

LIFT: WOMEN LEADING CHANGE

TRANSFORMING WOMEN'S PROGRESSION OUT OF POVERTY

PROJECT BRIEFING

BACKGROUND

Oxfam, working in partnership with local organisations and communities, is leading on the design and implementation of "LIFT: Women Leading Change", a project that aims to tackle poverty and support women's economic empowerment in the UK using a mix of research, programme implementation, and policy influencing. Adopting a co-production and social innovation approach, the LIFT project seeks to:

- **Explore the challenges** that women with lived experience of poverty face;
- **Identify and test solutions** to these challenges and promote the scale up of effective interventions;
- **Influence local and national policy** on the key issues identified by the project.

Following the traditional social innovation life-cycle, LIFT aims to find effective solutions to real social challenges by working through a series of phases:

1. **Phase 1** – Participative research exploring opportunities and challenges and generating ideas for solutions.
2. **Phase 2** – Co-production with local women and other stakeholders to develop project plans and test identified solutions.
3. **Phase 3** – Delivery and implementation of identified solutions and advocacy and influencing on key policy issues.
4. **Phase 4** – Evaluation, succession planning, and scale-up.

WHAT HAVE WE FOUND SO FAR?

Between April – December 2019, Oxfam partnered with Inspire Women, The Young Foundation, and Sarah Marie Hall¹ to conduct research exploring the following key questions:

RQ1. What does economic empowerment mean to women?

RQ2. What are women's personal experiences of economic empowerment?

RQ3. What stops women from achieving economic empowerment?

RQ4. What could support women to be economically empowered

RQ4.1 Who can do something, and what can they do?

The research took a participatory approach, with a team of 6 Community Researchers (each with lived experience of the issues to be explored) recruited to lead on design, delivery, and dissemination.

The fieldwork for the project's research phase was made up of three component parts:

- **Broad consultation (August 2019)** – The Community Research team undertook a period of 'broad consultation' activity, engaging with 41 women across Oldham at community events and 'pop-ups' organised in partnership with local voluntary and community sector organisations, churches, and foodbanks in order to gain insight into what economic empowerment means to women in Oldham.

¹ Sarah is an independent research consultant specialising in participatory and creative research

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- **Group interviews (September – October 2019)**– The team conducted 4 group interviews, engaging with 20 women to supplement the ‘light touch’ insights gleaned during the broad consultation period with more in-depth accounts of women’s personal experiences of economic empowerment.
- **Challenge and solutions workshops (September – November 2019)** – The team designed and delivered 6 workshops, engaging with a group of 36 women and local stakeholders. The first 3 workshops invited women with lived experience to explore the challenges to economic empowerment, with workshops 4 and 5 asking them to design potential solutions to these challenges. Workshop 6 brought the women together with stakeholders to review the ideas proposed and coproduce more detailed solutions, 3 of which were identified as ‘priority solutions’ to be further developed in the LIFT project’s next phase (commencing 2020).

CHALLENGES TO WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Analysis of the data from the broad consultation, group interviews, and challenge and solutions workshops highlighted **4 key challenges** that the women who participated in the research phase felt stopped them from feeling economically empowered.

1. **Mental health: “There is a lack of support from professionals/my family/my community for me as a woman with mental health issues”**

For the women that we spoke to, poor mental health was a central issue. They told us that they felt that poor mental health impacted on all areas of their lives – how they interacted with their families, whether they felt able to work, and how they felt about themselves as mothers, women, and citizens.

“I struggle with my mental health. I’m lonely and isolated, depressed, ashamed – feel like it’s my fault because people have told me that so many times”

Several participants highlighted how little support they felt there was for women struggling with poor mental health:

“As women we are told we are nothing, we will amount to nothing, our whole lives. So your mental health suffers – you have no self-esteem or confidence. It feels like professionals and your family don’t take that seriously, or understand what you’re going through”

For many women, there was also a complicated and difficult relationship between poor mental health and a financial situation that required them to seek support through receipt of state benefits. Several participants discussed a ‘cycle’ whereby their experiences of poor mental health made it difficult for them to find and maintain employment, causing financial stress which led them to claim benefits, the conditions of which added so much pressure and stress to their lives that their mental health worsened significantly:

“I lost my job and then a family member died, and the job centre was on my back constantly about getting a job. I ended up on anti-depressants because I was depressed and overwhelmed but there was no sympathy, no understanding. We need to provide training and raise awareness about mental health at a basic level”

2. **Childcare and work: “There is no flexible and affordable childcare in Oldham and I can’t find a job that is flexible enough to fit around looking after my family”**

Issues around providing childcare, and the impact that being the primary caregiver for children can have on women’s ability to work, also featured prominently throughout the research.

Many women spoke to us about how much they wanted to work and about how important they felt working was both to their identity as women and whether other people perceived them as valuable members of society:

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“I would love to work. When I used to go out to work, I felt like I had a purpose, a value...it was like people respected me”

However, despite this desire to be in employment, women highlighted a lack of affordable and flexible childcare as a significant barrier to being in work:

“Mothers are discriminated against for being lazy when actually there are too many blocks stopping you from achieving goals i.e. being responsible for childcare. The additional money to have to pay for childcare as soon as you start working makes it hard to cope financially and means it doesn’t make sense for me to work”

Aside from the financial strain that not being able to work and/or afford childcare placed on families, many women also spoke about the mental health impacts of not being in work and their fear of being judged by those who did not understand the struggles they faced with childcare:

“I’m judged because I don’t work but it’s because I can’t afford childcare. I feel guilty asking for help because people just assume I’m too lazy. There’s so much stigma – I feel ashamed”

3. Benefits: “I can’t find the information I need on what benefits I’m entitled to and there is no support for me applying for or managing my benefits”

The benefits system was highlighted by many women as a significant barrier to feeling empowered economically. In particular, women felt that there was little information on what benefits they were entitled to claim and a lack of adequate face-to-face support when issues inevitably arose, with women being referred to multiple agencies for support without gaining much clarity:

“Benefits are so confusing. When I was forced to apply even the benefits staff did not understand it properly and I got passed from pillar to post. The system is not working properly for the people who need it!”

The inflexibility and inability of the benefits system to account for personal circumstances was highlighted by a number of participants. Several women spoke about the negative financial and mental health impact of missing appointments or deadlines and spiralling into debt as a result of reduced or delayed payments:

“If you are penalised because you miss an appointment or deadline, there is the worry of having all money stopped, stress, depression, losing your house, going into debt. You feel ashamed, isolated. It keeps me up sometimes, worrying that I’ll make a mistake”

Universal Credit received special mention from many women, who expressed frustration with a lack of information around the switch to UC and the financial impact that this might have:

“With Universal Credit, you don’t have money for months so you go into debt and nearly lose your house, there’s no food so you need to use foodbanks. It’s so stressful. I don’t have anyone to ask for help”

4. Voice: “I don’t know where I can get my voice heard as a woman in Oldham – there are no opportunities and even when I can contribute no change happens”

Many of the women that we spoke to highlighted a lack of information about where to get their voices heard in Oldham as a significant barrier to their economic empowerment:

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“All women need to have their voices heard, but there is nowhere to do that in Oldham”

Even when women did feel that there were opportunities to speak out about issues they cared about, and that they had access to the information they needed about where these opportunities were, there was a strong sense amongst participants that no actual change would occur and that women’s voices were not seen as valuable:

“Why would I speak out? No-one would listen to me as a woman anyway. I feel invisible”

“I don’t have the confidence to speak out and have my voice heard about the things I care about. Personally, I feel that if I did speak out I wouldn’t be listened to anyway”

SOLUTIONS TO SUPPORT WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

In the ‘solutions workshops’ run as part of this research project, women and local stakeholders firstly began by thinking broadly about the changes that they would like to see and designing solutions to achieve these changes. The group then worked together to develop 8 solutions in more detail, exploring the key activities, resources needed, and potential impact of each. Finally, women and stakeholders each voted for their ‘top 3’ solutions.

The 3 solutions ideas that were voted ‘top priorities’ by women and stakeholders were:

1. **Creation of a community childcare hub** - a place open long hours that women can trust with the care of their children.
2. **Training for service providers, professionals and other key stakeholders** - women with lived experience are supported to deliver training for stakeholders on mental health sensitivity and sustainable livelihoods approaches² to services and support.
3. **Creation of specific slots for mental health appointments with GPs and nurses** - ensuring that women experiencing mental health issues receive adequate support from health professionals.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Following the initial phase of the project, Oxfam seeks to continue to work in partnership with local women and organisations to implement the remaining phases of the project.

From early 2020, local women and stakeholders will be supported to work together to refine ideas around the solutions generated during the project’s research phase into more specific project proposals that will be tested as if they were prototypes (Phase 2).

It is then intended that the solutions identified will be implemented in the form of actual interventions, based on the project proposals developed and tested in Phase 2, with research and policy influencing activities carried out alongside (Phase 3). In the final phase of the project, strategies for replicating both the solutions implemented and the social innovation process used in other contexts and communities will be identified, alongside dissemination of policy learning, with the aim of producing systemic change at scale.

If you would like to find out further information about what’s next for the LIFT project, please do not hesitate to get in touch with Oxfam’s Programme Researcher, Silvia Galandini, at sgalandini1@oxfam.org.uk.

² A holistic and asset-based approach to exploring and tackling poverty and inequalities