The GEO was particularly keen to hear from women facing multiple barriers including those in low paid employment, BAME women and disabled women. Our research focused on areas with higher levels of inequality and deprivation in the city. Many of the women who participated were in poverty, either reliant on social security or experiencing in-work poverty. Together we wanted to better understand:

- What stands in the way of women achieving their aspirations
- What steps they might take in reaching their aspirations
- What is working, or has previously worked well for them

*'These are powerful stories'*

Bristol Women's Voice worked collaboratively with women and anchor organisations to deliver 22 focus groups, 81 in-depth interviews, 6 pop-up events and an online survey, engaging with 530 women in total. During the focus groups, women had the option to participate in a crafting activity, enabling women to capture their reflections by writing on fabric. Community researchers

were recruited to ensure we were offering different ways for women to feed their voices into the data collection. The focus group facilitators and researchers worked with the women participating to capture key themes and recommendations coming through in the discussions.

Unsurprisingly, our research revealed how women's financial marginalisation limited their choices in many aspects of their lives including: security and enjoyment of employment; opportunities for education and professional development; quality of housing provision; ability to retire and enjoy retirement; scope to rebuild lives after domestic abuse; opportunities to find fulfilling pathways away from substance use. Also unsurprisingly, women revealed how marginalisation intersected with racism, discrimination against disabled people, gender violence and sexual abuse. Most striking was that many of the women participating in this research had very realistic aspirations and often understood what needed to change to enable them to move forward in their lives.

The partner organisations have been key to the success of this project supported by the far-reaching participatory out-reach work coordinated by Debra Newrick, the manager of the project. We would like to express our gratitude to every organisation that participated in this research, either through facilitating focus groups or connecting Bristol Women's Voice to women who may otherwise not have been reached. We are deeply grateful to have had the opportunity to work with each of the community researchers who were vitally important to the success of this project. Additionally, to all the women who agreed to be interviewed or attended focus groups, participated in the online survey or pop-up events, we are very grateful for you sharing your experiences

## *‘... racism prevented families moving to certain areas trapping families in poor quality housing’*

with us. These are powerful stories that enable Bristol Women’s Voice to continue to advocate for the changes needed to support a more equitable city.

- Women we spoke to aspired to secure, employment, access to education, and professional development but instead were surviving in unfulfilling poorly paid employment, their ambitions thwarted by significant barriers.
- We heard of multiple ways in which the lack of affordable good quality, secure housing affects women’s safety, health, employment and ability to live fulfilling lives. “Even though I work, if I lost my job it would only take a month before I wouldn’t be able to pay my rent.”
- Caring responsibilities emerged as a key theme. Women faced critical challenges in accessing support for themselves and the people they care for.
- Women across the city told us childcare was too expensive, located too far from home, and not available at the times they needed affecting employment, training and education opportunities. “If you get a job you can’t travel far because you’ve got to be able to get the bus back in time to do the school run”
- Restricted access to physical and mental health services emerged as a key theme impacting severely on women’s health and wellbeing.
- Women caring for SEND children highlighted many barriers that impacted on families, in particular interactions with schools, GP practices, and Bristol City Council services.
- We learnt how racism prevented families moving to certain areas trapping families in poor quality housing; how BAME women and disabled women faced racism and prejudice on public transport.

- Systemic failure in support of disabled people arose in many interviews and focus groups particularly for those facing less visible illnesses.
- A significant number of women from diverse ages, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds were survivors of domestic abuse with a long-lasting impact on many aspects of their lives including mental health.

## *‘The charity sector was considered vital’*

We also learnt about what is working well for women in particular the far-reaching benefits of volunteering. The charity sector was considered vital. We have been fortunate to witness the quality of support Bristol women are receiving from our partners: Ambition Lawrence Weston; Avonmouth Community Centre Association; Barton Hill Settlement; Bristol Bangladeshi Women’s Group; Bristol Black Carers; Bristol Parent Carers; Developing Health and Independence (DHI); Interculture; Knowle West Health Park; Mothers for Mothers; Nilaari; Refugee Women of Bristol; Red Tent; Sadaga; Talo; West of England Centre for Inclusive Living (WECIL).

The extensive research findings produced in a separate document by Emma Griffin, the research analyst for the City Listening Project will inform the future agenda of Bristol Women’s Voice in campaigning and advocacy work for equality in the city. The research will inform the strategic directions pursued by Bristol Women’s Commission to ensure the needs of all women are represented in local policy and decision-making. The City Listening Project is part of Bristol City Council’s One City Approach, responding to the complexity of public policy challenges by embedding a culture and framework of collaboration and collective responsibility in order for the city to thrive and benefit all who live in it.