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

The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police officers and the subsequent social uprisings throughout Minnesota this summer shook our state and the nation, awakening critical conversations about the need for vast racial justice reform in our country. As the trial of former officer Derek Chauvin began, we gathered with Black mothers and caregivers to listen to their experiences raising families during this time, and to hear their hopes and solutions for a more racially just and equitable Minnesota.

MONDAY, MARCH 1, 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 real, lived experiences of the issues faced by women and girls in our state so that we can continue to strategically reduce or eliminate the challenges, barriers, and obstacles faced by women and girls because of inequities and 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-shifting communications, and future research for years to come.
What the data show

Exposure to violence impacts mental health: Exposure to violence has been associated with higher rates of mental illness in youth, including post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. Youth of color are more likely to experience chronic stress, anxiety, and depression. Other risk factors include exposure to discrimination and racism.¹

Gender & racial wage gap reduces lifetime earnings:
The gender wage gap in Minnesota hasn’t narrowed in five years—particularly for women of color. Incarceration and periods of unemployment lead to financial instability and disproportionately affect communities of color.²

Black mothers are breadwinners:
The report found that 57 percent of Black mothers in Minnesota are the primary breadwinners in their families.

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Black mothers and caregivers are the backbones of their communities and their leadership is central to the well-being of their families, related both by blood and by love.

This Listening Session was framed by the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers in the summer of 2020 during a devastating pandemic, the subsequent protests, and the re-traumatizing trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Just weeks after the session, a Brooklyn Center police officer shot and killed a young Black man—Daunte Wright, a father, a brother, and a beloved son—during a traffic stop. This conversation was further situated within generations of state violence and trauma against Black and brown communities.

As Black mothers and caregivers gathered and told their stories, dual narratives of pain and resilience rose to the surface. The women were clear: leadership by Black women is key to building anti-racist communities that can thrive, but they need more support. Touching on wide-ranging issues including limited mental health resources, lack of childcare, working without meaningful compensation, and the disparate incarceration of Black and brown community members, the session participants spoke of the needs and opportunities to rebuild support systems that benefit everyone. Importantly, where these systems failed Black mothers and caregivers in this time of great pain and need, we heard how the community showed up in force to support and uplift each other.

Stories of pain and resilience, leadership, and solutions emerged as part of this discussion with Black mothers and caregivers in Minnesota.

“‘I’m making a commitment to live honestly and truly and not be silenced. The only way to change systems that call us ‘emotional’ when actually we’re passionate and tired is to show up authentically no matter who’s in the room. That is my commitment to myself and my community – no matter what.’”

**Facilitator:** Dr. Brittany Lewis  
**Research Fellow:** Amy Dorman, MPP
Listening to a Black mother and activist on the murder of George Floyd

Each WFMN Listening Session began with a grounding testimony told by a woman, girl, or gender-expansive person. At the opening of this session, we heard from a community activist and Black mother of five who shared how George Floyd’s murder affected her, her family, and her community. The storyteller considered George Floyd part of her family and expressed her anguish at hearing the news and the mental strain of watching his murder again and again as it was replayed across social media and news outlets.

She detailed how this tragedy and environment heightened her anxiety, particularly as she raises four Black young men, to the degree that she needed to seek support. Within the moving narrative of this devastating loss, the storyteller demonstrated courage and resilience in relaying how her community came together in ways she had never seen before when faced with stark racism, oppression, and deep personal grief. She told us that as a Black mother living within white supremacist systems operating in Minnesota, she would “not take this lying down.” Her words and challenge were clear:

“If I as a mother, the creator of life, don’t stand up – who will?”

Black mothers and caregivers lead families and communities

During the storyteller’s narrative, Listening Session participants supported her and each other and shared their similar experiences as Black mothers and caregivers. They affirmed how Black and brown communities “have a different set of rules” than white communities in Minnesota. They shared how that reality exacerbates the fear they feel as they navigate raising Black sons and daughters where the constant threat of police violence could mean that any time their loved ones walk out the door, they may not come home.

“Even though I don’t have sons that I birthed, when I found out I was pregnant, I prayed to God not to give me a son because I didn’t want to have to go through it.”

“I have one more little person to raise in this life, and that’s a Black girl. And I’m afraid. She’s 10.”

Even as they expressed their fear for their children and themselves as Black mothers, the women displayed fierce resilience in the face systemic oppression and racism. Black women are leading. They are the protectors of their children, their families, and their communities. Black women are the solution to the systemic challenges they face, and they need to be listened to and supported.
“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.”

“Yes, we need to lead the world, but also we need to be held and loved on and cared for.”

Trauma impacts mental health across generations

Participants made clear that the trauma and fear that they feel daily as a result of systemic racism and oppression has lasting impacts on their children and their children’s children. Some described how children are afraid for their adult family members to leave the house, fearing they may not return home.

The fear and mental health strain on caregivers trickles down to their children, and participants spoke of how this trauma is then categorized as “bad behavior” in Minnesota schools where many teachers are white and “don’t understand how stress and trauma show up in children.” Instead of getting the help and resources they need to heal from their trauma, adults and children alike are cycled through state systems that punish and victim-blame instead of support and empower.

One participant asked a key question that highlights the complexity of this generational trauma:

“Let’s be clear, George Floyd was murdered – but that was a modern-day lynching. How do you explain that to the children? That’s the resource that we’re missing: to really be able to explain to our children not only what happened but teaching it, so it won’t happen to them.”

State violence and economic oppression intersect

The participants interwove the prominent theme of state violence through policing and incarceration with narratives of economic violence against Black and brown communities. Stories illustrated the interconnection of gender-based violence, addiction, and incarceration, as well as the intersecting oppressions experienced by the participants as women and as members of the Black community. While the fear and daily reality of state violence impacts the mental health of participants and their families, they are also stressed and oppressed economically.
Community support and resilience are abundant

Underneath the pain of intersecting oppressions expressed during the Listening Session was uplifting and resilient community support, often led by Black mothers. In the face of a pandemic that disproportionally impacts communities of color physically and financially, and in the wake of George Floyd’s murder and the barrage of re-traumatizing media coverage that followed, the women described how their community came together to support one another. One participant shared the power of this community-based resilience:

“In all of this, something beautiful I experienced was the community coming together like I’ve never seen before. The community showed up and showed out.”

Through the stories shared and interactions between the women in the session, participants demonstrated that Black mothers and caregivers are not only crucial leaders at the forefront of anti-racist movements, they are also the backbone of their communities. Through showing up and caring for each other and their loved ones, they persevere and provide love and support for one another.

As one participant described:

“I want to talk about having a family member incarcerated. That’s already on us as people looking for housing or any type of assistance. Because you know a felon, you’re already looked at as not being able to get services and get housing.”

Incarceration of loved ones affects families’ mental and physical well-being and impacts Black women’s ability to provide for themselves and their loved ones: to have the economic, food, and housing security they need to thrive. Many expressed how incarceration compounds the challenges of finding jobs that offer a living wage as well as affordable, quality childcare that allows for career opportunities and expansion.

Ultimately, participants described this intersection of state violence and economic oppression as dehumanization – by police officers, by the state, by media outlets that spin negative narratives about Black and brown communities, and finally by the economic systems that continue to profit off the labor of Black women without providing the support they and their families need.

“There is humanity in loss of life. News is often reported without emotion and that helps desensitize the violence that is happening against Black and brown bodies. It’s often tied up tidy … but these are lives and they deserve to be wept for.”
The Black mothers and caregivers who gathered for this session hold a vision for hope and transformation in which Black women are leading. They offered some critical solutions to the oppressions they and their communities face:

1. **Listen to and support Black women**: Black women know what they, their families, and their communities need. They must be invited into decision-making spaces not only to share their stories, but to share their solutions. In these spaces, they need to be compensated for their time and have access to affordable childcare options, jobs with living wages, and healthcare that includes mental health services so they can continue to lead and thrive.

2. **Promote economic security and success for Black families through institutional reforms**: The current economic and public benefits systems create barriers for single-parent households, often led by Black mothers, to thrive. Our public benefits system must be transformed so that when a Black mother finds work, she and her family are not penalized by immediately losing all public food and housing support. Simultaneously, we must enact policies that ensure all people are paid a living wage and can find affordable childcare.

3. **Create a public safety system that is community-based and accountable to community**: Black mothers and caregivers want to feel safe in their own communities. The current public safety system does not protect and serve communities of color effectively and instead inflicts deep trauma and harm. Ensure Black women have safe places and trusted resources to turn to in situations of violence and abuse that do not involve law enforcement, the criminal justice system, or economic risk. Black people and Black women need to be at the forefront of creating a transformed, anti-racist system of community safety.

4. **Invest in opportunities for Black children and youth**: Black mothers and caregivers want their children to be safe and to thrive. Investing in career and extracurricular opportunities for Black children and youth is critical for safeguarding a hopeful future for these vibrant communities to thrive.

**“What rules are in place for police and the justice system to make sure that they respect humanity and that they believe that all human life is valuable? This goes beyond diversity trainings—this is about respecting humanity.”**

Listening session facilitated by Dr. Brittany Lewis, Founder and CEO of Research in Action and a Senior Research Associate at the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) at the University of Minnesota. Thank you to Dr. Reatha Clark King, WFMN’s longtime supporter and 2020 Mary Lee Dayton Catalyst for Change Honoree, who inspired the theme of this Listening Session, recounting her personal story of raising two Black boys in Minneapolis. WFMN’s Dr. Reatha Clark King Fellowship is named in her honor.