

## **Women and poverty**

### **Experiences, empowerment and engagement**

*Women's Budget Group*

#### **A project to empower women in poverty to take part in the policy-making process.**

While the Government has developed strategies to combat poverty, especially for children and pensioners, there is no strategy to challenge women's poverty specifically. This project set out to support women living in poverty so that they could go beyond being 'witnesses' to poverty to become actively involved in policy development. It allowed them to develop ideas to improve their lives and better understand how policy is made. The project's aims were:

- To encourage participation in and understanding of the policy-making process by women living in poverty, using participatory methods.
- To help women living in poverty to understand policy debates, explore policy solutions and engage with policy-makers directly.
- To improve the evidence base that informs policy-makers by enabling direct dialogue with women living in poverty.
- Ultimately, to develop more effective policies as a result.



**JOSEPH ROWNTREE  
FOUNDATION**



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We thank all of the regional institutions that supported the women's involvement in the project. They form a group of dynamic organisations working tirelessly for the promotion of gender equality and the elimination of poverty.

## *Birmingham*

Birmingham Women's Advice and Information Centre (BWAIC)  
Saheli Women's Group  
Women Acting in Today's Society (WAITS)

## *Cardiff*

Black Association of Women Step Out (BAWSO)  
Women's Workshop  
Workers' Educational Association (WEA)

## *London*

ATD Fourth World  
Gingerbread  
Haringey Women's Forum  
Rapid Solution Community Link  
YWCA East Dagenham

This research could not have taken place without the support of our funders – the Barrow Cadbury Trust (BCT) and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF).

We are encouraged by the joint commitment demonstrated by BCT and JRF, and believe that this co-operative approach to funding is necessary to develop innovative research which has the potential to make positive and lasting change a reality.

Moreover, Oxfam provided additional funding when an unexpected number of participants demonstrated a keen interest in participating in the entire programme. This funding enabled us to ensure that all those who were interested in participating could do so. In the end the money was not required for this purpose given the variable rate of attendance due to a variety of factors. We thank Oxfam for supporting the strategic influencing aspect of this instead, which was critical in ensuring that participants could meet directly with decision-makers.

We would also like to thank our Advisory Group for their support and engagement. The group was drawn from academia, grassroots organisations, government and lobbying backgrounds. The breadth of their expertise contributed significantly to the shape of this project.

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Without all of these valuable contributions from such a wide variety of committed individuals this project could not have been such a success.

# About the Women's Budget Group

The Women's Budget Group (WBG) is an independent organisation comprising individuals from academia, non-governmental organisations and trade unions, which promotes gender equality through appropriate economic policy.

In all our work, we ask the question: Where do resources go, and what impact does resource allocation have on gender equality? The impact that government expenditure can have on women's everyday lives, especially women experiencing poverty, is of particular concern to us. Given this organisational focus, and participatory work developed by our Poverty Working Group, we developed the Voices of Experience participatory research. The main objective of the research was to enable women experiencing poverty to engage and influence policy-makers directly.



# Executive summary

In March 2006, the Women's Budget Group launched a participatory action research project with women living in poverty with financial support from the Barrow Cadbury Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

While the Government has developed strategies to combat poverty, especially for children and pensioners, a strategy to challenge women's poverty in particular has not been initiated. To help fill this void, the Voices of Experience participatory research project created a space for women to:

- express their individual experiences of living in poverty;
- learn more about the policy-making process;
- develop proposals for improving their situation;
- present these ideas in a conversation with policy-makers.

This report will review both the process and the findings that resulted from this capacity-building and direct engagement project.

## Defining poverty

The participants were asked to define what poverty meant to them, and their responses reveal a complex and dynamic understanding that went beyond finances. The participants framed poverty as a human rights issue and defined poverty as an experience of social isolation. The impact of their poverty on their children was a central theme and the participants talked about sacrificing their own food, clothing, heat and other basic needs in order to put their families first.

Their experiences of poverty ranged from pervasive disrespect from other members of their community to feelings of low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence and hopelessness. They felt that poverty affected their ability to be good parents, and expressed anguish at not being able to provide even the smallest of luxuries or treats for their children. Poverty was experienced as a constant sense of financial insecurity and instability and the lack of any real opportunity to improve their situation.

### **Messages to policy-makers**

To challenge these problems, the participants determined which messages they wanted to bring to policy-makers that would help meet both their practical and strategic needs. There were numerous ideas. Some of the most popular included:

- increasing benefit income in order to improve the lives of women living in poverty and support their families' well-being;
- providing free and accessible childcare, to enable women to work and reduce their isolation;
- developing a Women's Act that would enshrine women's rights in policy-making and implementation.

### **Capacity-building and direct engagement**

The participants then presented these messages directly to policy-makers for their consideration, and the policy-makers had a chance to respond and engage with the participants. For many of the participants present, it was the first time they had framed their political concerns in a policy context, or articulated their policy wishes publicly. For at least one participant present, it was the first time she had made a public speech.

This project was successful in building the capacity of the participants present to the point where they could frame their experiences within a broader policy context. In providing an opportunity for women living with poverty to come together and collectively discuss and define their experiences, the project helped these participants to understand their situation within the larger policy context. The participants felt empowered to speak, and were able to provide support for one other and to determine what policy outcomes would best improve their lives. They developed the necessary skills to then bring these messages to policy-makers and engage in political debate with them.

This project speaks to both the expertise and experience that women living in poverty have and how these women can bring that to bear on government policy and policy-making. The following recommendations emerge not only for government policy-makers, but also for voluntary organisations that may seek to conduct their own engagement projects, and funding bodies which may support such projects in the future.

## Recommendations

### For government

- (a) Government should increase the opportunities for women living in poverty to engage directly with policy-makers on the design, development and evaluation of policies and programmes which affect them.
- (b) Government should ultimately progress towards creating systematic opportunities for citizens to help determine its priorities, ensuring that the voices of women living in poverty are not eclipsed by those of more powerful actors.
- (c) The Government should increase benefits, including Income Support, pensions and Child Benefit, in order to support women living in poverty to improve their lives.
- (d) The Government should enact a Women's Act to ensure that gender equality is a central goal of all government policy-making.
- (e) The Government should provide free high-quality childcare, so that women in poverty are able to fully pursue employment or education as routes out of poverty. Only by tackling women's poverty will the Government be able to meet its child and pensioner poverty objectives.

### For the voluntary sector

- (a) Gender and diversity analysis should be incorporated into participatory projects with women living in poverty to support their capacity-building to situate their experiences and ideas for change in the broader context.
- (b) Participatory projects should incorporate peer-to-peer learning opportunities to share expertise among women living in poverty, and enhance the confidence of all participants to make change happen.
- (c) Organisations seeking to carry out participatory projects need to build in sufficient resources to meet the needs of women living in poverty in a range of ways, including childcare, transportation and payment for participation. In addition, they must be flexible to support women living in poverty to overcome barriers that are not solely resource-based.

- (d) Collaborative participatory approaches to developing and implementing projects among grassroots and other organisations would create opportunities for sustainable initiatives. This will ensure financial viability for grassroots organisations in participating in these projects, as well as mainstream their expertise in engaging with women living in poverty.
- (e) Community-based, single-organisation workshops should be pursued to engage with harder-to-reach communities, particularly women from black and ethnic minority communities. This should be done in addition to drawing participants from diverse local communities to engage at the national level in a collective manner.

### **For funders**

- (a) Funding bodies should develop a three-tiered system for funding application processes that compensate organisations for the time devoted to developing their proposals, particularly when they are based on collaborative multi-organisation participatory projects.
- (b) Both organisations proposing participatory projects and relevant funding bodies should include a significant budget to pay for grassroots partners' work in promoting projects and providing ongoing capacity-building with clients during processes of this kind.

# 1 Introduction

## Policy context for the Women's Budget Group

### Poverty as a women's issue

The Women's Budget Group (WBG) has been developing gender-sensitive policy alternatives since 1984, and provides advice and feedback to government on how policy can promote both gender equality and economic efficiency. This is achieved through the use of gender analysis, which looks at the different needs, lifestyles, work patterns and caring obligations of women and men and how these can be met by government programmes.

The work of the WBG challenges the notion that government policy-making is gender-neutral. As the work of the WBG centres on equality analysis of economic policy, women's poverty<sup>1</sup> has been a central theme in the work of the Women's Budget Group. The theme of women's poverty features strongly throughout WBG research: not only do women make up the majority of those living in poverty, but child poverty is linked to women's poverty. Women are also more likely to feel the sharp edge of government policy if it is not designed to recognise the reality of their lives. Poor women remain a highly marginalised political group; yet their lives are often very much affected by political decision-making and government bureaucracy.

According to the Department for Work and Pension's own statistics, about one in every five women in the United Kingdom live in poverty (DWP, 2007a). This is a conservative figure because poverty is measured at the household rather than individual level; therefore women's individual poverty may be concealed, as they are more likely to make financial sacrifices for the benefit of other family or household members (WBG, 2005). Moreover, the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey found that women are 'more likely to be poor on all four dimensions of poverty (namely: lacking two or more necessities; earning below 60 per cent median income; subjective poverty; and receiving Income Support)' (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2003, p. 3). Women's poverty is also affected by their diverse identities: 'For example, 20% of white women are living in poverty but the figures are 38% for Black women and 64% for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women' (Fawcett Society and WBG, 2006, p. 2).<sup>2</sup>

### Political context

Since New Labour was elected to the Government in 1997, they have introduced policies intended to promote greater equality between women and men (for example, the right to request flexible work). Despite this, however, government policy-making is often gender-blind. It does not routinely consider the differences between women and men in the design or implementation of policy, which can result in unintended and disparate impacts on women and men.

The Voices of Experience Participatory Action Research Project was developed in response to the Government's consistent lack of focus on poverty as a women's issue. While the Government has made broad commitments to tackle poverty, specifically children's poverty, it has been reluctant to confront women's poverty as part of an overall reduction strategy; its anti-poverty strategies have rarely been targeted at women specifically, and the positive impacts they have had for women are normally a by-product rather than an intended effect. Government anti-poverty policy, for example, seeks to reduce the vulnerability of children and pensioners to living in poverty (DWP, 2007b). For working-age adults, it propounds work as a route out of poverty; however, research conducted by the Equal Opportunities Commission on gender, poverty and policy found that when anti-poverty initiatives have a positive impact on women, this is a by-product of gender-blind strategies (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2003, p. 3). The EOC report goes on to state that without a gender analysis of poverty, government anti-poverty strategies will be likely to miss their targets.<sup>3</sup>

By narrowly focusing on *child* poverty, the Government's anti-poverty policy has obscured the gender dimension of poverty. It is essential that the Government consider women and men's poverty in their own right, but especially given that women are still more likely than men to experience poverty in the UK (DWP, 2007a). Moreover, despite the statutory Gender Equality Duty which came into effect in April 2007, a thorough gender analysis of the Government's anti-poverty policies has not yet taken place.

### Public consultation and participatory research

Public consultation has begun to play a bigger part in the development of government policy: for example, the new Comprehensive Spending Review Public Service Agreements will ensure that 'user engagement' will play a key role in the delivery process. But while the Government has sought the views of women and people living in poverty, it has not consulted with women living in poverty specifically.

The Government has elicited the views of women through a workshop-based programme called 'Today's Woman: Your Say in the Future'<sup>4</sup> organised in the winter of 2006. The objective of the workshops was to ascertain the views of women to help shape government policy. While this is a laudable programme, and the importance of engaging directly with women was emphasised in the process, the impact of conducting this engagement on policy is not clear, and the programme's ability to engage with a wide range of diverse women, including women living in poverty, is also not clear. Without a specific drive to do so, it is unlikely that a critical mass of women living in poverty could have participated.

The Government has also made a significant step towards engaging with people living in poverty through the Get Heard project, a DWP-supported national programme implemented to engage directly with people living in poverty and to inform the development of the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2006–08 (Social Policy Taskforce, 2006). Between 2004 and 2005 146 workshops organised by community groups were held across the UK to survey the views of people living in poverty. However, the extent to which their views were then fed into the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion (DWP, 2006) is uncertain.

The Voices of Experience project evolved out of the fact that there was a distinct absence of participatory research engaging specifically with women experiencing poverty. This project set out to support women living in poverty to go beyond being 'witnesses' to poverty to become agents of change, and to develop ideas for making their lives better, with a greater understanding of how policy is developed.

## **Project aims**

In the light of women's continuing poverty, and an absence of government policy that explicitly tackles its causes and symptoms or adequate user engagement, the Women's WBG conducted participatory research with women living in poverty from Birmingham, Cardiff and London. By doing this, we hope to make more visible to policy-makers, civil society and the public the complex and far-reaching impact of poverty on women in the UK. Participants have developed recommendations for improving their situations. For policies to be truly effective, they need to be responsive to the diverse and complex needs of those who are most reliant on them, including women living in poverty. By connecting directly with women living in poverty, the Government can make progress in combating women's poverty. This is also vital to achieving a range of government targets on issues such as child poverty, welfare to work programmes and social inclusion policy.

The Voices of Experience project sought to challenge policy-makers to expand their evidence base to include participatory research, in order to bring in a more nuanced understanding of how policy works on the ground and the different ways in which it has an impact on women and men. In order to achieve this, participatory research was conducted with women living in poverty in the belief that they are in the best position to determine what policy measures are helpful, enabling more effective policy development.

In supporting women living in poverty to explore ideas for improved policies, there was also an aim of supporting them to understand the policy process more broadly, and particularly the constraints faced by policy-makers. Increasing the capacity of women living in poverty to engage with policy-makers in this way both provides increased skills for women and can contribute to promoting positive policy change based on collective experience, rather than individual experiences, when meeting with policy-makers.

The aims of the project were threefold:

- to encourage participation in and understanding of the policy-making process by women living in poverty, using participatory methodologies;
- to build capacity among women living in poverty to understand policy debates, explore policy solutions and engage with policy-makers directly;
- to improve the evidence base that informs policy-makers by drawing on participatory research through facilitating direct dialogue with women living in poverty, and ultimately develop more effective policies as a result.



## 2 Methodology

### A participatory approach

As the central aims of the project were engagement/communication with and empowerment of women experiencing poverty, the project was designed to take place in three phases, so as to build upon group knowledge and experience over the course of several sessions of engagement. Rather than confine the meetings to a predetermined agenda, feedback from participants was encouraged, and guided the facilitators and participants in the direction most appropriate to enhance the experience.

The overall three-phase structure and aims of the workshop-based research were set out initially by the WBG. Ongoing workshop development was shaped in line with participants' evaluation, which was conducted at each event.

The methodology for carrying out this approach took place in three phases.

- *Phase I* was an opportunity for women to 'map' their experiences of living in poverty. In spring 2006, workshops were held in Birmingham, Cardiff and London to build a picture of women's poverty in each area. In total, we met with 50 women to discuss their individual experiences of poverty. Based on these experiences, women then articulated their collective needs.
- *Phase II* brought women from the three cities together in summer 2006. Women had an opportunity to develop greater understanding of how the Government makes decisions, including reviewing basic government structure and some of the influencing factors in decision-making. With a better understanding of policy-making, women developed and refined their combined ideas for improving their situations.
- *Phase III* provided an opportunity for women to meet directly with policy-makers to discuss their ideas for change in autumn 2006.

The workshops themselves were highly participatory. The two facilitators conducted workshops that involved all participants regardless of their background, literacy, and confidence in engaging in this kind of event. In order to achieve this, a variety of methods were used in all workshops to both provide information and share knowledge, such as small group discussions, external speakers, and visual and

artistic activities. The content of the research is derived from women's experiences of living in poverty and their ideas for increasing their well-being.

Participants were recruited through grassroots organisations working directly with women living in poverty in each city. These grassroots organisations then became our regional partner organisations. These organisations played an integral role in recruiting, informing and supporting women to participate in the entire project. (Their role, a more extensive discussion of the methodology used, and the challenges in working with women living in poverty are discussed further in Annex 1.)

Participants were not paid for their involvement in the research. There is ongoing debate about whether this is appropriate for research of this type, and we would recommend other research projects to fundraise for this element of a project. Not paying participants exacerbates an already significant divide between paid staff, consultants and participants. It can also be a barrier to participation, if participants cannot afford the time to attend workshops. Providing these resources may increase access by women living in poverty who are in low-paid employment. Paying participants also acknowledges and values their time and effort (Beresford and Hoban, 2005). However, it can also be a difficult issue for people living in poverty whose benefits may be jeopardised by earning above the recipient threshold through participation. Despite not being paid for their involvement, the travel, childcare and accommodation expenses of the participants were paid for. Well-catered meals and breaks were included in the workshops, in order to ensure the participants felt valued and respected.

## 3 Findings

### Phase 1: Mapping individual experiences of living in poverty

In spring 2006, women from Birmingham, Cardiff and London met to discuss their individual experiences of living in poverty. In Birmingham, there were 13 women, in Cardiff 17 women, and in London 22 women. At each event, the same methodology was followed to map a picture of women's individual experiences of living in poverty.

First, all participants were asked to complete the sentence 'Poverty means to me ...'. In all, 132 statements were written across the three cities. The statements were written down, collected and redistributed, and other women read them aloud. This process enabled an anonymous approach to discussing individual life experiences, as well as creating a platform for developing a collective picture of poverty.

Among the statements, common understandings, definitions and shared experiences were noted. Overarching themes emerged, and the participants identified eight main ones across the three cities. In descending order of prominence, they were: human rights, isolation, children, money and finances, employment and education, physical and mental health, the 'postcode lottery' and housing.

This mapping exercise defined poverty in complex and interconnecting ways, moving beyond measures of income or finance. Poverty was experienced as the absence of security, a socially isolating condition, compromising the women's ability to be good parents and lowering their sense of self-worth. Poverty was expressed as the inability to meet certain basic needs and to turn their situations around. Their statements were couched in the language of despair, fear and lack of choice.

Many of the participants' statements frame the issue so succinctly that they are quoted below.

#### Human rights

Poverty was understood as a human rights issue, and many participants felt that being unable to meet their basic needs was an issue of social inequality. Statements that frame poverty as having 'to choose between paying for my boiler to be fixed or my children's lessons to support their dyslexia' (Birmingham) demonstrate how poverty deprives women and their families of living essentials. Mothers often find

themselves having to choose between their needs and the needs of their children, for example defining poverty as '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' (Birmingham).

Poverty was also defined as disrespect, stigma and discrimination: 'Poverty is being judged by what you have, not by who you are' (London); 'Lack of respect. Being told off by a debt collector on the phone. And to make things worse she said to me I am only helping you' (London). 'Being stereotyped as lazy and stupid' illustrates the vitriolic statements that can be aimed at poor women.

### **Social isolation**

The stigma surrounding poverty is significant, and the mental stresses associated with it have far-reaching consequences. The participants described poverty as a socially isolating condition that resulted in feeling trapped and depressed. Being unable to afford to participate in social activities is a reality for poor women. 'Poverty to me means making excuses because of a lack of money for not attending social meetings with friends or taking part in leisure activities' (Birmingham). Poor interpersonal skills, low self-esteem and increased difficulties with stress and mental illness were all identified as a result of both social isolation and exclusion.

Many of the women's statements identified the difficulties of remaining resilient in the face of hostility, judgement, pity and shame. Poverty was described as 'having to exist on a pittance but live up to society's expectations. How can you pay bills, look good, feel well, have pride and keep up with society on £74 per week?' (London).

### **Children**

In placing a high importance on their role as carers, women mentioned the effects on their children in describing their experience of poverty. Although not all of the women were parents, poverty was commonly expressed as an inability to be a financially and emotionally supportive parent to children.

Many participants expressed frustration, fear, guilt and sadness about the ways in which poverty meant 'never having enough money to pay my bills and give my children treats and a holiday' (Cardiff). Being unable to provide small luxuries for their children was a common experience. Several participants had no choice but to

sacrifice their own necessities to provide for their children, particularly in terms of food and clothing.

The issue of childcare was prominent. Participants had difficulty securing employment with wages high enough to pay for it, highlighting a key shortcoming of the Government's 'work as a route out of poverty' policy. 'Childcare is expensive – [it's] not worth working [as] all wages will go on rent and childcare' (Cardiff). Finding affordable, quality childcare at weekends or odd hours was identified as a key problem.

### **Money and finances**

Not having enough money was of course a key issue. Many participants explained their financial difficulties in very compelling and revealing statements. Poverty was frequently described in terms of financial instability, apart from or in addition to simply not having enough money. 'Poverty is never knowing if you have enough money to pay the next bill' (Cardiff). Increases in utility bills are particularly problematic for women on low incomes. Benefits are not increased to cover the full amount of the additional costs and so one participant explained very plainly how poverty meant 'going to bed in the day to keep warm, b/c can't afford to keep the heating on' (Birmingham). Statements like these demonstrate the difficult set of choices and balancing acts women in poverty are forced to make.

Poverty was often felt most acutely when the participants were unable to provide both basic necessities and treats for their children: '[Poverty means to me] ... no birthday or Christmas presents for my children' (London). Not being able to pay for children's needs, not having money to pay the bills, or insufficient housing or food were central to the participants' experience of poverty, and underscore the constant instability and uncertainty that accompany a low income.

This instability was identified as both compromising the women's quality of life and trapping them in a deepening cycle of debt and financial obligations. In Cardiff, a small group summarised their discussion on this topic with the following:

In a nutshell, all of the above points all stem from wants and necessity of having enough money for yourself and your children, to be able to live comfortably and with contentment, without the ongoing feeling of permanently having to watch the pennies, in order to forever rob Peter to pay Paul.

### Employment and education

Employment and education were issues that emerged strongly in the participants' discussion of poverty. While employment was identified as a route out of poverty, these women expressed frustration at the lack of opportunities or support in finding well-paid employment. Possibilities to improve their financial situation seem limited. Education is prohibitively expensive, and therefore women living in poverty are often unable to fulfil their desire for attaining more education or skills training. For those who do invest in education, debt is a certainty: 'being over 7,000 pounds in debt after just 1 yr of a 4 year uni degree' (London).

The participants identified these contradictions and limitations as central to their experience of poverty. Poverty was defined as 'having no real chance to improve myself and no hope for my future. I can't go to college because my husband won't pay and because he won't divorce me I can't go' (London).

Feelings of hopelessness and emotional and physical exhaustion were commonly expressed; poverty means 'having to work until 9pm every evening after getting up at 5.45am' (London). It is unsurprising, therefore, that the participants went on to identify the impact poverty has on their health and well-being.

### Physical and mental health

Poverty was experienced as having a negative impact on mental and physical health. Stress, depression, exhaustion, low self-esteem and poor nutrition were repeatedly named as consequences of poverty. Poverty-related stress has been identified as having a significant impact on women's capacity to parent (WBG, 2005) and the discussions among the participants confirmed this: 'poverty means ... being thought of as a bad parent. Poor parents do not equal poor parenting' (London).

Mental health problems were linked to physical health problems: 'Poverty means to me poor health – due to stress and poverty I have to be tube-fed every night' (London).

The participants also perceived poverty as being a barrier to adequate treatment for health problems. While the 'postcode lottery' undoubtedly has an impact on locally available services, the participants felt that mental healthcare providers were only willing to assist in quick-fix 'pill therapies' rather than invest the resources into alternative 'talk therapies'. It is perhaps not surprising then that at least one

participant defined poverty as feeling 'suicidal'. 'Poverty means ... fear of life. How I will survive day to day – what the future holds – dying alone' (London).

### **Postcode lottery**

The theme of the 'postcode lottery' emerged solely in Birmingham. Many people felt that where you lived would determine the type of services and opportunities you and your children would have. For example, 'poverty is when my children are likely to die sooner than other postcodes' (Birmingham). Housing, road safety and the difficulties for single women emerged under this theme.

### **Housing**

Housing emerged as a key theme in Cardiff, which may be due to the fact that some of our participants lived in a refuge: 'Poverty is to be homeless'. When discussing the housing theme further, some participants were clear that this was an urgent practical need and that, without a permanent roof over one's head, it is difficult to address other problems. Unstable or inadequate housing was seen as one of the main factors that perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

### **Conclusions**

It is evident from women's individual experiences that poverty is complex and has a wide-ranging impact on their lives. When asked to discuss what poverty means to them, their children's needs permeated all their experiences, demonstrating women's continuing prioritisation of others' needs. Making ends meet is a constant struggle, and achieving a sense of stability or security is mostly out of their reach through a lack of financial and social resources. In all three cities, women cited isolation as a particularly difficult aspect of living in poverty, restricting their opportunities for connecting with others in a social atmosphere and impacting negatively on their mental and physical health. Isolation may also exacerbate their limited access to resources, where they do not have the connections to more substantive support, both material and emotional.

The women in the Voices of Experience project want to challenge their circumstances and seek positive changes in their lives. Having to sustain both their own and their family's well-being on meagre resources, while being stigmatised

for circumstances beyond their control, exacerbates this difficult task and impacts on their mental and physical health. Participants have identified an acute need for practical resources, such as financial support, to cover the costs of basic necessities such as food and increasingly expensive heating bills. Furthermore, they want to combat the systematic discrimination and isolation they experience as a result of their gender and economic situation, for example being under-recognised in their role as carers and treated with disrespect by others because of their economic situation.

As set out in the outline for the project, a central aim was to encourage the participation of women living in poverty and enhance understanding of their experiences using participatory methodologies. The participatory approach enabled the sharing of individual experiences, but within the broader context of other women's experiences of living in poverty. As one woman in Birmingham responded in feedback, in response to a question about whether she had gained a better understanding of poverty: 'Yes, very much so, as there are some women who have more difficulties and issues than myself also there are women who have less but at the end of the day there are women from all walks of life who suffer "POVERTY"'.

## **Phase 2: Capacity-building – making government policies work for women**

### **Setting the policy agenda**

A key aim of the project was to build capacity among women living in poverty to understand policy debates, explore policy options, and engage with policy-makers directly.

Three capacity-building workshops were held to support women to frame their experiences and ideas for change within a government policy context. The first two workshops supported women to understand more fully: the structure of government; how government makes decisions; the role of HM Treasury in those decisions; guidelines for trying to influence government; and the contribution that women make to the economy through their unpaid caring work. External consultants contributed their expertise in influencing policy, particularly around benefits and poverty. Twenty-two participants from all three workshops met together for the first time in London for a final capacity-building workshop. The purpose of this workshop was to narrow down the original 28 policy recommendations into three key proposals to be presented to policy-makers.



Based on this learning, participants developed an analysis of the positive outcomes that would be achieved if their recommendations were implemented. Below we examine in more detail some of the tools used to promote greater understanding of the policy context and gender analysis.

### **Building policy**

After the women's individual experiences were explored and collectively defined and grouped into themes, in order to determine what policy items the participants thought were most pressing, participants were split into groups to do 'blue-sky' thinking on how they would change things for the better. They were charged with the discussion topic: 'If you met Tony Blair in a lift, what would you tell him to do to make things better?'

Participants came up with a long list of recommendations for making things better under each theme. Armed with this positive and action-oriented focus, they then moved forward with capacity-building exercises.

Building on their greater understanding of the policy process, the participants then discussed their list of recommendations for making things better. In all, the 132 'poverty means to me' statements were distilled into 28 different recommendations under five themed headings: mental health, human rights, isolation, bills and children. Emerging from these 28 recommendations are *three types of changes* that the participants would most like to see in policy-making and implementation:

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

#### *1. Greater engagement between women living in poverty and policy-makers*

The need for greater engagement between women living in poverty and policy-makers was central to the participants' recommendations. Many of the recommendations proposed rethinking the way services are delivered, making them more accessible and effective for people living in poverty.

Creating interventions that are responsive to the needs of women living in poverty depends on their feedback in the design, development and implementation of policy. For example: 'When government provides temporary accommodation, they need to think about what schools are close by, and if parents are happy with that'; or 'Use plain English, and not medical jargon when explaining things'.

The women also generated recommendations that could contribute to decision-makers' greater understanding of how seemingly innocuous policy interventions can have a pernicious effect on people living in poverty. For example, as discussed by Cardiff-based participants, 'Holidays [are] expensive during peak time; so parents are penalised by schools for taking kids out during term time. Government should pressure holiday companies to keep prices low during peak periods'. By creating a system whereby government can engage directly with women living in poverty, they could refine their policy initiatives to be more responsive and more efficient. To give one example, they may find that tackling the root cause of some school truancy – poverty – could achieve both a reduction in poverty and an increase in educational achievement.

Participants were adamant that policies need to respect the contributions that women living in poverty make to society, and that opportunities to engage in the decision-making process are a cornerstone of achieving this:

... create a Women's Act ... ensure real women's views are incorporated into policy-making ... and provide better recognition and equality in work and home life.

Participants noted that a Children's Act exists, and that something similar may improve gender equality. They noted various instruments to promote equality that, to date, do not seem to have achieved their aim. For example, they said that despite the existence of an Equal Pay Act, women continue to earn less than men. They felt that a Women's Act could enshrine women's equality with men more fully by addressing a broader range of topics, and also by incorporating mechanisms for government to engage with women directly when developing policies.

### *2. Enhancement of service provision*

The second type of recommendation is focused on improving services and their delivery to meet the needs of women living in poverty. The women identified a broad range of services that, with increased investment, could improve their situations, including employment support, education, healthcare, childcare and housing.

Moreover, participants developed a policy-influencing rationale that highlighted the positive outcomes for both women and government of putting into effect their recommendations. A dominant theme that the women used in promoting their ideas relied on the principle of 'invest to save' that can be achieved by ensuring effective and meaningful services. For example, participants argued that:

- by investing in preventative healthcare provision and nutrition, government would save money on medicines;
- by investing in the non-profit sector and facilities for communities, crime could be lowered, higher levels of education could be achieved, and 'better community spirit' could be developed.

Furthermore, the women also developed the business case of increased productivity resulting from implementing their recommendations: for example, in reviewing the benefits of providing free childcare, participants argued that it would give women the ability and incentive to go to work.

The women also illuminated the interconnected nature of the different issues. They developed links between different policy areas that need to be considered together in order to achieve a particular outcome. For example, in proposing enhanced support for employment, women said that government should provide flexible work and childcare in order to ensure that women were able to acquire employment that suited their particular situation.

Finally, participants drew on a strategic needs/human rights approach to supporting their recommendations, where women should have full access to basic services, and be treated with respect and dignity. For example, the women felt it was their right to have support in increasing their self-esteem, through investment in adult education and training for staff dealing with the public.

### *3. Increasing financial support to women living in poverty*

The third type of proposal that the women developed relates to income poverty directly. Income poverty, as demonstrated by the 'poverty means to me' statements, leaves women unable to make ends meet: 'Poverty is not to have money to live'. Proposals developed by participants included increasing Income Support, benefits, pensions and tax credits; creating clearer forms of communicating about tax credits; extending benefits; creating a sliding scale based on income, for example for utility bills; and eliminating council tax.

The outcomes that participants cited to argue their case to alleviate income poverty mirror the profound impact that poverty has on their lives:

- 'less poverty';
- 'less sickness';
- 'less debt';
- 'better quality of life in the long run';
- 'more incentive to go back to work (better health, homes, work, kids, etc.)'.

These three types of proposal – emphasising the need for enhanced dialogue with policy-makers, service provision and financial resources – underline participants' desire to achieve both strategic and practical ends, and the connections between them.

Without an opportunity for women to review and provide expert understanding of the day-to-day reality of how policy is implemented on the ground, there is little hope that the practical services and resources required to alleviate poverty will be available. Instead, policies created in a vacuum, in the absence of women's voices and expertise, will continue to leave women needing better services and more money.

### **Women deciding on key messages to policy-makers**

A three-tiered 'traffic light' system for categorising recommendations was developed for reviewing recommendations alongside government agendas. A 'green light' included those recommendations that coincided with current government policy development. For example, a recommendation to review the communications related to tax credits was signalled as a 'green light', given the Government's ongoing review of the system. An 'amber light' reflected where the Government may be willing to review policy, but the area is not currently under debate. An example of amber is free childcare, as the Government has developed a ten-year childcare strategy and conducts ongoing work in this sector. However, given their emphasis on demand-side as opposed to supply-side funding, this was labelled as an amber.<sup>1</sup> Finally, a 'red light' was identified where the Government has already reviewed and demonstrated that it will not support a proposal, for example increasing adult benefits.

The women then discussed these issues with an expert guest speaker who played the role of government decision-maker. She made comments from both a mock politician and a civil servant position, to help distinguish between these sets of actors. After deliberation in small groups, participants put forward their priority recommendations with the speaker. In doing so, participants had an opportunity to receive guidance on the Government's possible response to their proposals. Participants appreciated the feedback on their proposals and having the opportunity to discuss their ideas in more detail. While the women understood the concept of targeting their proposals to match the Government's agenda, this did not constrain them from pursuing those ideas which received a cooler reception in the mock engagement.

### **Who sets the parameters for discussion in policy and direct engagement events?**

The feedback given by policy-makers about the suitability of particular topics for discussion helps us consider to what extent one of the central aims of the project – to improve the evidence-based research that informs policy-makers by drawing on participatory research – was achieved. For some of the policy-makers, it was useful to engage with women living in poverty when a particular policy was undergoing (regular) review. As one commented, it helped to 'frame policy in a new angle'. For other policy-makers, where they perceive little room for debate, it was considered less useful. If policy-makers do not find it useful to hear individual experiences of a particular policy, is it a disservice to women involved to take up their time and effort in creating this evidence? A woman living in poverty may present compelling and unique evidence to alter policy development, and this can be unearthed in full through participatory research. In addition, it could be argued that by drawing on participatory research with women living in poverty, the Government could learn to develop new methods for sharing their policy messages in a more meaningful way with the public, one that challenges negative attitudes towards people living in poverty.

This also raises a critical concern in carrying out participatory research in order to influence policy development. The priorities of women living in poverty may differ significantly from the priorities of policy-makers. How participatory can research and direct engagement be if the priorities and topics for discussion are determined 'top-down' by policy-makers? This is counter to the basic principles of the participatory process. However, to what extent can we expect policy-makers to set up completely open debates? The time pressures that policy-makers experience is a practical barrier to engaging in this way, not to mention the political levers and pressures that determine government priorities.

Given that (with some exceptions) formal consultation processes engage almost exclusively with professional individuals from organisations and academia, it would be a tremendous advance for the Government to initiate debates and dialogue with women living in poverty on areas where there is room for debate. Certainly these issues have a profound impact on women living in poverty – for example, the ongoing review of the childcare system, the Discrimination Law Review and the new Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). However, a deeper debate also needs to take place on how priorities are determined in government. Within the framework of such a debate, a review of the fundamental principles of what drives government needs to be undertaken. In order to meet the needs of women living in poverty, it can be argued that the promotion of social justice and the elimination of poverty and all forms of discrimination, including gender inequality, should be a central aim of government. Mechanisms could then be created that enshrine these principles and fend off competing demands that undermine equality and social justice, while maintaining an open environment for debate. The ethical argument for promoting these principles lies at the heart of a government that should be measured on its ability to meet the needs of its most marginalised and vulnerable citizens, whether because of their class, faith, sex, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity or race.

### **Phase 3: Direct engagement between policy-makers and participants**

In October 2006, 17 women with experience of living in poverty<sup>2</sup> met with eight policy-makers from the House of Lords, HM Treasury, HM Revenue and Customs, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Women and Equality Unit. The event had been organised with the expectation that more women politicians could attend. In the event, one baroness attended; she provided significant input on the day and made a positive impact on the women.

The women chose three presentations based on priorities identified in the capacity-building workshops. They developed these presentations, keeping in mind some of the decision-making processes and constraints that shape policy-makers' work. In order to achieve this end, the facilitators developed a set of statements to help participants build their presentations around each of the three prioritised proposals. Creating a series of statements to be presented also enabled the majority of women attending to present to policy-makers. Those who did not make speeches had the opportunity to ask questions after the main presentations. The basis of each presentation was formed by women describing the following:

1. the difficulties women experience when living in poverty, using examples from women's experience, including drawing on the 'poverty means to me' statements;
2. how women want things to change;
3. examples of the positive effect which women's ideas for change would have on women's lives;
4. what advantages the proposals would have for the Government.

### **The women's first proposal to policy-makers: increase benefits, including Income Support, pensions and Child Benefit**

#### *Women's proposal*

The women described the inadequacy of the benefits system. It does not allow recipients to afford the basics, let alone any luxuries. This means that children can suffer as their basic needs are not being met. The women suggested that the Government could increase benefits to help women living in poverty meet these basic needs. They recommended that a broad range of benefits be increased, including Income Support, pensions and Child Benefit. They highlighted the discrepancy between Child Benefit rates that are higher for the first child and lower for subsequent children. They also expressed the fact that carers often go unrecognised and are underfunded, especially if they are unregistered because they are family members.

In the presentations and subsequent discussion, they argued that if Government were to increase benefits, then the basic needs of women and children could be met. Moreover, other government objectives, such as increasing the number of women in work, would be advanced. They put forward the compelling argument that a key factor in a woman joining the workforce is having a sense of dignity – while living in poverty, and not being able to support oneself or their family, that dignity is lost.

#### *Policy-makers' response*

Policy-makers responded openly and honestly about the difficulties they face in increasing adult benefits, explaining the complicated decisions that they have to take in allocating limited resources. Areas where the Government is either currently reviewing policy or carries on regular reviews of policy were highlighted, including the

debate over levels of Child Benefit. There was also a more wide-ranging discussion in response to questions and answers at the individual level, for example on financial support for education for young people.

There was, therefore, a variation in the receptiveness of policy-makers to the proposals that the women put forward. Policy-makers' honest approach to discussing the pros and cons of different proposals, and highlighting where change may be possible, contributed to an ambiance of dialogue and respect.

### **The women's second proposal to policy-makers: create a Women's Act to ensure that women's rights are achieved**

#### *Women's proposal*

The women identified the pervasive disrespect that they experience as a result of their poverty, being stereotyped as lazy and stupid. Moreover, they highlighted the limited access to basic necessities, decent education and employment as a result of living in poverty. They noted that despite various legal and policy instruments to promote gender equality, such as the Equal Pay Act created 30 years ago, there continue to be significant instances of discrimination and inequality experienced by women, and women living in poverty in particular. In order to redress this situation, they suggested creating a Women's Act that would enshrine women's rights on a range of issues, and have more power to make change happen both within Government and outside, for example by regulating negative media messages about women. One of the key elements of this proposal was the idea that consultation with women living in poverty be a central tenet of such an Act to ensure that policies and programmes are respectful to and reflective of their needs. The presenters argued that if women were more confident and motivated, and had a better quality of life, they would be more active in society, leading to more women in employment, more women voting and more women paying taxes.

#### *Policy-makers' response*

Policy-makers responded positively to the proposal of a Women's Act, expressing a considerable interest in it, but also discussed the difficulty of creating such legislation. They also went on to describe certain policy innovations taking place currently, with particular reference to the Discrimination Law Review and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). While they sympathised with the continued prevalence of gender inequality, they suggested that there needs first to be a change in social



perceptions, values and beliefs, before equality can be promoted, endorsed by the Government and then embedded in laws. (Such a shift in social perceptions, however, would likely pre-empt the need for equality legislation.)

The response to this proposal was encouraging and well-balanced by providing further information about the current policy landscape. It appears as well that to a greater extent than increasing benefits, both the women participants and policy-makers concerned with gender equality had a shared sense of purpose in promoting women's rights. Moreover, there was a shared understanding that achieving equality is a significant struggle, but that the Government has a role to play in influencing our culture and society towards it.

The baroness played a critical role in encouraging women to take their ideas further and described her excitement at the idea of a Women's Act. She expressed her particular concern, one which is echoed by the gender-equality lobby more widely, that the EHRC could eclipse gender concerns. This provided women with greater confidence about their proposals, and a more in-depth understanding of current debates on how to promote gender equality.

### **The women's third proposal to policy-makers: provide free quality childcare**

#### *Women's proposal*

Women proposed that childcare should be free. They challenged government rhetoric about the 'choices' available to women and parents with respect to childcare provision. They argued that women living in poverty often cannot access childcare because it is prohibitively expensive. They also cited other problems with childcare of particular concern to them, including extremely high nursery penalties for late pick-ups, and the lack of financial support available to family members who care for children, such as grandmothers.

#### *Policy-makers' response*

Policy-makers highlighted the ongoing review of the childcare system within the framework of the ten-year childcare strategy, and said that input from women is therefore useful. A more in-depth discussion over the possibilities of providing payment to family members for childcare was held, enabling a thoughtful engagement on the subject. They also explained that there is currently a review of different types of carers in the Comprehensive Spending Review.

The baroness rallied behind the proposals made by women, particularly providing support to family members for the childcare they provide, citing the fact that there are other adult carers' allowances which are a precedent for paying family members for childcare. Civil servants had argued that the Government does not want to commercialise this relationship. By providing this enthusiastic and knowledgeable support to participants, the baroness gave more confidence to women in pursuing this proposal.

Overall, the direct engagement event provided the women with an opportunity to present their ideas for change with policy-makers, contributing to one of the aims of the project to 'understand policy debates, explore policy solutions, and engage with policy-makers directly'. By presenting proposals to policy-makers that had not been given the 'green light' in the capacity-building phase of the project, the women also made clear that they wanted to pursue their own priorities for change, and influence policy-makers to take these on board, rather than be limited by what proposals they thought policy-makers wanted to hear. They balanced this with persuasive arguments grounded in individual experience, and benefits for themselves and government, to make changes that reflect and respect their particular needs.

### **Reactions to direct engagement**

#### *The women's reaction to the direct engagement event*

The women reacted positively to engaging directly with policy-makers and noted the approachability and dialogue that ensued. They were asked whether the experience was the same as or different from what they were expecting. Many said that it was better than they expected: for example, 'It went even better than expected because they went out of their way to talk to us women'. Another dominant theme from the feedback included a sense of solidarity and empowerment, with all the women contributing to compelling presentations and discussion.

Buoyed by the positive feeling they had from the day, and the supportive approach from the baroness, the women were keen to take their messages to more policy-makers. In particular, they hoped to engage with MPs in future, particularly those MPs who could not attend the event as planned.

Unfortunately, because of conflicting engagements, all three MPs who had confirmed their participation could not attend the event. In order to relieve some of the

disappointment the women felt, this was used as an opportunity to reflect on the competing priorities politicians have to meet. The role of civil servants in the policy-making process was also highlighted, and the need to engage at this level was viewed as being essential to making change in policies and attitudes in government. Despite this, participants expressed their disappointment at the absence of the politicians, which reinforced a feeling of being disrespected and ignored. In addition, the project team and participants had hoped that MPs might attend a later evaluation workshop, in order to meet with participants. Unfortunately, this was not possible. The women again felt disappointed by their absence. In future, organisations putting on work of this type need to ensure the 'buy-in' of MPs from an early stage of a project, and include events in their diaries well in advance as a step towards this. In addition, having MPs play a role in organising or hosting such events would also contribute to greater ownership of the process from the politicians' end, and enable more opportunities to influence the policy process for the women living in poverty. Without this engagement women feel less positively about the research overall, as it feels as though they continue to be ignored, and they may not wish to pursue similar work in the future.

### **Policy-makers' advice for improving direct engagement**

The civil servants who attended the direct engagement event were consulted afterwards about their opinions of the event and how it might be improved in future. They were asked for their thoughts on the event's usefulness; for ideas on how it could have been improved; whether they would be interested in engaging in the future; at what point in the policy-making process this type of event would be most useful; and what features of the policy process support or hinder engagement with women living in poverty.

The event resonated with policy-makers, largely because it is a rare opportunity to meet directly with people living in poverty: 'to meet people from the real world and get evidence from people that live policy first hand'. Several respondents indicated that they normally only engage with professionals and lobby groups, rather than with women experiencing policy interventions directly, and that it provides 'quite a refreshing perspective'. Other comments relate to the role of communication and language that government uses: for example, 'it was useful to see the disconnect between what we [government] do, and what people understand. It is not meant as a criticism, the lack of understanding is a failure on the part of government to be transparent'.

Some of the officials said that it might have been more useful to discuss a broader range of topics, enabling opportunities for greater debate, while another attendee felt that deeper debate could have been achieved if officials had had more information prior to the meeting about the recommendations participants would be putting forward.

All of the policy-makers interviewed clearly stated that they would be interested in participating in an event of this type in the future. One attendee said that 'absolutely' this sort of engagement should be pursued, and wondered whether it would be best for particular policy areas to be discussed in more depth, or for a set group of policy-makers and participants to meet regularly (e.g. every quarter) to build up a rapport.

However, another attendee commented that direct engagement was obviously a resource-intensive process, and that other less intensive forms of dialogue might be pursued. Policy-makers tended to agree that engaging directly with women living in poverty is not a process that central government is currently very well-equipped to carry out. However, they said that this format was useful for other reasons: 'Government having to explain why we do things directly to participants can be a difficult but important exercise, which doesn't always happen in other similar types of exercises, such as a visit to a job centre'. This, again, seems to underline the value of having a substantive dialogue, rather than one-way contact or superficial meetings.

One policy-maker noted that through traditional consultation processes government engages with civil society organisations that represent or speak on behalf of individuals, including those living in poverty. They went on to note that government 'can formally meet the requirement to consult without reaching beyond the usual suspects [of professionals, organisations, and academics]'. This raises an important question about how effective the consultation process is in engaging with those who are most vulnerable to and affected by policy developments. What level of engagement should women living in poverty expect from government?

## Conclusions

In engaging in events where women living in poverty and policy-makers come together to review policy, a tension exists between the priorities of the women involved and those of policy-makers. Where policy-makers do not perceive room for debate on an issue, does this mean that women living in poverty should not raise it? Who defines the policy-making agenda, and how can the process create more opportunities for women living in poverty to set the priorities and evaluate the policies that they live with in their everyday lives? This project demonstrates that engagement

between policy-makers and women living in poverty is not a straightforward exercise, given the very different constraints that each group faces. Policy-makers have to make choices that consider the needs of millions of citizens in a wide range of circumstances. Women living in poverty have to choose how, where and for whom they use their own limited resources. This presents a significant gap between policy-makers and women living in poverty.

However, both groups' decision-making processes are based on *constrained choices*. That is, a choice is not always a genuine choice when there are limited resources to implement a decision. Given its powers in raising income from tax revenues, however, government has a much greater freedom. It can be argued that government should make its choices, and its effectiveness should be measured on its ability to meet the needs of its most vulnerable citizens by meeting both their practical and their strategic needs, including promoting the principles of social justice and gender equality. With this in mind, it should strive to create opportunities for women living in poverty and other marginalised groups to help:

1. determine the priorities of policy-making;
2. contribute to the development and implementation of policies;
3. evaluate their effectiveness, measured by indicators created by policy-makers and women living in poverty working together.

This would create meaningful and change-making policies that enable all citizens, including those who are most vulnerable, to achieve their full potential.

Government has a strong record of encouraging consultation on policy-making with civil society.<sup>3</sup> However, public consultations are rarely about priority-setting, but instead request views on changes to policy proposed by government. Moreover, these consultations rarely reach out to women living in poverty, and instead rely on engaging with well-established, and often London-based, lobbying organisations. It is with an understanding that their participation in policy-making is rarely solicited that women in the Voices of Experience Participatory Action Research Project proposed a Women's Act that would include the right to be active citizens in the policy design, implementation and evaluation process.

## 4 Conclusions

The Voices of Experience project had three main aims:

- to encourage participation in and understanding of the policy process by women living in poverty, using participatory methodologies;
- to build capacity among women living in poverty to understand policy debates, explore policy solutions and engage with policy-makers directly;
- to improve the evidence base that informs policy-makers by drawing on participatory research through facilitating direct dialogue with women with experience of living in poverty.

In order to measure the success of the project, an independent evaluator was contracted to observe the process at all stages and engage the participants in feedback. This feedback was compiled into a separate report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The evaluation found the feedback from the workshops to be very positive. The participants came to the project with their own understandings of poverty, but found that they learned a lot from the other women and spoke warmly of a sense of 'sisterhood'. One of the main findings of the report is that the confidence of the participants had improved throughout the project, and that they felt they had learned about the policy-making process. Sharing their experiences with other women was seen as very valuable and most of the participants felt they had been able to reflect on their own situation and put it in a broader context.

The workshops were successful in creating a strong space for discussion and participation. Many of the 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 stood up to make a speech before a group of civil servants.

When asked what the participants personally got out of the project, their responses included 'self-confidence', 'motivation', 'information and education', 'self-belief' and 'empowerment'. Moreover, there was a real sense that the participants felt they had learned about policy debates and government systems, and felt confident in making their own proposals on policy change.

A central aim of this project was to broaden the evidence base that policy-makers draw on to include participatory research. Having taken part in direct engagement with women with experience of living in poverty, some of the policy-makers had reservations about the content of the discussion, and questioned whether it was worthwhile to have participatory engagement in a policy area that is largely closed to change. For this reason, it was felt that improving the evidence base through participatory methods was perhaps an overambitious goal. Instead, the aim should have been for government to embrace participation to help determine the priorities, content and implementation of policies. Practically speaking, there should be greater engagement in government with women living in poverty on areas that are up for debate. Strategically speaking, women with experience of living in poverty will continue to press for access to decision-making spaces to help create policies that guarantee that their rights are no longer violated.

When given the opportunity to come together and share their individual experiences of living in poverty, women are able to articulate the urgency of their situation and the need for both their practical and strategic needs to be met. They are the experts on how policy is implemented on the ground, and can help guide the development of policy that is more receptive to their needs and thus more effective. It is important to create opportunities for women with experience of living in poverty to go beyond acting as 'witnesses' to poverty, and engage with decision-makers in a way that recognises this expertise. There is a need for more engagement with women living in poverty, to support their understanding of the way policies are made and influenced – and this has to include skills-building in gender and diversity analysis.

# Notes

## Chapter 1

1. In this report, we use the Fabian Commission on Life Chances definition of poverty: 'Poverty is the inability, due to lack of resources, to participate in society and to enjoy a standard of living consistent with human dignity and social decency' (Bamfield and Brooks, 2006, p. 14).
2. Figures from British Family Resources Survey, 1999/00, presented in written answer from Chris Pond to parliamentary question from Joan Ruddock, 2004.
3. Bradshaw *et al.* (2003) provide a thorough review of the Government's anti-poverty strategies, and the impact this has on women and men.
4. For more information please visit [www.todayswoman.org.uk](http://www.todayswoman.org.uk).

## Chapter 3

1. The WBG reviewed the National Childcare Strategy when it was first published, and expressed its concern over the emphasis on demand-side funding. This response is available at: [www.wbg.org.uk/documents/WBGResponsetoChildcareStrategy.pdf](http://www.wbg.org.uk/documents/WBGResponsetoChildcareStrategy.pdf).
2. The initial research proposal projected the participation of 25–30 women in this event, and as the research progressed this number seemed feasible. In the end, 21 women confirmed their attendance, but four had to cancel because of other obligations.
3. For example, there are regular policy consultations, with guidelines on how to conduct them in a transparent and fair manner furnished by the Cabinet Office. For more information visit [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/regulation/consultation/](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/regulation/consultation/).

## Appendix 1

1. A profile of the partner organisations can be found in Appendix 2.



2. For example, in spring 2006 the Big Lottery Fund launched the BASIS programme for infrastructure organisations which has a two-tiered application system: [www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/prog\\_basis](http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/prog_basis).

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# Appendix 1: Additional notes on methodology

## Regional focus

The research was conducted in England (Birmingham and London) and Wales (Cardiff). The England sites were chosen based on prior relationships which the WBG had with grassroots organisations in those cities. We also wanted to ensure that we had a devolved nation included in the project.

## Selection and support for women experiencing poverty

### Regional partner organisations

The WBG conducted significant outreach with grassroots organisations to identify partner groups in all three cities. Links were strong in Birmingham, but the group had few prior connections at this level in Cardiff and London. After connecting with only three groups in Birmingham and Cardiff, and attracting only 15–18 participants instead of the proposed 25, it was felt that more partners were required in London. This was particularly necessary because, after consulting with black and ethnic minority women's organisations, it was apparent that their clients would have difficulty in participating in a project of this kind. One barrier cited was the difficulty that women would encounter in having to leave their communities to participate. Events they organise are normally within their clients' community, providing a safe space within easy travel distance to home. Some organisations did not feel that any of their clients would attend, while others felt that only one or two were in circumstances that would enable them to participate in an ongoing way. In order to ensure that a significant proportion of women from black and ethnic minority communities attended the London workshop, the WBG therefore doubled its partner organisation relationships within London to six, after seeking out eight relationships. In the end, the WBG connected with a dozen regionally based grassroots organisations to help identify and work with participants.<sup>1</sup>

At the core of the work of each of the organisations is a belief in ensuring that all women have a right to live free of discrimination and poverty. Each organisation works towards this end in different ways, for example through the provision of

emergency and long-term advice and support, and training. It was important to connect with organisations that could, as much as possible, maintain a connection with participants outside the research workshops, i.e. supporting them through and after the process.

As workshops took place over a period of ten months (March 2006 to October 2006, and January 2007) it was important to maintain the women's connection to the project. Ensuring that women living in poverty understood the process and, if interested, were encouraged and supported to participate was a very time-consuming and challenging task achieved by our regional partners. The project had envisioned engaging with 25 women in each city; however, in practice this number varied between 13 and 17. In most cases, this was through clients of partner organisations changing their mind because of unforeseen circumstances, or more generally because they did not feel sufficiently interested in the project to overcome the barriers to participation. Regional partners' suggestions on best practice in ensuring people participate include:

- a project worker accompanying participants to provide additional confidence in attending the workshop;
- holding events closer to home, so that women do not have to travel such long distances and can therefore maintain other commitments, such as caring etc.;
- holding events in the evening for women who may have daytime commitments;
- providing information and invitations earlier, in order for the organisation to promote the event with their clients, and provide clients with a date well in advance;
- maintaining a personal connection with and supporting individual women so that they feel more connected to the project, rather than only to their own organisation;
- holding debriefing events in advance of the workshop for women to contribute more confidently on the day, as they would have a better understanding of the aims and process. This is particularly important for women who may not have participated in events of this kind before.

This requires a significant amount of work on the part of partner organisations, and the WBG provided an honorarium to each organisation for supporting their clients to stay connected to the project. However, this honorarium does not in any way reflect the actual costs of conducting this kind of work, which relies on long-standing relationships with women living in poverty.

Grassroots organisations bring a depth of expertise and knowledge on how best to engage with women living in poverty in a manner that is meaningful and respectful. Creating projects based on deeper partnership with these organisations would contribute enormously to their success and sustainability in the long term, where activities can be pursued beyond the limited time frame of a particular project. This would involve a collaborative approach whereby organisations develop projects collectively; thus, aims, objectives, processes and budgets would reflect their integral role. This suggests that anti-poverty networks, such as the UK Coalition Against Poverty (UKCAP), with a critical mass of grassroots organisations as members, are well-placed to conduct work of this kind, as in the Get Heard project. However, the development phase for creating participatory research projects would be lengthy and expensive. Significant staff time and financial resources for meetings to create and develop proposals are required.

Funding bodies should create a pool of resources to compensate organisations for developing collaborative participatory proposals. A three-tier funding system could support this process. For example, the first tier would require a brief two-page proposal outlining the main aims, but subject to changes after more detailed work. If accepted, organisations would then have access to resources for developing a more detailed proposal. Finally, a decision would be made on the final proposal. The Big Lottery Fund<sup>2</sup> provides resources to organisations that are selected to develop a fuller proposal; however, the initial development is still a laborious unpaid task.

### **Selection criteria for participants living in poverty**

Three key criteria were in place for selecting participants living in poverty:

1. **Sex:** it was a requirement of this process to work with women only. The main reason for this is the absence of women's voices and a gender perspective in the policy-making process. Evidence suggests that creating women-only spaces is important in creating a safe space, where women are able to develop confidence and feel at ease to discuss issues of concern to them, including exploring gender stereotypes and discrimination (YWCA, 2005).
2. **Poverty:** it was a requirement of this process to work with women living in poverty. To ensure that women living in poverty were engaged, our regional partners' client base was utilised. We were concerned that it could be difficult for the WBG, and partners, to ask directly of potential participants whether they were living in poverty. Other research has noted that people living in poverty are not always

comfortable with this terminology (Yeandle *et al.*, 2003). It is also clear from research and across different governments and research communities that there are many ways of measuring poverty, including subjective feelings (Maxwell, 1999). With this in mind, it was felt that organisations who work with women living in poverty day in and day out would be best placed to recruit participants.

3. Black and ethnic minority women's participation: we wanted to ensure that we had significant participation in the group of women from black and ethnic minority communities to capture the diversity of women's lives and of the communities on which we were drawing.

### **Barriers to the participation of women living in poverty**

Women living in poverty lead complex lives that are often more vulnerable to negative disruptions than others. Moreover, as a result of lack of income, stereotyping and disrespect, they may be less able to overcome the barriers they face (for example, problems with violence and an unsupportive justice system, no money to choose where to live etc.). In terms of the Voices of Experience research, this means that participants were not always able to attend all events, which affects the continuity of what is covered and the relationship between participants. The Voices of Experience research did, however, have a high rate of retention. The likely reasons for this are:

- the ongoing support provided by the partner organisations to encourage women to participate;
- the opportunity to meet directly with policy-makers;
- the dynamic workshops which kept women stimulated.

In addition, there are logistical initiatives that organisations engaging in participatory research can undertake to increase participation. Many of these actions relate to women's lower income which can inhibit their attendance; therefore it is important to ensure that there are adequate resources to cover the costs of:

- childcare;
- transportation, both intra- and intercity, including taxi costs when necessary;

- subsistence during events, but also during travel to and from events; particularly if travelling a long distance for a one-day event, women could be waking up at 6am, travelling for a couple of hours, and not reach home again until late evening;
- payment for participation.

However, even where the above resources for meeting have been furnished, this does not guarantee attendance. Women living in poverty may face significant barriers in attending different events for a variety of reasons. For example, a woman living in poverty may not have had the opportunity to travel widely and could feel intimidated by travelling to a new city. Ensuring, when possible, that a trusted project worker or other participant who is more confident can accompany her will greatly improve the likelihood of her attending events. Another partner organisation commented that women with school-aged children are very difficult to reach. They do not need childcare facilities, but do need support for getting children to and from school. This means having someone trusted living nearby, which is not always the case.

## Recruiting policy-makers

Policy-makers who were involved in the direct engagement event for the project were drawn from a pool of officials with whom the WBG already had a relationship. The policy (as opposed to programme) emphasis of the bulk of the work of the WBG meant that policy-makers who were involved rarely had the opportunity to engage with women living in poverty. Given the WBG's broad focus on gender equality and socio-economic policy, policy-makers were drawn from HM Treasury, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Women and Equality Unit. While the DWP has more regular contact with those served by policies, it is more rare for those in HM Treasury. Politicians were recruited via our relationships with particular individuals who have demonstrated a commitment to challenging gender inequality.

The WBG had initially planned to deliver awareness-raising events in different departments, with the vision of having 'observers' during the capacity-building as well as the direct engagement phase of the work. However, it was agreed as the process unfolded that it would not be fair to participants to have observers in the process, as women were still learning more about the policy-making process. Instead, civil servants who participated in the direct engagement event were connected to poverty work as these issues were part of their work portfolio. The event had the support of an HM Treasury minister, who had agreed to attend the direct engagement event (but did not); this probably helped to produce a critical mass of attendees. Moreover, all



the civil servants who attended had regular contact with the WBG, either directly or through their team. All of the civil servant teams contacted agreed to attend, except for one HM Treasury team who were all out of town that day for other work.

A dozen women politicians were invited to attend the direct engagement event. Three MPs and one baroness agreed to attend. In the end, only the baroness attended the direct engagement event, as other obligations took priority on the day for MPs. The timing was ill-suited, as it was the first day back in Parliament.

# Appendix 2: Regional partner organisations

## Birmingham

### **Birmingham Women's Advice and Information Centre (BWAIC)**

Birmingham Women's Advice and Information Centre aims to raise awareness of and actively address the unequal position of women in today's society. We facilitate the personal development of women and enable them to identify and articulate their individual and collective needs. Ultimately, through the provision of advice, information counselling and lobbying, we strive to enable women to take control over their lives.

### **Saheli Women's Group**

Saheli Women's Group was formed five years ago through the Balsall Heath Forum's 'Capacity Building' programme funded by URBAN. It aims to provide a health and fitness centre run by women for women. The project aims to provide opportunities for all the women in the area, regardless of background, race and religion; to allow them access to health and fitness sessions and the use of a gym in a safe and secure female-only environment. In doing this, it aims to show that in some areas you have to understand the needs of the community if you are to change the way services are accessed. Services can be delivered effectively, using the expert knowledge of local people, to bring about positive social change. In particular, the group is reaching out to young Asian women to support their confidence-building, as well as encouraging older women to take up physical exercise with a view to improving their health and to promote greater social interaction.

### **Women Acting in Today's Society (WAITS)**

WAITS is a women's educational trust established in 1992. We support women to address issues such as welfare benefits, social education, domestic violence, isolation, health, crime and the fear of crime, and many more. We provide the first steps for women from a wide range of educational, social and cultural backgrounds

to challenge and work with mainstream decision-makers and institutions. As a network of women's groups, our membership reflects the diverse communities of Birmingham, Sandwell and other parts of the West Midlands.

## **Cardiff**

### **Black Association of Women Step Out (BAWSO)**

Established in 1995, BAWSO is an all-Wales voluntary organisation, providing specialist services to black and minority ethnic women and children made homeless through a threat of domestic violence or fleeing domestic violence in Wales. It is affiliated to Welsh Women's Aid and works closely and in partnership with other women's aid organisations.

### **Women's Workshop**

The Women's Workshop is an established training centre in Cardiff Bay. We offer an exciting range of opportunities. For women returning to education, training and the workplace we run different levels of courses that include Information Technology, Career and Personnel Development, English as a Second Language, Confidence Building, Home Maintenance Skills and Pacific Institute Training. Training is in term time and during the school day to suit women who have to collect children at school. An onsite nursery is available for those women who have children under school age.

The Women's Workshop is also the base of the Welsh Resource Centre for Women in Science Engineering and Technology (SET).

### **Workers' Educational Association**

The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) is a voluntary movement for lifelong learning. Our objective is the creation of an educated democracy in which participation in public affairs, and the knowledge that it requires, are widely spread throughout the community. The WEA (South Wales) is democratically accountable to its members and federated educational and workers' organisations. It is inclusive, unsectarian and non-party political, and wholly concerned with promoting lifelong learning in South Wales.

### London

#### ATD Fourth World

ATD Fourth World is an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) that engages with individuals and institutions to acknowledge and support the daily efforts of people in extreme poverty. ATD Fourth World works in partnership with people who are living in poverty to:

- raise awareness of poverty as a violation of human rights;
- listen to the needs and views of people living in poverty and respond to them;
- give priority to those most affected by poverty, not those easiest to reach;
- ensure that the voice of people living in poverty is heard in all spheres of society;
- create opportunities for those living in persistent poverty to participate in, and contribute to, the community as a whole;
- ensure that their views are represented when policy is decided and decisions are made.

#### Gingerbread (now merged with One Parent Families)

Gingerbread is an organisation for lone-parent families. It is the leading and largest charity providing help for 2.5 million lone parents and their children nationally.

Gingerbread provides:

- advice and an expert and confidential free phone service dealing with a varied range of queries from benefits to just listening, the only one of its kind;
- help to counter the effects of childhood poverty by organising holidays, discount vouchers, outings and events to ensure that children are not excluded from activities and opportunities;
- the opportunity for children in lone-parent families to come together;

- support for lone-parent families through over 200 local self-help groups;
- a range of targeted information for lone-parent families;
- membership to over 12,000 lone parents.

### **Haringey Women's Forum**

Haringey Women's Forum offers advice, counselling and housing support for women in crisis. We also present women's issues to the council and other public sector departments such as the local health service. The organisation runs consultations on major issues with local women and women's groups within the Borough of Haringey and represents women's issues at the community and voluntary sector level through the Haringey Community Empowerment Network.

### **Rapid Solution Community Link**

This is a community group for black and minority ethnic women, youth and children in Deptford, south-east London. They hold after-school clubs; courses for parents, women and youth; and programmes for parents and women to provide advice and support on housing, nutrition, etc. They also provide outreach services and family support, and hold cultural events and entertainment.

### **YWCA East Dagenham**

As one of the oldest women's organisations in the world, YWCA has supported disadvantaged young women for 150 years. YWCA still works to end discrimination against women. We believe that young women enrich the world. Yet one in ten young women are held back because of poverty, exploitation, abuse or poor health. We work to change this, running services and campaigns to enable young women to change their lives and the world around them.

## **Appendix 3: Reflections for future research**

Below are reflections on some of the key issues that arose in the project that could be used by other research and funding bodies in future.

### **Making participatory research happen: the integral role of grassroots organisations**

The foundation of all participatory research is the grassroots organisations that work with individuals on a day-to-day basis. They build up relationships with individuals in vulnerable situations, provide them with emotional and practical support, and create opportunities to overcome hardship and barriers. Without this essential work being done on the ground, researchers would not have an avenue to connect with women living in poverty. Once research has begun, the role of these organisations continues, where they support, encourage and inform their clients on the logistical and substantive elements of a project.

Their role in making work of this kind a reality must be recognised. Participatory research should strive towards incorporating grassroots organisations in all stages of a project, from planning to implementation to evaluation. Collaborative research with a range of organisations, including grassroots organisations and other lobbying or academic organisations where relevant, is the ideal format for conducting participatory research. With this in mind, anti-poverty networks may be the best-placed to carry out participatory projects with members from a range of backgrounds. In order to conduct participatory research with women living in poverty in particular, women's organisations (from grassroots to national-level lobbying organisations) should work to create an anti-poverty gender network to ensure that work of this sort is sustainable in future. Such a network must reach beyond the 'usual suspects' of lobbying organisations, and reach out to organisations across the UK working at the local, regional and national level. A review of similar networks could be carried out to assess governance structures and membership formats. The Women's Budget Group (and especially its Poverty Working Group) is a useful starting point for conceiving of a gender-specific anti-poverty network, but a critical mass of grassroots women's organisations need to be present to provide their expertise and connections to the daily lives of women living in poverty.

## **There is a need for an anti-poverty funders' network**

It is evident that participatory research and projects require significant time and resources to be both effective and meaningful to participants. The costs of such work can be prohibitively expensive. This project has benefited from the support of two funders, and would not have been possible without these resources. Many funders in the UK are concerned with challenging poverty and discrimination, and the power they could have to fund future research of this sort could be exponentially increased if they created more collaborative funding opportunities. Furthermore, the messages they carry could have a far greater reach and impact with both the public and the Government. It is essential that in any such network it is the women who are the key beneficiaries given their continued predominance among those living in poverty, and the particular routes in and out of poverty they will have.

## **Women sharing their expertise in tackling poverty**

Future work of this sort would benefit by building in opportunities for women to bring their broader experience to the table. In doing so, they can discuss the work they are involved in to transform their lives and communities. Many of the organisations involved in the Voices of Experience project promote this type of involvement with their clients. For example, a facilitator had hoped that one of her clients could share her knowledge of a policy event. However, time limitations and the collective approach of this project, with its specific target audience of national-level policy-makers, restricted this peer-to-peer learning process. By enabling this type of engagement with participants, confidence among the group can be strengthened, and opportunities created for policy-makers to better understand women's role as agents of change in their communities. For example, while it is a distinctly different project, the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power was able to see this positive work first-hand (UKCAP, 2000).

## **Women's poverty: making gender explicit**

The project team and Advisory Group decided that capacity-building in gender analysis skills would not be introduced until after women had discussed their individual experiences through the 'poverty means to me' mapping stage. This capacity-building was delayed in order to avoid imposing a researcher-defined gender bias in the initial experiential discussions that underpin the project. However,

a gender analysis of unpaid care and the benefits system was introduced in the capacity-building stages of the research. This was done in order to support women's learning about the policy context, including reviewing the evidence that women are more vulnerable to poverty. Women themselves had indicated that this was one of the elements they hoped to see in the capacity-building phase of the work, as can be seen by statements of what they wanted to achieve, including 'Learning about society and women's issues more broadly'.

The Voices of Experience project did not elicit individual participants' information on intra-household poverty and resource-sharing, therefore this research does not shed light on this. Future research should assess this information, if participants are happy to explore these issues.