In recent years, much has been made of the urban-rural divide, the impact of the ever-changing economy on the industries that once fueled rural towns, and the ongoing migration of people from small, rural communities to larger metro areas. For this listening session, we convened white women, the majority of whom were working class women, from across rural Minnesota to hear directly about their daily lives—what is most important, what distinct challenges they face, and how women in rural Minnesota like them are leading their communities as elected officials and community problem solvers, entrepreneurs, and heads of household. We affirm and recognize that Rural Minnesota is home to sovereign tribal nations and growing populations of Black, immigrant, and communities of color. We ensured that we heard from the diverse voices of Rural MN in eight other Listening Sessions to learn more about life at the intersection of identities across Minnesota. Reports from those sessions will be available on WFMN’s website.

FRIDAY, MARCH 9, 2021
LISTENING TO
Minnesota’s Women & Girls

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 and racial equity. We believe that women and girls in communities across Minnesota are the experts our state needs to shape real, lasting solutions.

Through nine Listening Sessions in WFMN’s Road to Transformation Listening Series in March 2021, we 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.

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. The themes and solutions that surfaced across the Listening Series will inform the Women’s Foundation’s statewide agenda for gender and racial equity, using our levers for grantmaking, policy, strategic partnerships, narrative change, and research for years to come.
What the data show

Men dominate county and local government positions:
The COVID-19 crisis has revealed the immense importance of local governance. However, men continue to dominate county governments, and woman mayors are rare in Minnesota.¹

Only 17% of Minnesota cities have female mayors²

Women make up the majority of Minnesota workers who are paid at or below the minimum wage, even with advanced degrees.

Rural and urban Minnesota women are similarly concentrated in minimum wage jobs. In 2018, 59% of minimum wage workers in Greater Minnesota were women, and 61% of minimum wage workers in the Twin Cities metro area were women.

59% WOMEN
41% MEN

CWGPP analysis of Quarterly Employment Demographics data from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. Data was from Q1 2018. Minimum wage in 2018 in Minnesota was $9.65 per hour for large firms.

Women in Greater Minnesota are half as likely to work in higher-paying STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) positions as women in the Twin Cities metro area.³

Child care supply does not meet demand in Minnesota:
High-quality child care is out of reach for many Minnesota families, especially for households in Greater and rural Minnesota. From 2002 to 2015, the number of family child care slots decreased by about one-third in Greater Minnesota.⁴

Minnesota has the 5th highest cost in the United States for quality infant care.


³ CWGPP analysis of Quarterly Employment Demographics data from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. Data was from Q1 2018. Minimum wage in 2018 in Minnesota was $9.65 per hour for large firms.
LISTENING TO
Rural Women in Minnesota

Framed by the COVID-19 pandemic and mandated shutdowns that increased the mental health and financial strain on individuals, families, and small business owners, this session illuminated how rural Minnesota depends on women’s creative and collaborative problem-solving.

The pandemic exacerbated the financial disparities, lack of child care, and isolation that were already challenging in rural Minnesota. But the women and gender-expansive participants in this session, from college students to experienced politicians, envision an asset-based future where rural Minnesota communities thrive. While rural Minnesotans face specific challenges in getting the resources they need, the participants spoke to a collective need to uplift stories of community support, strong family ties, and the resilience of rural entrepreneurs and communities. Women and gender-expansive people in rural Minnesota are lifting their voices and finding solutions, together.

As women running for office, students, mothers caring for and supporting their families, and brave entrepreneurs, women and gender-expansive people from rural Minnesota were eager to share the challenges they face and solutions they see in the face of a staggering pandemic.

Facilitator: Teresa Kittridge, Founder and Executive Director of 100 Rural Women
Grantee-partner: 100 Rural Women
Research Fellow: Amy Dorman, MPP
Listening to one rural woman’s experience running for political office

A moving narrative that began the session illustrated the challenges women across the state face when running for political office. As an experienced politician, the storyteller had earned the confidence and grit necessary to handle tough political campaigns. However, the pandemic and social unrest of 2020 severely inhibited her ability to travel, host events, and meet with people – a crucial part of campaigning. Although she had a good record and was well-liked in her community, a powerful challenger had access to substantial outside funding to spend on negative campaign ads.

The storyteller shared that she was attacked with negative, false ads from all sides: social media, television commercials, radio, and direct mail. Her opponent’s campaign deepened a narrative that pits rural Minnesota against the Twin Cities. Her opponent tried to paint her as a “tax-and-spend liberal from the Cities.” Through this difficult campaign experience, the storyteller leaned on a community of other women running for office across the state for guidance and support. They were also experiencing barrages of negative campaign attacks. The storyteller identified the overlap of voter suppression in communities of color and sexism:

“Women are vulnerable to this kind of negative campaigning and, in many ways, it is meant to disillusion your voters, to keep them from going to the polls. This has a big impact on Native communities and is meant to really suppress the vote.”

Despite these challenges, the group shared consensus that women in rural Minnesota are important problem-solvers who transform the way decisions are made so whole communities can thrive. These participants were hopeful about the increasing representation of women in elected positions. They saw the support of other women in politics and supporters in their communities as a path for women to win more elections and build more collaborative and relationship-based decision-making processes.

“Women bring a more collaborative spirit to decision-making through relationship-building and finding solutions that everyone can agree on. There is a lot more discussion around how everyone can get something positive out of this decision we’re having to make.”
Economic challenges and “brain drain” widens the urban-rural divide

The so-called “urban-rural divide” also manifested in the financial well-being of participants and their families. Many emphasized how the average income of rural families is well below the state average. Many rural Minnesotans are working multiple minimum wage jobs to support loved ones. Healthcare and child care are both unaffordable and often out of reach for families working several part-time jobs. Rural women are seeing women in their communities leaving the workforce to care for their children because they could not afford child care. Others relied on the full-time jobs of their husbands as the only means to afford health insurance.

The participants expressed how roles traditionally held by women continue to be undervalued and underpaid, which must change for rural communities to thrive. Rural women also contribute to their communities through volunteer and service work, which often is unpaid. One participant stressed the importance of compensating women meaningfully for the contributions in their jobs and their communities:

“Roles that are historically held by women, caretaking, teachers, collaborators, artists, service-industry roles, are often at minimum wage level. We should be talking about how we compensate those roles and value those roles better. Women are doing amazing work that is often unpaid or underpaid: How do we compensate that work that’s already happening?”

The narrative of the urban-rural divide also contributes to what participants call a “brain drain” when young people leave their hometowns for colleges in larger cities and then stay in those cities to build their lives around more lucrative work. However, several participants intentionally built their lives in rural Minnesota to start businesses, work in public service, and feed the state through local farming: all with deep care for their rural communities. As one participant stated:

“I grew up in the suburbs, I sometimes live in the city, but I have a rural heart.”

COVID-19 exacerbated isolation and mental health concerns

The impacts of COVID-19 and the subsequent mandated shutdowns hit rural communities hard. Participants reflected upon the intense mental and financial strain as some farming profits plummeted to nothing overnight. The participants shared personal stories of deep financial and personal loss.

Several participants noted that losing the ability to meet with their extended family and faith communities had a devastating impact. The inability to gather, coupled with poor cell service and broadband, compounded the mental health strain that families were already feeling due to financial loss and uncertainty. Some mentioned how substance abuse and violence increased during this time, and how few people, including children, had a safe place to go. The mental health impact of this mandated isolation was reflected in participants’ comments:

“People were really isolated and scared. If you don’t live in town, you don’t have good cell service. You’re nervous about what is going on, with added tensions and the financial strain involved.”

“There was so much physical isolation: kids on their farm without reliable broadband access who were physically away from people. It was hard to access some sort of safe haven without being near to people.”

“My own mental health has struggled, and businesses are struggling a lot, especially in smaller communities.”
“Some of these churches are small and these are their only opportunity to connect. My husband’s cousin committed suicide because he didn’t have the opportunity to connect with his priest. People are dying without rites of passage and are not having siblings with them when they die. No one should die alone.”

The women also saw COVID-19 as an opportunity to realize solutions that would help rural communities build back stronger. One participant stated:

“I’m really hopeful. COVID has shined a light on how economically this has affected people. I’m hopeful in the future that we can invest in more services to help people and help communities come together and respond to their needs, like mental health, broadband, and income needs.”

Narratives about rural life need to change

In a time of profound political polarization, the participants felt that the narratives about rural Minnesota and rural women need to change. They emphasized that words matter and that the negative narrative of rural Minnesota as “dying” impacts rural Minnesota’s ability to thrive. Rural women recognize the assets of their land, businesses, and communities, and are working hard to shift the divisive political narratives about people living in rural Minnesota.

“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?”

“The stories that we tell about ourselves really matter, the people we see in leadership really matter, and the stories told about us really matter. That affects the way our small towns are thriving or not thriving. What if we tell the stories [from this session] on a megaphone? I think women are leading the charge in a lot of ways.”
Rural women and gender-expansive people contribute to the rich community assets of rural Minnesota. They know that changing the narrative and the polarized political landscape in rural Minnesota is key to ensuring rural women and girls, families, and communities thrive. Their solutions were specific, community-centered, and powerful:

1. **Craft emergency solutions that support the unique needs of rural Minnesotans and businesses:**
The pandemic hit rural communities with extreme force in part due to policies set by the Governor in Saint Paul. Rural women want policymakers to listen to the needs of rural communities, many of which center on agriculture. A “one size fits all” approach only deepens the urban-rural divide and leaves Minnesotans in rural areas behind.

2. **Invest in rural broadband and cell service for every household in the state:** The participants agreed that investing in broadband and cell service for all households in rural Minnesota was crucial for mental health, connection, prosperity in school and career, and personal safety.

3. **Support and invest in the leadership of young women in rural Minnesota:** To activate the innovation, energy, and potential of young people and support the economies of rural Minnesota, young women can be supported with access to leadership and workforce opportunities, including in elected office and policymaking, the nontraditional workforce and STEM, and the jobs of the future. As young people transition from high school to college or search for full-time work, they need additional support to find economic opportunity locally.

4. **Emphasize assets shared across rural Minnesota to decrease political polarization:** The participants expressed pride and confidence in themselves and the strength, vibrancy, and necessity of their rural communities. Positive, holistic narratives that are told by rural voices who represent the truth of lived experiences in rural Minnesota will help shift the narrative and emphasize their shared assets and values.

“I remember as a young lady, seeing that this is a community of very strong women. They were unconventional, these amazing leaders, and taught us to never be afraid to be who you are. They raised us up to be whatever we want to be.”