

Participatory policy-making with marginalised women and communities for a more equal Bristol

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Executive summary

Effectively engaging marginalised women in decision-making is crucial for developing fairer policies and a more equal Bristol. Prioritising proactive outreach, lived experience, and two-way dialogue has significant potential to increase the engagement and influence of marginalised communities within policy-making.

Context

Participatory policy-making has become increasingly popular in recent years, with cities and countries around the world seeing the benefit of including citizens in decision-making processes. Despite this popularity, there are still issues with effectively engaging marginalised communities in accessible and inclusive ways. Marginalised women, in particular, often remain unheard in decisions that affect them, resulting in a clear gender inequality in the way that social policies are developed.

As the only city in the UK with a Women's Commission and having hosted its first citizens' assembly in early 2021, Bristol has a solid foundation on which to expand participatory policy-making and ensure the voices of women are heard.

“ Ultimately, your policies are never going to be what they need to be unless they are directly linked to people who have provided the benefit of their lived experience ”

Bristol policy stakeholder

Policy implications and checklist

Despite facing challenges to getting involved, women in Bristol are passionate about having their voices heard on issues that are important to them. Policy stakeholders in the city must look to proactively remove barriers that prevent marginalised women from engaging with policy processes.

> Practical help for marginalised groups to engage

To avoid increased risks of research fatigue and disillusionment, it is crucial to develop and sufficiently resource participatory research projects and engagement initiatives which include capacity for feedback and follow-up.

> Scope for feedback from marginalised communities

Improved outreach can be achieved by working with organisations and individuals who already hold established relationships within marginalised communities, as shown by Bristol Women's Voice in the Bristol City Listening Project.

> Assistance of communities to reach most marginalised

Employing an intersectional approach is crucial to developing policies that fully account for the lived experience of marginalised communities. This includes: ensuring that data collection systems capture multiple aspects of a person's identity; resourcing analysis teams to provide intersectional breakdowns of data; and acting on intersectional insights.

> Intersectional approach to data and decision-making

Going forwards, Bristol must expand upon the collaborative dialogue about the city's priorities and policies, ensuring that diverse voices are invited and included. In particular, it will be beneficial to strengthen connections between community and policy/local government spheres to ensure that policy-making benefits from all types of expertise.

> Grassroots expertise from community organisations

Key findings

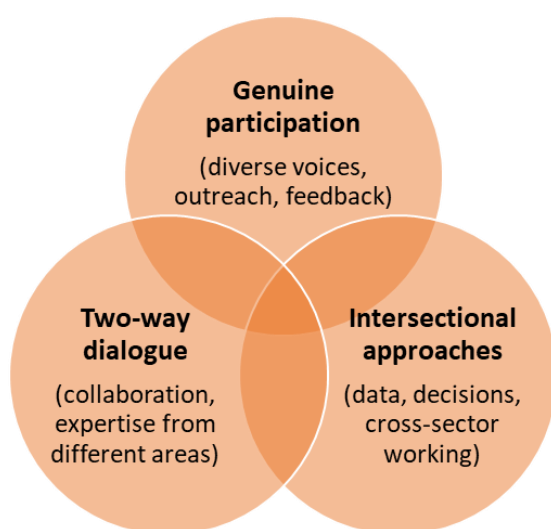
The Bristol City Listening Project revealed that different women face similar barriers across the city. Analysing lived experience in a collective way enables researchers and policy-makers to reveal systemic inequalities and develop policies to address them.

Marginalised women in Bristol often report feeling ignored or unheard in traditional decision-making settings. To combat this, proactive outreach and meaningful feedback are key to effectively engaging marginalised women in policy-making.

Engaging with the most marginalised in already marginalised groups, e.g. disabled women, is particularly difficult. These groups are often unhelpfully labelled as ‘hard to reach’ which risks perpetuating marginalisation. Challenging this perception and actively building connections is crucial for creating ongoing engagement.

Intersectional approaches to policy-making (which consider how different protected characteristics – i.e. sex, race, disability – compound to produce disadvantage) are found to be threatened by the drive to simplify information, often prompted by limited resources. However, the findings revealed an increase in intersectional considerations and cross-sector working at local and national government level as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, pointing to the benefits of applying intersectional approaches to challenging policy issues.

The research shows that the partnership between Bristol Women’s Voice and Bristol Women’s Commission works to successfully bring the diversity of women’s experiences into policy discussions. Combining grassroots expertise from Bristol Women’s Voice and the strategic advocacy of the Women’s Commission, this collaboration provides inclusive opportunities for marginalised women to speak, promotes their voices through research, and advocates for gender-conscious policies.



Key elements of participatory policy-making



Bristol Women’s Voices street art by Caro Pepe (2018) ©Alice Clermont

About the research

Based on interviews with policy and community stakeholders, in addition to examination of the Bristol City Listening Project (funded by the Government Equalities Office and conducted by Bristol Women’s Voice in 2019-20), this research offers a positive and practical contribution to discussions about engaging with marginalised women and communities to effectively influence policy.

Further information

- This policy brief is based on MSc dissertation ‘*Hard to reach’ or ‘just easy to ignore’? Marginalised women’s voices in Bristol’s social policy* by Alice Clermont, completed at the University of Bristol in June 2021. Full report available [here](#).
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Drawing on research conducted at:



Working in collaboration with:

