

Engaging and empowering women in poverty

Findings
Informing change

July 2008

This report examines participatory research conducted with women in poverty living in Birmingham, Cardiff and London. The project aimed to build their political capacity so that they could take their collective knowledge and experience, present it as policy proposals to policy-makers and actively help to produce policy change.

Key points

- Women with experience of living in poverty are well-placed to articulate the policy changes which can most effectively improve their situations.
- The project participants defined 'poverty' in complex and interlocking ways that went beyond a lack of money and financial security. They defined poverty as a human rights issue that:
 - impacts upon their children and their physical and mental health;
 - causes feelings of social isolation; and
 - limits their prospects for advancement in employment or education.
- The participants engaged in capacity-building exercises where they determined which priorities to present to policy-makers. The three priorities were:
 - increasing benefits;
 - ensuring the provision of free, high-quality childcare; and
 - the development of a Women's Act to ensure the protection of equality rights.
- Recommendations from the project include:
 - Government should increase the opportunities for women living in poverty to engage directly with policy-makers, to design and deliver more efficient policies which truly address their needs.
 - Government consultations should routinely include active engagement with women and other groups experiencing poverty and fund the capacity-building on both sides that is necessary to make this successful.
 - Participatory projects should incorporate capacity-building, peer-to-peer learning opportunities, and gender and diversity analyses.

The research

By the Women's Budget Group.

Background

The Voices of Experience project consisted of a series of workshops where women living in poverty came together to express their experiences of poverty and learn more about the policy-making process. It also enabled them to develop policy proposals to improve their situations and present these to policy-makers.

Voices of experience

The project participants were encouraged to define and share their experiences of poverty. Their responses to the statement “Poverty means to me ...” showed that poverty was an undermining and destabilising factor in their lives. They told how poverty compromised their ability to be good parents, forced them to choose between basic necessities, led to feelings of low self-worth and self-confidence and closed off opportunities for self-improvement.

Poverty means to me...

“Being hungry, only having enough food to give the children, hoping they would leave some leftovers on the plate, so I wouldn’t be so hungry.”
(Participant, Birmingham)

Building policy

In order to transform their direct experience into policy proposals, the participants were asked for recommendations on how to improve their situations. They came up with 28 recommendations that focused on three central themes:

- greater engagement between women living in poverty and policy-makers;
- enhancement of service provisions; and
- increasing financial support to women living in poverty.

From these recommendations, the participants decided which priorities they would develop more fully for their

presentation to policy-makers. The proposals the participants chose to take forward were:

- to increase benefits, including income support, pensions, and child benefit;
- to provide free, high-quality childcare; and
- to create a Women’s Act to ensure the protection of equality rights.

Dialogue with policy-makers

The participants delivered their three policy recommendations in a meeting with policy-makers at various levels of government, who then engaged with and responded to the proposals. This dialogue gave the project participants and policy-makers a rare opportunity to share their experiences and insights into the realities of poverty and government policy-making.

Policy-makers felt the dialogue gave them a unique opportunity to see the disconnection between women’s lives and government policies which impact upon them. The participants appreciated the policy-makers’ approachability and candidness.

Empowerment and capacity-building

The Voices of Experience project succeeded in creating a space where women living in poverty could share their experiences, build confidence and expand their knowledge of government policy-making process. The workshops created a strong forum for discussion and participation. Many women identified that “even the quietest people spoke”, and expressed the importance of the fact that “everybody felt safe to speak out and voice opinions” and “know that we would be listened to and not be judged.” In a telling example, a participant who had never spoken in public before made a speech before a group of civil servants.

About the project

The Voices of Experience project was carried out by the Women’s Budget Group in partnership with regional voluntary organisations that work with women living in poverty in Birmingham, Cardiff and London. The workshops were held from May 2006 to January 2007.

For further information

The full report, **Women and poverty: experiences, empowerment and engagement** by the Women’s Budget Group, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk.

The research on which this publication is based was made possible by grants from Barrow Cadbury and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF’s research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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