EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
ROAD TO TRANSFORMATION LISTENING SERIES

Themes and Solutions for Whole Community Well-Being
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thank you to all women, girls, gender-expansive participants, and advocate-leaders for your partnership in creating virtual community for listening, learning, and harnessing our collective power to advocate for change. May the stories you are sharing mobilize all who are listening.

We hope the Listening Sessions inspire you to further explore your capacity to listen, learn, and create lasting change with communities in Minnesota.

In order to create meaningful change, we need to turn to the experts – the participants in our Listening Sessions – to hear lived testimony about their experiences, challenges, and the opportunities they see to create sustainable solutions. With their insight, may we create a more just world, together – one that puts the experiences and ideas of communities pushed to the margins at the center of our way forward.”

– Gloria Perez
President & CEO, Women’s Foundation of Minnesota

A special thank you to the facilitators and lead partner organizations of each Listening Session:

COVID-19’s Impact: Women on the Frontlines
LaCora Bradford Kesti, Director of Community Impact, Women’s Foundation of Minnesota

The Economic Status of Working Women & Families
Angelica Klebsch, Comunidades Latinas Unidas en Servicio (CLUES)

Justice System-Impacted Women & Girls
Autumn Mason, Ostara Initiative

Listening to Women in Rural Minnesota
Teresa Kittridge, 100 Rural Women

Minnesota Racial Justice Uprising: Centering Black Mothers & Caregivers
Dr. Brittany Lewis, Research in Action

Not One More: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women
Nicole Matthews, Minnesota Indian Women’s Sexual Assault Coalition

The Status of Girls in Minnesota
Neda Kellogg, Project DIVA International

The Status of Older Women in Minnesota
Gloria Perez, President & CEO, Women’s Foundation of Minnesota

Unheard Voices: Asian Americans Experiencing Hate
Bo Thao-Urabe, Council for Asian-American Leaders (CAAL)

Thank you to Research Fellow, Amy Dorman, MPP, and to the WFMN Listening Sessions Working Group: Lulete Mola, Chief Strategy & Innovation Officer; Hayley Drozdowski, Research & Communications Manager; LaCora Bradford Kesti, Director of Community Impact; Stacy Papier-Meister, Associate Director of Advancement; Jen Lowman Day, Senior Director of Communications; and Cynthia J. Zapata, Community Impact Manager.
At the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota (WFMN), we know that to improve the lives of all Minnesotans, we need strong grantmaking and policy agendas that are grounded in both qualitative and quantitative data. WFMN conducts research to listen, learn, and drive action with communities to create a state of gender equity and racial justice.

The past year illuminated vast and unconscionable inequity and laid bare the daily injustices against Black lives and all people pushed to the margins. Across the state and the nation, our Asian and Asian American communities experienced increasing acts of hate and violence. COVID-19 revealed the vulnerabilities borne by working people who risked their health to provide for their families, while lacking the benefits and job security to stay home and safe. The pandemic showed us the stress of unpaid care work and the resilience of mothers, care workers, and frontline workers – all essential components of families, our economy, and whole community well-being.

Through the Road to Transformation Listening Series in March 2021, WFMN deepened our understanding of the real, lived experiences of Minnesota women and girls so that we can continue to strategically eliminate the challenges and barriers they and their families face because of injustice in our systems.

We believe that women and girls in communities across Minnesota are the experts our state needs to shape lasting solutions. As a statewide community foundation, we convene and listen to center the vision and solutions of communities pushed to the margins and then activate our collective power to drive lasting change.

Through nine online Listening Sessions, we created virtual space to deepen our understanding of the experiences and issues faced by Minnesota women and girls. Participants discussed the impacts of COVID-19, racial injustice, economic inequities, incarceration, and additional crises on women, girls, and families, and shared their solutions to create a state where all women, girls, and their families can thrive.

As we seek to transform into a more just, equitable community, the direct experiences of women, girls, and gender-expansive people impacted by inequitable systems connect with our leading 2020 Status on Women and Girls in Minnesota research and expand our understanding of how systems must change. The themes and solutions that surfaced across the Listening Series will inform the Women’s Foundation’s statewide agenda for gender and racial justice, using our levers of grantmaking, policy, strategic partnerships, narrative change, and research for years to come.

Each facilitated discussion included community members with lived experience in the session topic and were grounded in data from WFMN’s Status of Women & Girls in Minnesota and Status of Older Women in Minnesota reports. Individual reports for each Listening Session are available at WFMN.org and include detailed community-specific insights and solutions for transformational, systemic change.
Mental health impacts on women and their families across identities:

Mental health was a key concern across the Listening Sessions, and was discussed in the context of:

- the pandemic
- as part of the stress of aging
- as a result of financial and physical insecurity.

Isolation profoundly impacts mental health. Pandemic-based disconnection as well as the separation of families due to incarceration, loss of life at the hands of police officers and intimate partners, and disconnection of elders from their families as they age were all mentioned as negatively impactful on the mental health of women. Across sessions, essential workers, Black mothers and caregivers, Indigenous women, immigrant women, rural women, girls, and older women all expressed the need for increased mental health supports for themselves, their families, and their communities. Minnesota’s women are stressed, grieving, and trying to balance caring for their families with facing systemic oppression and financial hardship. They need more support.

“I was working that night [that George Floyd was murdered]. It changed everything. All the emotional support with coworkers and family, and then it came to the surface that we viewed the world in different ways and I didn’t have the support I thought I had. I had so many emotional breakdowns: leaving shifts, coming to shifts, crying with my patients about what’s going on outside. All this on top of combating a pandemic and infectious disease and the systems oppressing people of color for so long since the beginning of this country.” — COVID-19’s Impact: Women on the Frontlines Participant
Financial insecurity for women exists across the lifespan:
Women and girls across the sessions expressed the difficulty in achieving financial security and well-being. From girls needing more financial education to older women still paying off student loans, financial insecurity is a real threat to women and girls’ well-being across the lifespan. Especially in the context of the pandemic, finances, job security and workplace safety, and the cost burden of career advancement through education were central to many of the session conversations.

“Childcare is not an option because I have four kids and it’s very expensive. I have to stay home and take care of the baby. I like to go to work and be out and be interacting with people and making money, but that’s what’s holding me down right now. Not being able to come up with ends to meet: it’s either rent and things we need or childcare.”
— The Economic Status of Working Women & Families Participant

Oppressions intersect across identities:
It became clear across Listening Sessions that the oppressions women face in Minnesota are linked. Participants made clear that racism, sexism, colonization, misogyny, homophobia, and other forms of oppression are connected experiences that compound the historical and modern-day traumas that burden women, families, and communities. Economic oppression and state violence, the impacts of the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd, gender-based violence, substance use, and incarceration are additional barriers that keep women and their families from thriving.

“The victims of the March 2021 Atlanta mass shooting] were targeted, and their lives were taken away because of racism and misogyny. We are devastated, but the community is not surprised. Violence has been experienced across the country. The rhetoric [from political leaders that] assigned blame for a global pandemic had a direct correlation to the increase of violence, which disproportionately impacted women, children, and the elderly.”
— Unheard Stories: Asian Americans Experience Hate Listening Session
Women and girls shared critical, actionable solutions to address inequities throughout the sessions. Some were specific to the issue being explored in each session, yet several solutions are relevant across themes, systemic injustices, and identities.

**1. Amplify the voices and power of women, girls, and Black, Indigenous, and communities of color:** Participants said that building power with women, girls, and communities to amplify their voices and experiences is crucial. Communities know best what they need, and women are leading the way to transformation. By continuing to offer safe and public platforms for women, girls, and gender-expansive people across identities to share their stories, radical systems change becomes even more possible. Women, girls, and gender-expansive people who are most impacted by inequities and injustice should be key participants who hold power in discussions about the systems that impact them.

*“As a Black mother, I have experienced so much trauma at the hands of white supremacy and white fragility. We have to protect ourselves, we have to protect our space, we have to protect our children, our jobs, our health, mental health, and let us not forget Black men. George Floyd called for his mother. The solution is the Black woman: people need to listen to us.”*

— Minnesota’s Racial Justice Uprising: Centering Black Mothers & Caregivers Participant

**2. Invest in Minnesota through investing in women and gender-expansive people:** Financial investments are key for community transformation, growth, and thriving. Participants noted that investments should be guided by community leaders and focus on centering and supporting youth. Women of all ages should be compensated for their expertise and the time they spend educating Minnesotans and uplifting their communities. Investing in the education and opportunities for women and youth is an investment in a more equitable future for all Minnesotans.

*“We know women in Minnesota have had the highest rate of exiting the workplace [during the pandemic]. We know the cost of childcare and the cost of reentering the workforce. Women are life-givers, the bearers of so much in our homes: how are we supporting women and gender-diverse folks so we can get to a place of financial security?”*

— COVID-19’s Impact: Women on the Frontlines Contextualizer Alicia Kozlowski, Community Relations Office, City of Duluth

*“Who is telling the story of rural places, and what story are they telling and why? We need to reframe the narrative: What assets does rural Minnesota have?”*

— Listening to Rural Women Participant
Develop culturally relevant and geographically specific emergency response systems: The impact of COVID-19 was a prominent theme throughout the sessions. Participants emphasized the importance of implementing emergency responses that support communities in the specific ways they need to survive and thrive. A one-size-fits-all approach leaves out some of the most vulnerable communities in our state. Culturally relevant and geographically specific responses could help more Minnesotans stay healthy, both physically and economically, and limit the devastating impacts that have been felt disparately by communities of color and rural communities. This is the only way that emergency response systems will be effective in responding to emergencies in the short term and preventing ongoing trauma, violence, and injustice in the long run.

“If we can start to see that the systems in which we live today were intended to limit us and restrict us from living a good life, we can get back to the way we used to live as a people. Youth learning the language, our traditional ceremonies... if we can start to get back our identity as Indigenous people, then we won’t continue to perpetuate the violence we learned because we had to survive.”

— Not One More: Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women Participant

Strengthen care infrastructure and social safety net: Participants elevated the need for large-scale systems change through an expansion and transformation of the social safety net to better support women, families, and communities. Participants underlined the lack of mental health support, affordable and accessible childcare, quality healthcare, affordable housing, healthy food, and safe transportation as major gaps in the social safety net. They noted that the public benefits system must be adapted so that when a parent finds work, supports do not immediately or completely disappear. Creating community-centered infrastructure, including a public safety system that keeps all Minnesotans safe, is key to ensuring that women, families, and communities have the support they need to thrive.

“We are innocent yet betrayed by the ones who were supposed to defend and serve. Where is the justice when our peace has been compromised, when we’re stomped out and thrown in jail? Where’s the justice when your record and your wrongs can never be wiped away?”

— Justice-System Impacted Women & Girls Participant

“All of this is so interwoven and connected. When our families don’t have the right care, how does that trickle down and affect people in that household? It has really shown us that we need to reimagine a way to offer accessible childcare and help families and working mothers and gender-expansive people.”

— COVID-19’s Impact: Women on the Frontlines Participant
Conclusion

The Listening Series reflected the raw intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and the uprising for racial justice that took root in Minnesota following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police. The context and the direct testimony underscored the importance of WFMN’s approach to addressing entrenched, structural barriers using the Intersectional Equity Framework™ to understand complex issues and target investment in community-led solutions.

We cannot wait for change. We must relentlessly drive it. At the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota, our vision of gender equity is indelibly bound to racial equity and the movement for justice. The women’s movement can only be fully realized when we center the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and women of color who experience state-sanctioned violence directly and through the men and boys in their lives.

In the last year, WFMN has been at the table, putting equity into design as we listen and learn, co-create, and adapt to catalyze change. We must make a new day for ourselves, our children, and future generations. The time has come for a long-term cultural transformation that centers women and girls in responsive strategies across the state and nation. As we invest in transformation for women and girls, their families, and communities, we will step into our future as an anti-racist community foundation boldly driving systems change for gender and racial justice.

This year has shown us that we must remake our state with intersectional equity in the design of all we do. We must imagine, innovate, adapt, and press onward to a world where all women, girls, and families thrive.

Minnesota’s women, girls, and gender-expansive people need targeted, positive investments in solutions they and their communities define. They need the partnership of leaders in philanthropy, government, business, and nonprofits to drive their solutions forward.

As we press on, we recognize that in a culture that continually reinforces white supremacy, justice can only be achieved when we confront and repair the anti-Blackness that is woven through every aspect of society—in our homes, schools, workplaces, communities, and government. We must continue to raise our voices and use our influence, to refuse a status quo that denies the basic dignity and humanity of Minnesotans pushed to the margins.

To transform together, we cannot stop at listening, learning, and amplifying the voices of communities pushed to the margins. We must transform our attitudes, our systems, our practices, and our institutions. We are committed to sharing power, building power, and wielding power to catalyze transformational change. WFMN will continue advancing racial and gender justice in ways that significantly disrupt current practices and shape systems and structures so that all people have the opportunities and support they need to thrive.