

Women's work

How gender equality can deliver stronger local economies



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Leah Millthorne
Victoria Bettany
Tallulah Eyres
Sara Reis
Lisa Adamson
Sarah Longlands

wbg WOMEN'S
BUDGET
GROUP



CLES
the national organisation
for local economies

About the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES)

CLES is the national organisation for local economies.

Established in 1986, we are an independent charity working towards a future where local economies benefit people, place and the planet.

This will happen when wealth and power serve local people, rather than the other way around, enabling communities to flourish. We have an international reputation for our pioneering work on community wealth building and are recognised as the curators of the movement in the UK. [Link](#).

About the Women's Budget Group (WBG)

WBG is an independent, feminist think tank that monitors the impact of government policies on men and women. We propose policies for a more gender-equal future, and we build the capacity of women and women's groups to participate in economic debates. [Link](#).

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Leeds City Council for supporting this project and being willing to explore the practicalities of piloting a gender inclusive approach to economic development.

We also acknowledge the support of the many women across Leeds we engaged with about their experiences and insights without whom this work would not have been possible, and to Women's Lives Leeds who connected us to communities and invaluable informed the research. [Link](#).

This report was supported by the Columbia Threadneedle Foundation. Established in 2013, the Columbia Threadneedle Foundation is a UK registered charity, which works with charities to improve individual lives while also driving fundamental social change through tackling critical social issues including employment, empowerment, inclusion, opportunity and mental health.

Finally, thank you to Helen Power for editing and communications support and to Alice Needham-Pearmain, Leeds-based illustrator and designer, who created the report cover art. [Link](#).

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Executive summary

Despite decades of campaigning and significant legislative progress, structural and systemic barriers to gender equality in local and national economies persist. This is, in part, because they are deeply rooted in long-standing gender roles, norms, and stereotypes – which, often unintentionally, uphold and reinforce the existence of barriers to women’s economic inclusion.

The barriers to paid work encountered by women, and disadvantages including underemployment and lower pay mean that £88.7bn of Gross Value Added (GVA) is lost to Britain’s economy every year – equivalent to the annual contribution of the financial services sector.¹ On the local level, the average regional economy is losing out on £1.68bn per year – in some cases representing nearly 10% of existing annual economic output.² The detrimental effects of gendered economic inequalities on the wellbeing of women represents the real cost to communities, hindering the accumulation of wealth and autonomy, driving health inequalities, and putting women and their families at a greater risk of isolation, poverty and poor health.

Local, combined and devolved authorities can, however, have a transformational impact on supporting gender equality in their local economies. Through detailed socioeconomic analysis and engaging directly with women from all different walks of life, this research has provided a deep understanding of the gender inequality challenges and barriers that women face in Leeds. From this, we have developed an agenda for change for gender.

However, whilst the challenges observed in Leeds reflect the specific economic and social context in the city, the impacts of gender inequality can be found in places right across the UK and beyond. The specifics of how these challenges play out are different in every locality and so too are the actions required to ensure that local economic strategies make a tangible and meaningful difference to women’s lives. Therefore, while the recommendations we set out may not suit all places, we hope that they will provide suitable inspiration for those with an interest in creating more gender equal local economies everywhere.

¹ CLES and WBG. (2023). New research: prioritising gender inclusion in economic strategies. [Link](#)

² Ibid.

An agenda for change

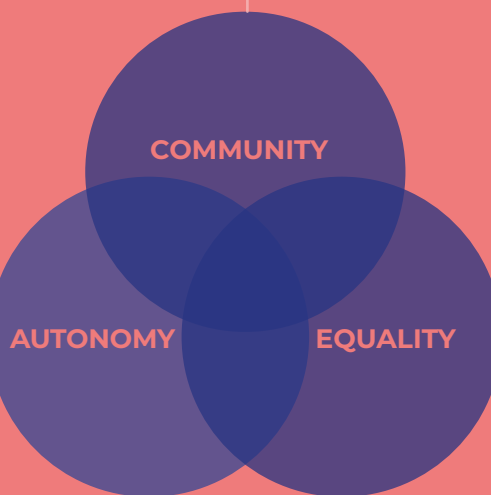
We asked all of the women we engaged with to tell us the key thing they would change in Leeds. This is their agenda for change to create greater gender equality and inclusion through Leeds' economic strategy:

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS & WELLBEING SUPPORT

- More opportunities for connection
- Improved information sharing
- More dedicated community space
- Improved mental health support services
- Safe spaces
- Better support for vulnerable and older women
- More support and advocacy for women escaping abuse

WEALTH AND AUTONOMY

- Dedicated workshops and training programmes on:
 - financial literacy
 - business management
 - pension inequalities
- Ensuring all women in Leeds have access to:
 - public funds
 - safe housing
 - legal aid



CAREGIVING SUPPORT

- Increased access to affordable, flexible child and social care that can accommodate varied shift patterns
- More businesses adopting policies to support caregiving
- Improvements to maternity pay and return to work progression
- Support for an increased role for partners in caregiving

FLEXIBLE EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND PROGRESSION

- Overcoming gender bias in male-dominated industries
- More diverse definitions of work success
- Greater exposure to non-linear career pathways.
- Increased workplace tolerance around menopause, menstruation and breastfeeding
- More flexible working
- Gender pay parity
- Free and accessible careers advice
- Additional support to access further and higher education opportunities

REPRESENTATION IN LEADERSHIP

- Improved representation in senior business position
- Mentoring and coaching opportunities
- Dedicated resources and funding for women entrepreneurs of colour
- Campaigns and advocacy

Recommendations

In this work, we have been inspired by the women of Leeds but also by the work of Leeds City Council who, despite the challenging context of local government finance, has committed to doing more to support women in their city.


Many councils and combined authorities across the UK are refreshing their economic strategies (or, like Leeds City Council, have already done so³) while the Labour Party has proposed the roll out of new growth plans across the UK. These strategic documents can be used to place much greater emphasis upon the role of women in our economy in a number of ways.

Drawing on the insights from this work we propose the following recommendations for combined and local authorities across the UK and beyond.

STRATEGY

- 1 Commit to placing gender equality at the core** of your economic approach.
- 2 Underpin economic strategies** with detailed baseline analyses and measures of success on gender equality.
- 3 Take a challenge-led approach** to improving gender equality through economic strategy, with missions informed by evidence and co-developed with women.
- 4 Build economies for and by women** by establishing mechanisms for meaningful engagement with, and accountability to, them.
- 5 Take a partnership approach** to supporting gender inclusion across by bringing councils, anchor institutions and the VCSE sector together.

³ Leeds City Council. (2023). Inclusive Growth Strategy. [Link](#).



Our recommendations for action outline ways in which councils and their partners can deliver an agenda for change in the status of women in the economy.

ACTION

- 1 Caregiving support:** pilot the development of new, more inclusive child and social care provision in cities, towns and rural areas across the UK, using procurement and commissioning powers to encourage and enable more locally-owned and distributive providers.
- 2 Flexible employment, education and progression:** to create supportive and inclusive cultures in workplaces, councils and other public sector organisations should be first adopters of progressive practices in-house and work to extend this to all employers in their area.
- 3 Community connections and wellbeing support:** create the conditions that allow women's social connections to flourish and ensure that places, services and transport connections are designed through the lens of improved accessibility, inclusion and safety for women.
- 4 Wealth and autonomy:** decrease gender inequalities in wealth by spearheading local campaigns to make their areas home to the highest standards of social care employment nationally and work with key partners in public and private sector to deliver support for vulnerable women.
- 5 Representation in leadership:** take a proactive approach to reviewing gender disparities in leadership and decision-making positions and design sectorally targeted approaches to address them.

Introduction

In partnership with the Women's Budget Group (WBG) and Leeds City Council, the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) designed and delivered this pilot project with the objective of exploring how gender inclusion can be more central to the development and implementation of local economic strategies.


The research aims to provide local decision makers with good insights into the lived experiences of women, and to support the design of strategy and tailoring of interventions to improve economic inclusion in their communities.

The project was driven by CLES and WBG's observation that decision making at the local level often does not properly understand or account for the needs of women, thereby perpetuating structural inequalities and the economic impacts that they have on places.

Now is an opportune moment to address the intersecting socioeconomic and demographic inequalities that pervade our economy – with gender inequalities being particularly important.

While there has been a shift in economic development practice in some places the UK in recent years, all too often, dismantling barriers to gender inclusion is not considered in economic strategy, with many of the complex, intersecting, systemic challenges that drive gender inequalities (in incomes, poverty, deprivation, wellbeing and quality of life), seen as purely social and outside the scope of economic priorities. This can lead to interventions which overlook the challenges faced by women and, as a consequence, generate significant opportunity costs for women, and communities and economies as a whole.

At the time that this project commenced Leeds City Council were in the process of refreshing their Inclusive Growth Strategy and were keen to act as a pilot local authority for this research, and to work with us to explore the practicalities of



At the heart of this project is an objective to address the systemic socioeconomic barriers facing women across the UK.

piloting a more gender inclusive approach to economic development.

The project took a “check and challenge” approach across three research phases, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. First, literature reviews and socioeconomic analyses provided a foundation for understanding existing gender disparities nationally and in Leeds’ local economy. Second, we convened focus groups with women in Leeds, which sought to amplify their diverse voices, provide insights into their lived experiences, their aspirations and the barriers they face. Finally, we facilitated workshops with representatives across Leeds City Council departments, where we explored perceptions of gender equality in the city, shared our findings and discussed ideas for change and priorities for action.

We hope the insights gained through this work have advanced the creation of a blueprint for better practice in inclusive economic development approaches, not just for Leeds, and not just for women, but across the UK and for all people. At the heart of this work are fundamental questions about how we can approach economic development in a way which properly recognises and remedies the opportunity costs of characteristic-based exclusion. How might we develop our economic development strategy, for example, if Black people were at the heart of it? What would we do differently if positive outcomes for LGBTQ+ people were centred? How would we design, build and change our economic approach for disabled people?

The challenges - but, importantly, also the possibilities - are endless.

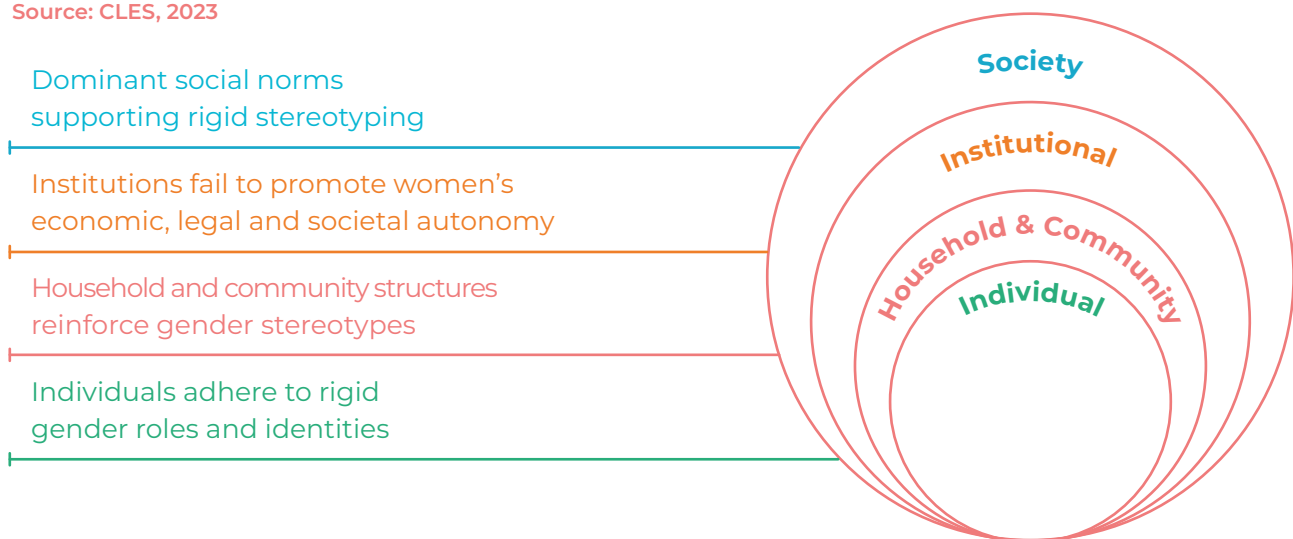
The gender challenge

The barriers

Despite decades of campaigning and significant legislative progress, there continue to be deeply rooted structural and systemic barriers to gender equality in local and national economies. These occur at multiple levels – see Figure 1.

Figure 1. The existence of gendered barriers across multiple economic levels

Source: CLES, 2023



These barriers are deeply rooted in long-standing gender roles, norms, and stereotypes which, often unintentionally, uphold and reinforce the existence of barriers to women's economic inclusion. Regardless of how visible these barriers may be to the observer, the results speak for themselves: women in the UK earn 30% less than men,⁴ carry out 60% more unpaid work,⁵ accumulate only half the private pension wealth that men do⁶ and are less able to afford a decent home.⁷

⁴ WBG. (2021). The Gender Pay Gap in the UK. [Link](#).

⁵ WBG. (2020). Spirals of inequality: How unpaid care is at the heart of gender inequalities. [Link](#).

⁶ WBG. (2020). Pensions and Gender Inequality. [Link](#).

⁷ WBG. (2019). A home of her own: Housing and women. [Link](#).

The drivers

A recent report by IPPR North argues that the gender pay gap in the UK results from a complex combination of drivers that interact with and reinforce one another.⁸ Occupational segregation and stratification result in more men occupying higher-paid positions, with high rates of women working in low-paid sectors and a seniority “glass ceiling effect”.

The “maternity/motherhood penalty” is another critical factor. Women typically take more time away from work to look after children, with career breaks affecting earning potential, development and progression opportunities^{9 10}. Research also indicates that mothers earn less than fathers and childless women, even when accounting for factors such as skills, experience, and job type. From the start of the pandemic, new mothers experienced high rates of unfair treatment and discrimination at work, including being singled out for redundancy or furlough.^{11 12} That said, the government is taking steps to improve protections for new mothers in the workplace, including the Protection from Redundancy (Pregnancy and Family Leave) Act, which received Royal Assent in May 2023.¹³

For many women, these inequalities are compounded by other systems of structural disadvantage. Class and race significantly impact an individual's experience of gendered inequality and disabled women have lower pre-tax household incomes than other women or disabled men.^{14 15} Women of colour earn on average 10-28% less than white men and women and are over-represented in low-grade positions across all sectors. There is also a glaring lack of diversity in leadership roles: no CEO of a FTSE 100 company or a civil service permanent secretary is a woman of colour.¹⁶

These income disparities not only impact women's earnings but also their financial independence and control over their lives. The uneven distribution of unpaid caregiving responsibilities, coupled with other systemic inequalities, significantly restricts women's opportunities to accrue wealth – men, on average, have 35% more than women.¹⁷

⁸ IPPR North. (2018). The state of pay: demystifying the gender pay gap. [Link](#).

⁹ England, P. (2005). Gender Inequality in Labor Markets: The Role of Motherhood and Segregation. [Link](#).

¹⁰ Oakley, A. (1979). From Here to Maternity, Becoming a Mother. [Link](#).

¹¹ Buchmann & McDaniel. (2016). Motherhood and the Wages of Women in Professional Occupations. [Link](#).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ UK Parliament. (2023). Protection from Redundancy (Pregnancy and Family Leave) Act 2023. [Link](#).

¹⁴ Shields, S. (2008). Gender: An intersectionality perspective. [Link](#).

¹⁵ WBG. (2019). A home of her own Housing and women. [Link](#).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ WBG. (2023). Why taxation of wealth is a feminist issue: A gendered analysis of wealth in Great Britain. [Link](#).

The opportunity cost

Our analysis finds that the barriers to paid work and disadvantage within the labour market encountered by women mean that £88.7bn GVA is lost to Britain's economy every year – equivalent to the annual contribution of the financial services sector. On the local level, the average regional economy is losing out on £1.68bn per year, representing up to 10% of total annual GVA for some regions. West Yorkshire loses £3.6bn annually which represents 6.2% of total annual GVA in the region. There are large regional disparities, too (Figure 2), and a correlation between this economic exclusion and child poverty rates (Figure 3). It is perhaps intuitive that economic exclusion of women can have adverse impacts on children's disadvantage and this fact has long been recognised in the Global South. This relationship highlights the importance of considering gender inclusion as a core part of wider poverty reduction strategy.

Quantifying the impact of those inequalities as a cost to local economies, to a large degree, feels like missing the point. But this £88.7bn figure underlines the significance of systemic barriers to paid work for women – including unpaid caring responsibilities (across Britain there are six times as many women than men described as economically inactive to look after their families),¹⁸ the high and rising cost of childcare and wages which are undermined by the gender pay gap. It is the detrimental effects of gendered barriers and inequalities on women that represents the loss to our communities.

Health inequalities are now widely understood to be underpinned by economic inequalities, with poor health outcomes driven by numerous wider determinants, including income and quality of work, housing and access to services.¹⁹ The detrimental effects of gendered economic inequalities on the wellbeing of women are a real cost to communities, hindering the accumulation of wealth and autonomy, and putting women at a greater risk of isolation, poverty and deprivation.

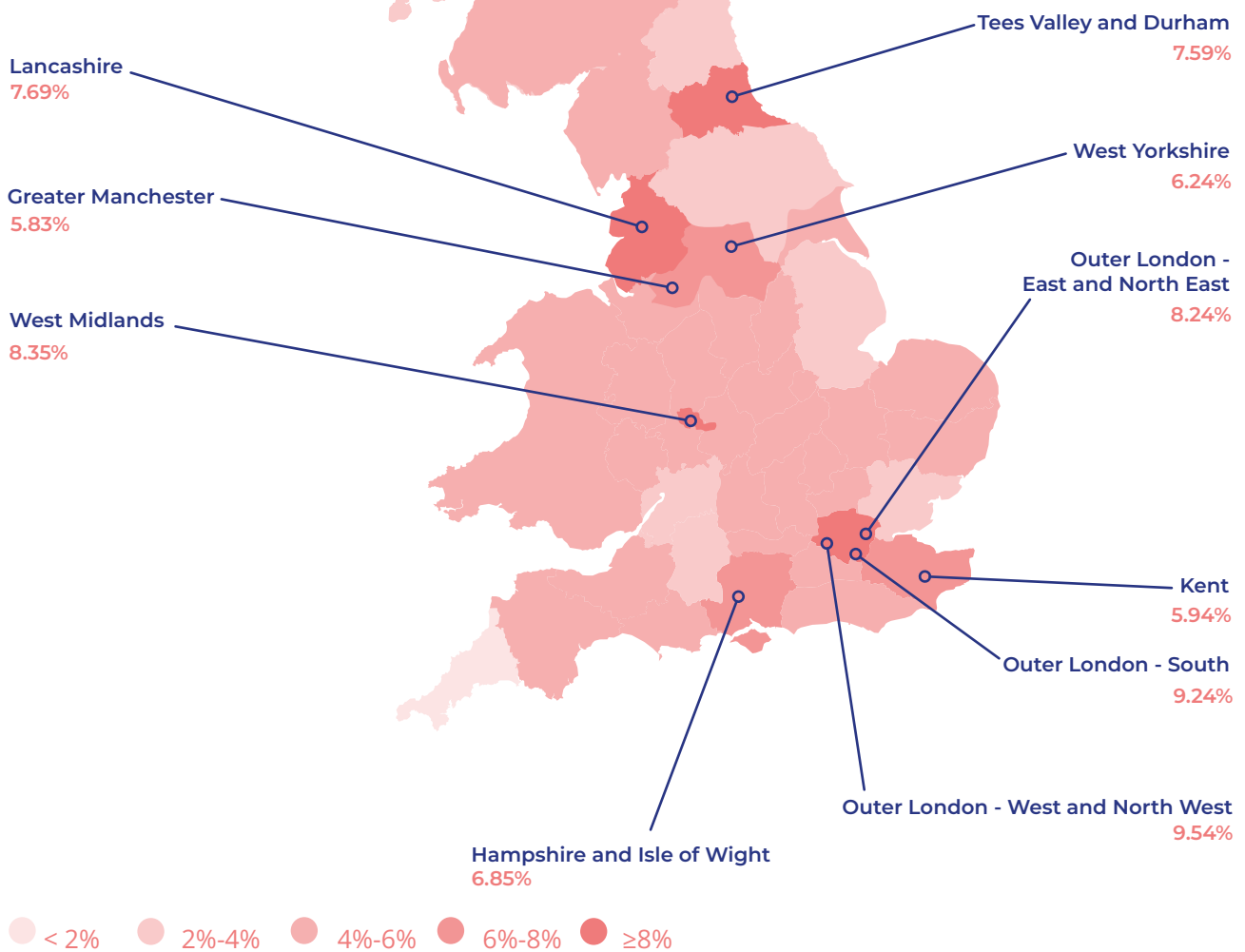
¹⁸ ONS. (2023) NOMIS – Official census and labour market statistics. Dataset – annual population survey, Apr 2022-Mar 2023. [Link](#).

¹⁹ NHS England. (2023). Acting on the wider determinants of health will be key to reduced demand. [Link](#).

Figure 2: Estimated annual lost GVA to economic exclusion and disadvantage within the labour market of women, by local economies (ITL2 regions).

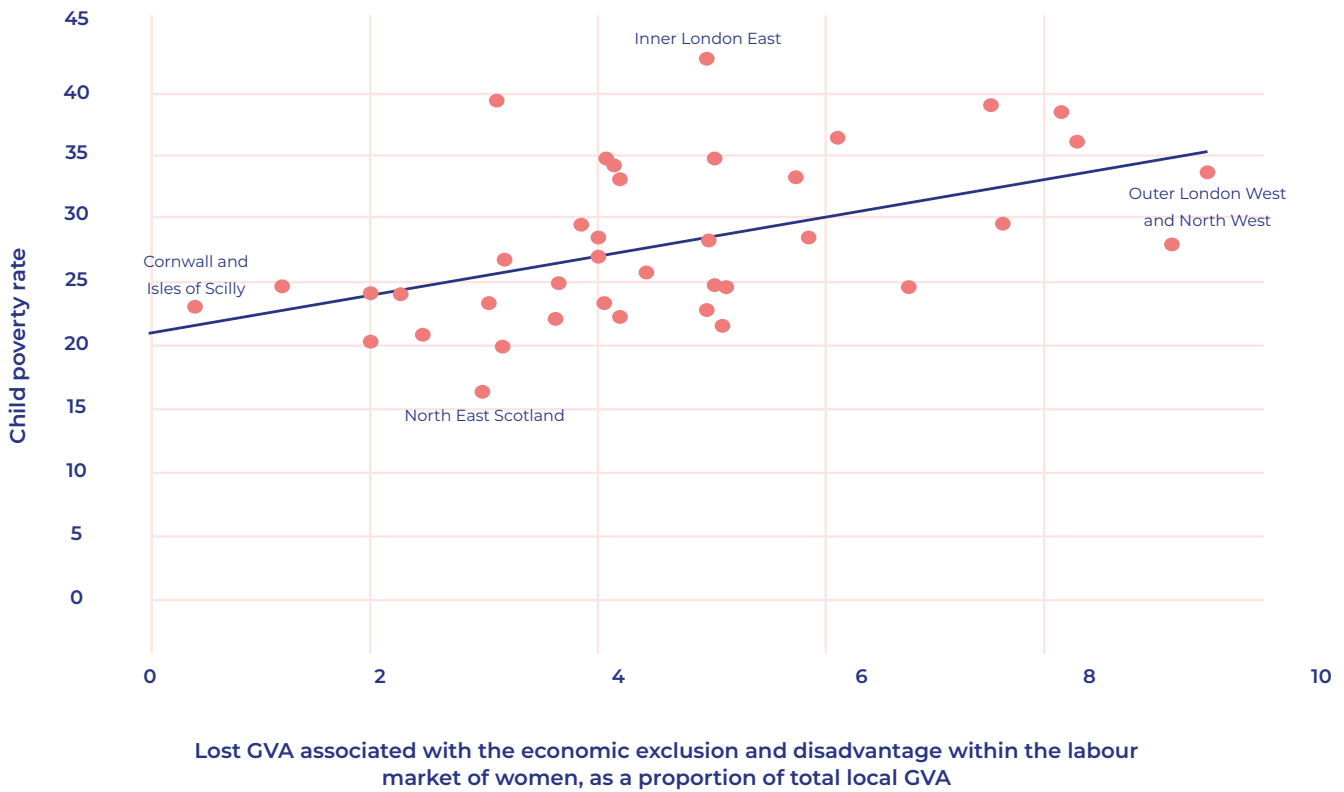
Note: the top 10 local economies - in terms of highest % of GVA lost - are labelled on the map.

Analysis conducted in March 2023 by calculating the lost GVA in £bn to local economies (ITL2 sub-regions), as a result of the higher rate of economic inactivity of women compared to men in each area, using [Nomis' Annual Population Survey](#) and [Business Register and Employment Survey](#). This was used to estimate (for each local economy in the UK) the total additional economic output (GVA) that would be added if the same percentage of women were "economically active" as men. Full data of the analysis, including maps and additional data relating to child poverty as found in Figure 3 can be found [here](#).



The cost of living crisis and women

Figure 3: Relationship between the child poverty rate and cost of economic exclusion and disadvantage of women, in each ITL2 region across the UK.



Rising cost of living impacts the poorest individuals and families the hardest, with women – who have borne the brunt of social security cuts and reduced public services over the past decade – more likely to be among the most affected.²⁰ Women also often manage family budgets, needing to stretch limited resources to provide for their families – making them the primary shock absorbers of poverty. This has become particularly evident in recent months, where a surprise inflation rise has proven that the cost of living crisis is far from over. This raises particular concerns for low-income households, especially single-parent families.

Specific groups of women face even greater burdens. Poverty rates are significantly higher among people from Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black ethnic groups compared to white people, and Covid-19 death rates for most ethnic minorities were higher compared to white ethnic groups. Disabled individuals face additional monthly costs, leading many to cut back on essentials. Single parents, primarily women, were severely affected by Covid-19, with many facing financial difficulties and problem debt. Survivors of domestic violence and abuse, including economic abuse, may find it increasingly challenging to leave abusive relationships as living costs rise. Finally, women with “no recourse to public funds”, who are ineligible for social security benefits, are at a high risk of poverty.

²⁰ WBG. (2022). The gendered impact of the cost-of-living crisis. [Read](#).

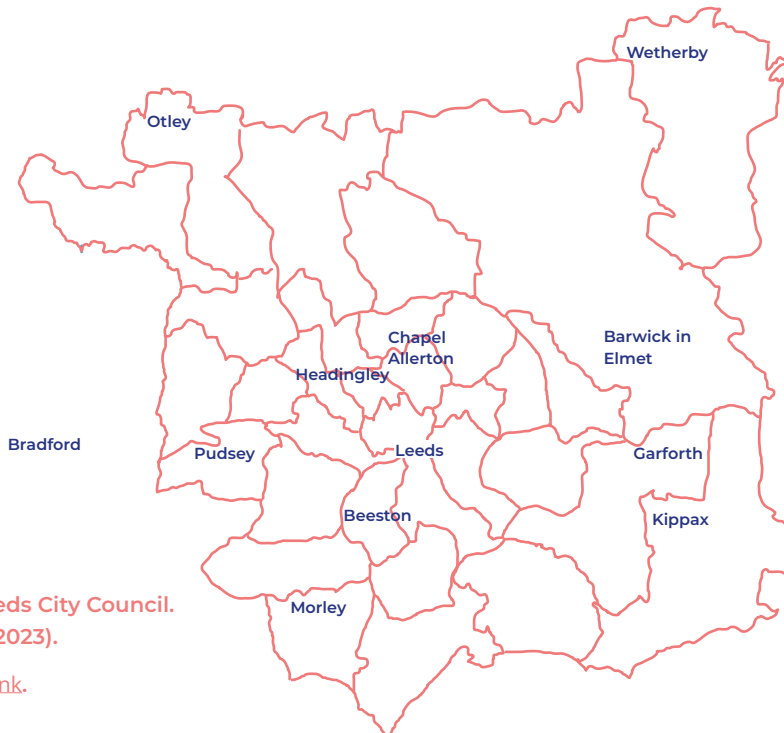
Women in Leeds

Interrogation of the gender variations in local level data on employment, earnings and health outcomes in Leeds reveals some of the barriers for women that exist in the city's economy.

Geography

In the heart of West Yorkshire, Leeds City Council's geography spans 33 wards, extending beyond the edges of the city centre into surrounding towns and villages - from Wetherby to Morley, Otley to Ledsham, Farsley to Aberford.

Figure 4: Leeds City Council Ward Boundaries



Source: Leeds City Council. (accessed 2023).

Website. [Link](#).

Today, Leeds is home to 809,000 residents and 35,480 enterprises, with the local economy amounting to a £28bn annual economic contribution.^{21 22 23} Leeds is the sixth largest economic contributor to the UK economy of its cities and towns and the only core city today that is a net contributor to the UK economy.²⁴ Despite this, challenges prevail and this report finds evidence that many women in Leeds experience poverty, hardship and inequality. But it doesn't need to be this way - more can be done to ensure that the local economy becomes more equal by reducing barriers to the flow and ownership of wealth for women.

²¹ ONS. (2021). Census, Leeds Local Authority Resident Population. [Link](#).

²² ONS. (2023) Inter Departmental Business Register, Leeds Local Units. [Link](#).

²³ ONS. (2023). Annual Balanced Gross Value Added 2023, Leeds Local Authority 2021 Current Prices. [Link](#).

²⁴ Leeds City Council. (2023). Inclusive Growth Leeds. [Link](#).

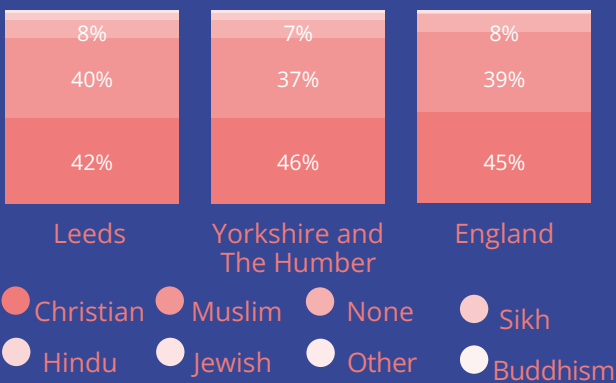
Demographics

In analysing the demographics of Leeds' resident base we recognise that additional protected characteristics (including ethnicity, age, religion, disability and sexuality) intersect with gender. We have attempted to consider these intersections at the "front and centre" of this research with the intention of informing more targeted strategies to promote inclusivity and equity for all women in the city.

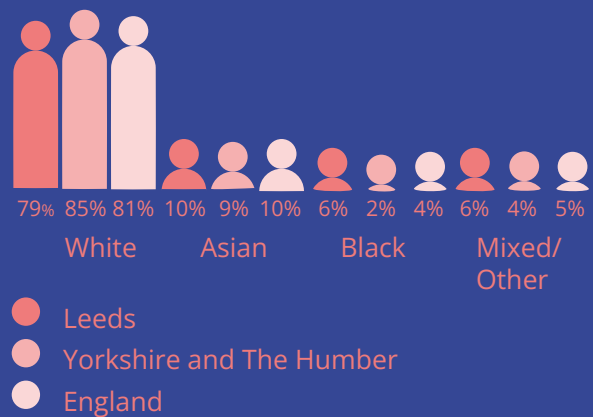
Figure 5: Demographics of Leeds' residents, CLES 2023

Sources: CLES analysis of ONS Census 2021. [Link](#); ONS Exploring local income deprivation, May 2021. [Link](#)

Religion



Ethnicity



Gender

51.2%

of Leeds' residents are women

Income deprivation

14.3%

of Leeds' population are out of work or on low earnings

LGBTQ+

5%

of Leeds residents identify as LGBTQ+

Lone parent families

7.6%

of households in Leeds are lone parent family households with dependent children; varies from **0.5%-25%** of households by neighbourhood

Disability

16.7%

of Leeds' residents have a long term physical or mental health condition that limits daily activity

Median age

35 years

below regional & national average (39 years)

Residents born in the UK

84.2%

regional = 88.6%, national = 82.6%

Care

Women in Leeds are seven times more likely than men to be “economically inactive” due to family caregiving responsibilities.²⁵ This has a significant economic impact, amounting to £1.5bn in GVA annually – over 5% of the city’s annual total.

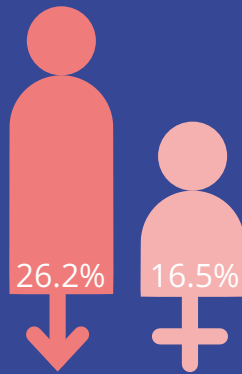
Figure 6: Economic inactivity in Leeds

Source: CLES analysis of ONS Annual Population Survey, September 2022, [Link](#); ONS Census 2021, [Link](#); CLES analysis of the cost of barriers to paid work for women, March 2023, [Link](#).

Rate of women economically “inactive”

26.2%

in Leeds; slightly above regional (26.1%) & national rates (25.2%)



Rate of women unemployed

1.3%

in Leeds; below regional (3.9%) and national rates (3.8%)

Unpaid care

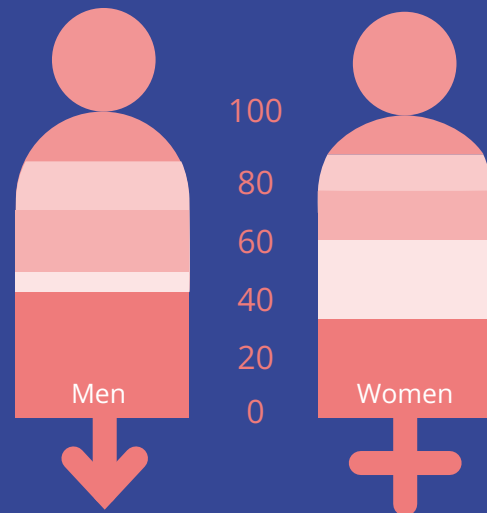
8%

of Leeds’ residents are unpaid carers for elderly or unwell family/friends; ranges from **2.2%-10.3%** by neighbourhood

Annual GVA loss **£1.5bn**

5.3% of the city’s total annual GVA

Economic inactivity by reason (%) in Leeds



- Student
- Looking after family/home
- Long-term sickness/disability
- Retired
- Other reasons

²⁵ Economic inactivity is defined by the ONS as “people not in employment who have not been seeking work within the last 4 weeks and/or are unable to start work within the next 2 weeks.”

Income

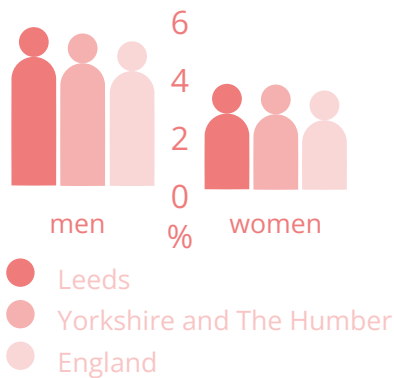
Leeds has a relatively high gender pay gap in comparison to other local economies across the UK – within the top 30%.²⁶

On average, women in Leeds earn £10,000 less per year than men.²⁷ 37% of employed women in Leeds work part-time, compared to 9% of men. Even when only comparing the earnings of men and women in full time work an average earnings gap of over £7,000 persists. This is driven by more women being employed in lower paid roles, particularly in the public sector. Over 50% of women in Leeds are working in teaching, healthcare and public administration roles (and are over twice as likely to be working in these sectors than men). Public sector pay freezes and other austerity measures, therefore, have disproportionately affected women in Leeds.

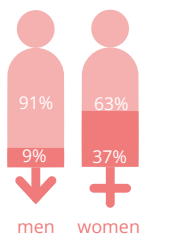
Figure 7: Employment and earnings of women in Leeds.

Source: CLES analysis of ONS Annual Survey of Hours & Earnings, resident analysis, 2022, [Link](#); ONS Claimant Count, February 2023, [Link](#); ONS Annual Population Survey, January-December 2021, [Link](#).

Out-of-work benefits claimant rate

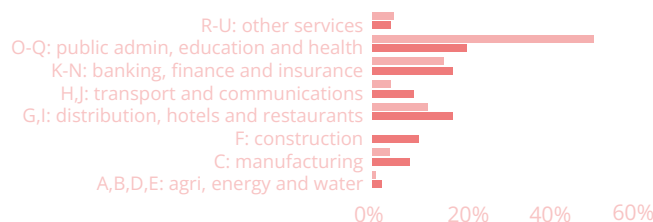


(%) Part-time employment



- Part-time
- Full-time
- Men
- Women

Employment by sector



Median gross annual earnings

Leeds residents:

all women

£23,590

all men

£33,743

women working full-time

£28,237

men working full-time

£35,483

Leeds workers:

all women

£19,080

all men

£28,780

women working full-time

£26,752

men working full-time

£33,880

²⁶ ONS. (2022). Gender pay gap in the UK. [Link](#).

²⁷ CLES analysis of ONS Annual Survey of Hours & Earnings, resident analysis, 2022. Note: this includes all employees, but does not include self-employed residents or employees not paid during the reference period. [Link](#).

Life expectancy

The life expectancy of women in Leeds has declined since 2014, and, on average, women in the city spend just under 64 years of life in “good health”.²⁸ In Leeds, twice as many women as men reportedly struggle with mental health illnesses, and 77% of domestic violence victims are women. Additionally, one in three children in Leeds live in poverty.

Figure 8: Health, wellbeing and safety of women in Leeds

Source: CLES analysis of ONS health state life expectancy, 2022, [Link](#); Leeds City Council the State of Women’s Health in Leeds, 2019, [Link](#); Child poverty rate: local indicators of child poverty 2020/21, Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University for End Child Poverty, [Link](#).

Life expectancy for women
81.75 years

Life expectancy for women in Leeds has been **falling** since 2014 and is **over 1 year below** the national average

Cancers and dementia are the main causes of death

Average years of women’s lives spent in good health

63.93 years

Less than the average for for men, proportionate to life expectancy



Mental health
Twice as many

women as men in Leeds have a common mental health illness

Domestic violence and abuse
77%

of domestic violence victims in Leeds are women (74% of perpetrators are men)

Child poverty
36%

of children in Leeds are estimated to be in poverty

Median child poverty rate across local authorities nationally = 25%

Women over 65
Over two thirds

of women over 65 live alone

Women over 65 have
twice as many

emergency admissions due to falling than men

²⁸ ONS. (2022). Health state life expectancy. [Link](#).

Initiatives supporting women in Leeds

Employment support

[Smart Works Leeds](#) is a charity which provides interview clothing and coaching to women across Yorkshire. Their mission is to give women the confidence they need to get the job, secure financial independence, and change the trajectory of their lives. They believe in the power of clothes and coaching to transform a woman's confidence. The women who go to Smart Works Leeds are referred by partners such as job centres, charities, community groups and prisons. It is their vision that any woman in Yorkshire that needs their support should be able to find her way to Smart Works Leeds.

Nurturing future talent

In 2022, Leeds launched a new Future Talent Plan, which encourages organisations to prioritise equality, diversity and inclusion, with organisations across the city committing to inclusive recruitment, better jobs and healthy workplaces. A key aim is enabling people in work to learn new skills, progress throughout their career and be able to change jobs.

Across Leeds, organisations are inspiring the next generation of female talent as part of the Future Talent Plan. Through its GirlTech programme, social enterprise Ahead Partnership builds the confidence of young women to pursue a career in digital.

Business support

AD:Venture is a regional business support programme funded by the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and partners, providing tailored support to help new and young businesses to grow and reach their potential. The programme embeds equality, diversity and inclusion at its core, putting on events to support women in business. Female-led start-ups AD:Venture has supported include marketing consultancy Youbee Media, set up by a female entrepreneur who wanted to create a business which would be flexible with her responsibilities as a mother.

Innovation support

Through engagement with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on their Regional Entrepreneurship Programme, Leeds has benchmarked its innovation ecosystem internationally and validated its ambition for inclusive innovation. The city has now launched a number of programmes including a twelve-week programme which supported entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds across the region to turn their innovative, socially beneficial ideas into scalable businesses. Case studies of businesses, including those with female founders can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

Through funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Leeds also supports founders through its innovation@leeds programme. Projects that have received backing include Fund Her Leeds, a business development programme specifically designed for diverse female founders, and the D-List, which profiles over 100 traditionally underrepresented exceptional entrepreneurs and innovators to showcase regional talent and inspire future generations through role models they can relate to.

Connecting communities to good jobs

The Connecting Communities with Health and Care Careers programme (CCHCC) works with people and communities in disadvantaged areas of the city and focuses on opening up opportunities through identifying a career that's suitable for the individual, adapting recruitment methods for residents and signposting appropriately to local vacancies or education and training courses. Thus far 215 people have participated, with over 70% of participants being women.

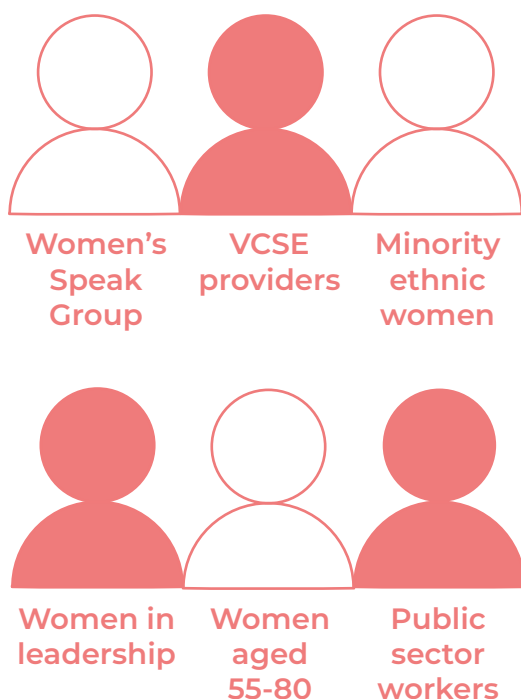
The programme achieves its goals through an anchor institution network approach across the health and care sector, with many anchor organisations such as Leeds City Council, Leeds Community Healthcare NHS Trust and Leeds City College taking part.

What women want

Who we spoke to

To understand the challenges women in Leeds face and to gather their insights into what would create greater gender equality we convened workshops with six different groups of women from different walks of life across the city.²⁹

Figure 9: Groups of women in Leeds engaged with for this research



²⁹ The first five of these group engagements took the form of semi-structured focus groups, with discussions that took place either virtually or in person, in community and neighbourhood venues in Leeds. Each focus group comprised 8-10 women and spanned 1-2 hours. Participants were remunerated for their contribution.

The final group took the form of a digital survey, following the same broad themes with open-box comment responses to enable freedom to provide detailed views and gather as much insight as possible.

What they told us

Challenges

Women's Speak Group

Convened by [Women's Lives Leeds](#), the Women's Speak Group consists of women who are experiencing (or have previously experienced) hardship and exclusion, and have used services provided by charities in the city.

A prominent theme of the discussion with the Women's Speak Group was the challenges facing women because of domestic abuse and their struggles to access adequate support - from places in refuges and housing to transport, and police and courts systems. The perception that police and courts do not take these situations seriously enough was highlighted, leaving women in vulnerable positions. Language and culture barriers can also sometimes play a role in how cases are perceived when reported.

These challenges compound issues with lack of self-esteem and poor mental health, while difficulties accessing support in these areas was raised as a key struggle for many women. The women in the workshop also reflected on the lack of opportunities and physical places to share experiences and connect with other women in their locality.

We learned about the barriers facing women as mothers, with high household and childcare costs presenting a barrier to progression in education and careers and to escaping poverty. The group felt that further and higher education opportunities were inaccessible for many women, particularly when having to prioritise caregiving in a scenario of high childcare and high education costs.

Some of the women reflected experiences from their cultural backgrounds which they felt added pressures from within the family to take on household and childcare responsibilities. For some, dads are still perceived as the head of household and breadwinner, while women and girls are encouraged to stay at home. For others, balancing both childcare and household responsibilities with paid work is the norm but they are unable to take on additional hours of paid work or take up career progression or education opportunities as there are simply not enough hours in the day.

"There are real barriers in accessing support to escape abuse - you don't get a free train ticket unless you have a place of refuge, if you have complex needs you are less likely to be supported, with no money to leave and no financial help"

"The police don't take it seriously enough and women are often not listened to when reporting, or it's treated as 'just a domestic'"

"Courts give out tiny sentences and perpetrators are straight back out"

Language and culture barriers sometimes play a role

Cultural and language barriers and stigma in accessing support: will they believe me?

"Women face a range of different types of domestic abuse, it doesn't matter what your background, it happens to women from all walks of life"

Lack of connections to other women locally

Poor mental health & confidence

Domestic violence and lack of associated support



Lack of self-esteem and mental health

Pressure from the family and childcare/household responsibilities

High household costs and cost of childcare

Slowly it's changing, but culture and religion results in many women and girls having to stay at home, not go on school trips or work

The high cost of childcare for younger kids is a barrier for women to access work, education courses, and support groups

"Men can start at 6am, but women as primary care givers need to do school runs and breakfast for the family first, can't increase hours as need to look after kids"

Rent increases, energy, food prices - all so expensive

"For many it is dad's decision as head of the house"

"Childcare is so expensive and that's a big barrier to getting on in life"

VCSE providers

In recognition of the ethical considerations surrounding engaging directly with some vulnerable groups, we held a focus group with organisations including the [Leeds Domestic Violence Service](#), [Women's Health Matters](#), [Smart Works Leeds](#) and [Asha](#) to capture the experiences of their current service users. These organisations provide support and services for vulnerable women in Leeds on a daily basis, including specialist health, domestic violence support, youth work, education, training and more.

Representatives highlighted the key challenges women in their communities were facing with access to basic necessities. There was consensus amongst the group that the number one issue for the vulnerable women they aim to support is the lack of access to housing – with the long housing waiting list for affordable social rented housing feeling insurmountable to many.

Another dominant theme was challenges in accessing health and social care, as well as obtaining childcare and school places. Many of the women that access support from VCSE organisations are also dealing with financial struggles, specifically debt, difficulty accessing benefits (or benefit sanctions) and rising costs of essentials including food and energy. One of the most difficult situations that the organisations reported is in helping women who arrive in this country and have no recourse to public funds, essentially leaving them destitute.

Services that are focused on supporting women into work find that many come to them to embark on the challenge of re-entering the workplace after extended career breaks. They also aim to champion diversifying currently male-dominated fields of work (e.g. construction), but are acutely aware of the challenges women face in including experiences of discrimination, bullying and harassment in some workplace environments.



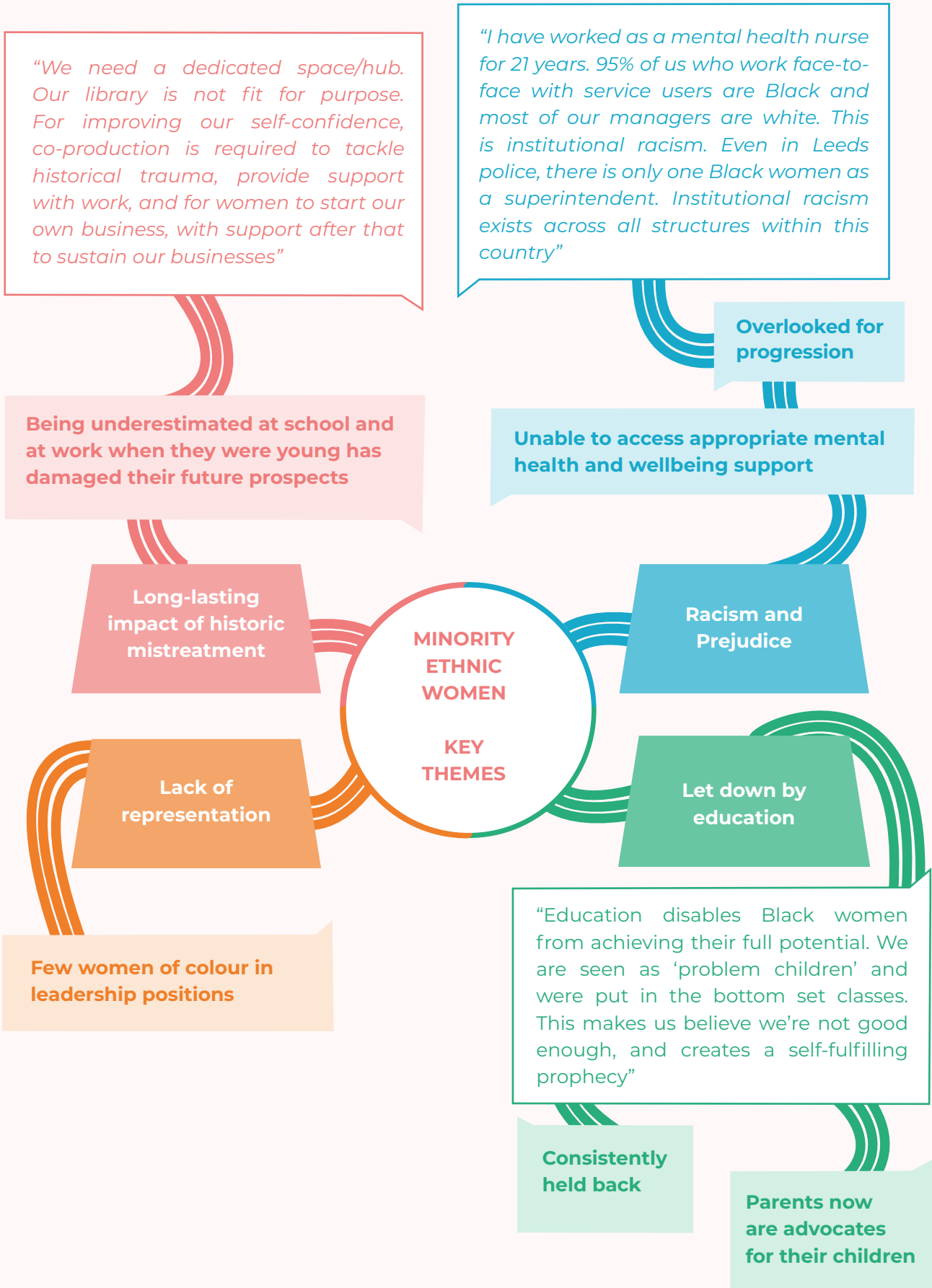
Minority ethnic women

The Culturally Diverse Hub is another group convened by Women's Lives Leeds that brings together women from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

An overarching theme of our discussion was on the historical and systemic barriers that have hindered opportunities for women of colour. This feeds into the ongoing systemic racial discrimination faced by these women and their children in Leeds, which has a knock-on impact on their economic equality

The group highlighted how limited opportunities and a lack of representation affect progression in education and the workforce, including experiences of racism and discrimination in various aspects of their lives. The group raised that, in school education, racial bias and prejudice have led to unequal outcomes. For example, some participants discussed their own experiences of being pushed to the bottom sets despite their abilities, and now as mothers, reflected on how they play an increased role in advocating for their daughters' access to opportunities, navigating systemic challenges and confronting negative stereotypes.

Participants also discussed the need for greater diversity in leadership positions and conveyed concerns about mental health, highlighting difficulties in getting diagnoses and support.



Women leaders

Our discussion with women in business leadership roles focused on the barriers and opportunities they encountered.

Limited access to affordable and high-quality childcare was highlighted by the group as a key barrier, perpetuating traditional gender roles and assumptions that women would prioritise caregiving over their careers. The group raised the importance of partners more equally sharing caregiving responsibilities as a critical enabling factor for many, although this points to larger structural issues whereby the burdens on women are such that partners are necessary to share the load.

The women in this group spoke from their own experience about their struggles with self-confidence and self-appreciation, which they felt had hindered their ability to pursue business and leadership roles. Additionally, the lack of diversity in certain industries, particularly those traditionally dominated by men and those with few women in leadership positions, can contribute to a hostile or unwelcoming environment for women.

The discussion emphasised the significance of creating inclusive workplace policies that better accommodate the needs of people with caring responsibilities, such as flexible and hybrid working arrangements. Raising awareness and developing policies to support women's health (for example, relating to miscarriage, infertility and the menopause) were acknowledged as steps towards fostering a more supportive and understanding environment for women in the workplace. The group also highlighted the importance of diverse role models, showcasing that there is no single path to success and celebrating different definitions of achievement.

Flexible and hybrid working

“women in their 20-30s are seen as a hiring liability, it’s almost assumed they’re going to have children. This makes women the problem, and men need to take more ownership of parenthood”

Raising awareness and knowledge around menopause and menstruation

Need female friendly workplace policies

Lack of self belief and confidence

Women need access to experience and education to promote imaginative thinking and non-traditional career aspirations

“the view of success in business, is dominated by a male gaze. In women-led businesses, we are more focused on supporting and empowering each other - the collective contribution of the team and our impact on wider society. For us, it’s not all about growth, vanity and awards”

Meaning many women fall into traditional gender roles and become the main caregiver

Lack of affordable high-quality childcare

Few women in leadership positions, particularly in ‘male’ sectors

“A lot of women don’t have role models in industries like construction. They believe these industries are for males and not for them. These barriers exist and are exacerbated by a lack of knowledge - so there needs to be a lot more focus on education, raising awareness, and encouraging females to take non-traditional education and career paths”

Diverse role-models demonstrate that there is no single path to success

WOMEN LEADERS

KEY THEMES

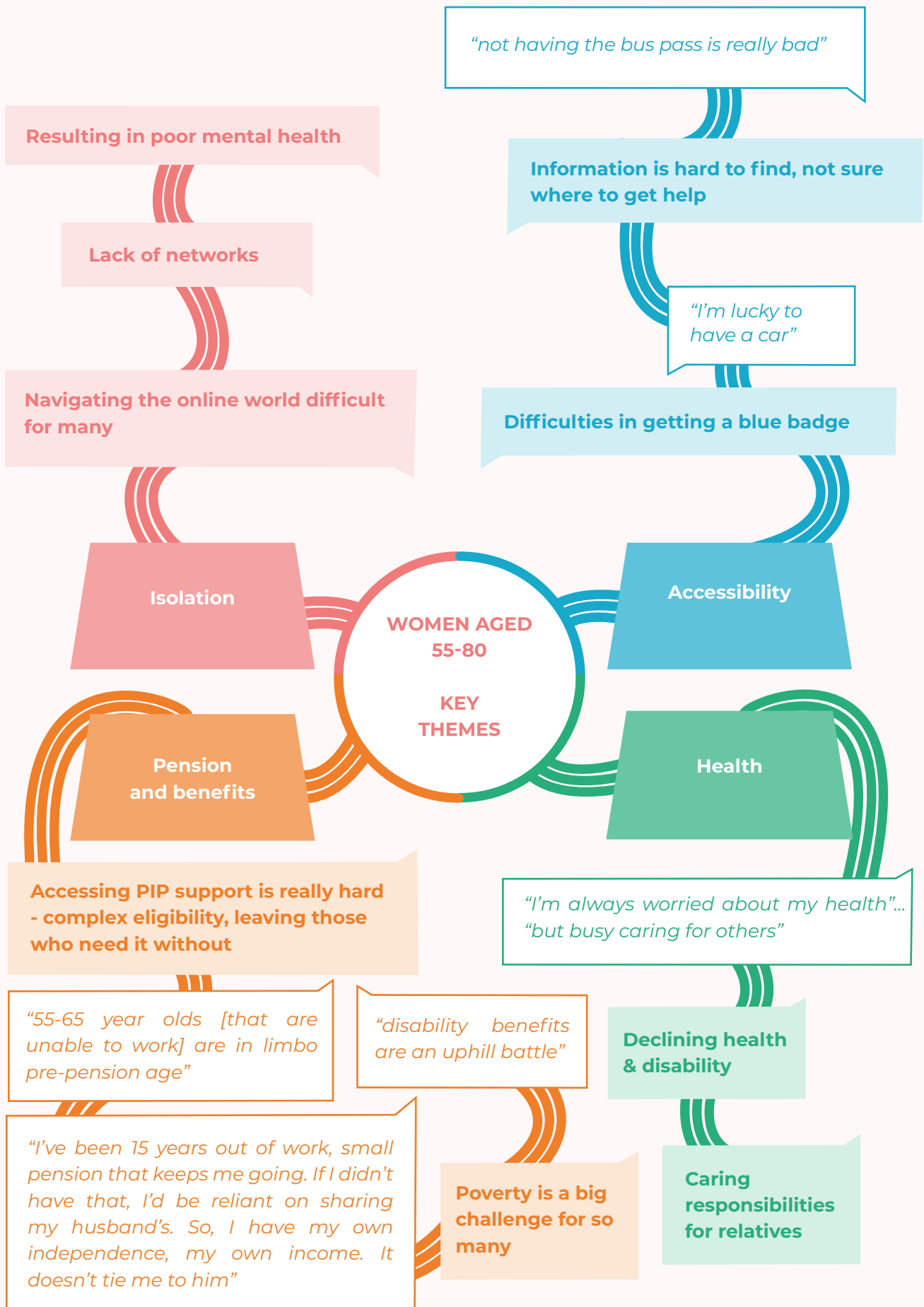
Women aged 55-80

The women aged 55-80 that we spoke to in Leeds highlighted challenges with isolation, loneliness and associated poor mental health outcomes. This was reported as relating to a lack of places and forums to connect with other women in their own communities. As well as this, the group highlighted barriers related to the accessibility of information and not knowing where to get help or advice – including, but not limited to, struggles navigating the online world.

Access to affordable transport was a dominant theme of the discussion, with lack of bus passes, difficulties getting blue badges and the expense of owning and running private cars preventing them getting out and about.

Also raised were the struggles with facing the harsh realities of declining health and disabilities. As well as grappling with their own health issues, women in the group highlighted the hardships that come with caring responsibilities for relatives and friends, often with little support from elsewhere due to the high cost and limited accessibility of social care.

All of the women we spoke to highlighted issues relating to low income (including pension income) and struggles accessing disability benefits. Some in the 55-65 age group faced the specific challenge of being of pre-state pension age while facing discrimination when trying to access employment, or whilst still having health challenges or caring responsibilities that limit their ability to do paid work.



Public sector workers

Over 50% of Leeds' women work in public administration, education, and healthcare roles, so we engaged with women in these sectors.

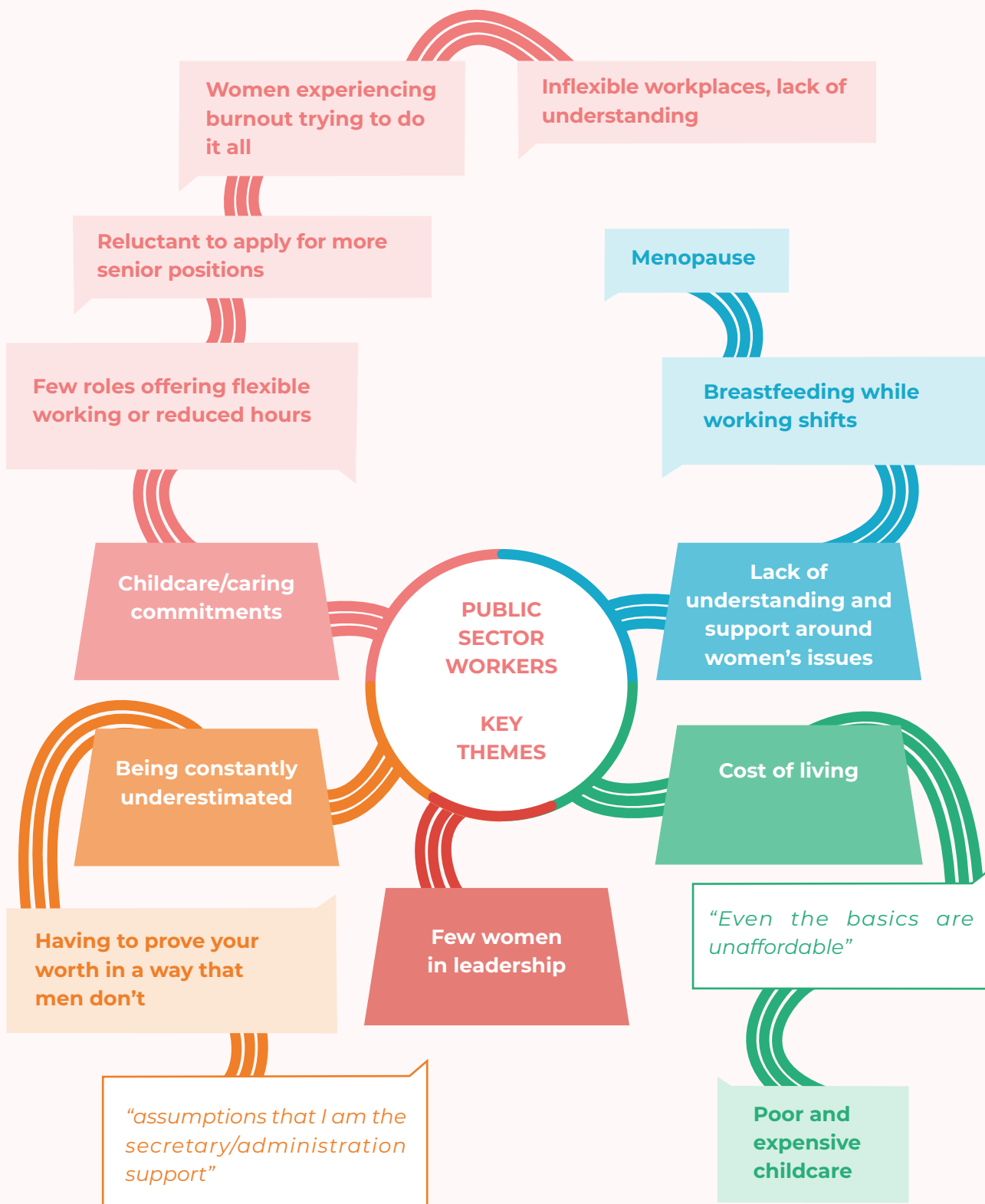
The challenge of balancing work with childcare commitments was one of the most discussed to aspects in our engagement. Women from this group highlighted the challenge of grappling with workplace policies that do not enable flexible working. For those with caring responsibilities, there is a real additional challenge of navigating school pick-ups and drop-offs without flexible working arrangements. This challenge is felt acutely by single parents, who are predominantly women.

Fewer women in leadership positions came through as a key theme again in this group, and we heard from women that were reluctant to apply for more senior positions due to feeling concerned they would not be able to fulfil their childcare responsibilities with the additional work pressure of a more senior role. Some reported experiencing burnout, including those that had taken the leap and occupied more senior roles and had an additional strain to balance everything.

The feeling of being frequently underestimated was also raised, with women in this group having grappled with being assumed to be in a secretarial or administration role as opposed to in a management or leadership position. A similar challenge was reflected in women reporting a heightened need to "prove their worth" (compared to male colleagues), in order to be taken seriously, regarded and respected highly in the workplace.

A lack of understanding and support for issues women grapple with including the menopause or navigating breastfeeding whilst working also came through in these discussions, with workplace policies not often in place to help women manage these stages in their lives.

The high of cost of living was a dominant theme in this discussion, with women reporting that even basic items were no longer affordable. Mothers of young children in the group also reported grappling with the decision of whether to continue working given the cost of childcare and the fact that provision can be of a poor quality too, with some considering forgoing a salary to look after their children full time instead.



An agenda for change

We asked all of the groups of women we engaged with to tell us the key thing they would change in Leeds.

This is their agenda for change to create greater gender equality and inclusion through Leeds' economic strategy.

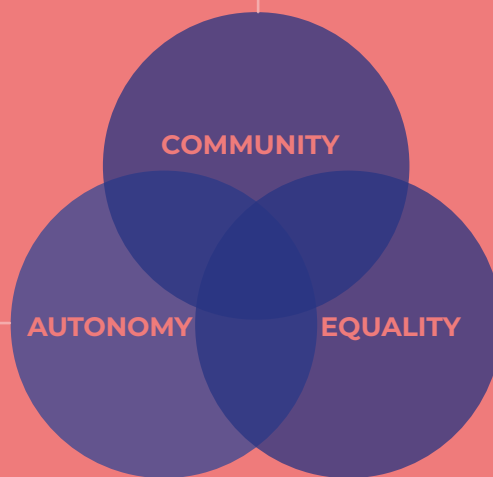


COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS & WELLBEING SUPPORT

- More opportunities for connection
- Improved information sharing
- More dedicated community space
- Improved mental health support services
- Safe spaces
- Better support for vulnerable and older women

WEALTH AND AUTONOMY

- Dedicated workshops and training programmes on:
 - financial literacy
 - business management
 - pension inequalities.
- Ensuring all women in Leeds have access to:
 - public funds
 - safe housing
 - legal aid



CAREGIVING SUPPORT

- Increased access to affordable, flexible child and social care that can accommodate varied shift patterns
- More businesses adopting policies to support caregiving
- Improvements to maternity pay and return to work progression
- Support for an increased role for partners in caregiving

FLEXIBLE EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND PROGRESSION

- Overcoming gender bias in male-dominated industries
- More diverse definitions of work success
- Greater exposure to non-linear career pathways
- Increased workplace tolerance around menopause, menstruation and breastfeeding
- More flexible working
- Gender pay parity
- Free and accessible careers advice
- Additional support to access further and higher education opportunities

REPRESENTATION IN LEADERSHIP

- Improved representation in senior business positions
- Mentoring and coaching opportunities
- Dedicated resources and funding for women entrepreneurs of colour
- Campaigns and advocacy

Strategy and action

For local economies everywhere

In this work, we have been inspired by the women of Leeds but also by the work of Leeds City Council and their partners who, despite the challenging context of local government finance, have committed to doing more to support women in their city. Drawing on the insights from this work we propose a series of recommendations for combined and local authorities across the UK and beyond.

Action

Many councils and combined authorities across the UK are refreshing their economic strategies, while the Labour Party have proposed the roll out of new growth plans across the UK. These strategic documents can be used to place a much greater emphasis upon the role of women in our economy in a number of ways:

1 Commit to placing gender equality and inclusion at the core of the economic approach

There is significant interest in addressing the challenges women deal with on a daily basis in many places across the UK, particularly when it comes to care and representation. However, in many cases, these concerns are overlooked in debates about economic growth and productivity, to the extent that gender and how it intersects with other characteristics such as age, disability and ethnicity can be reduced to marginal projects. As this work has shown, this is not only prejudicial but it also comes with a hefty opportunity cost to society. If we address the barriers that women face in our economy, then we not only boost productivity but we also boost the incomes and life chances of children and families for the longer term.

That is why we argue for gender equality and inclusion as the cornerstone of economic strategies everywhere. This is not unprecedented: councils like Newham³¹ and Clackmananshire have made the targeting of racial and gender inequality one of the guiding principles of their community wealth building

³⁰ Leeds City Council. (2023). Inclusive Growth Strategy. [Link](#).

³¹ Newham Council. (2019). Community wealth building for a fair and inclusive Newham. [Link](#).

strategies, while Leeds' Inclusive Growth Strategy embeds inclusivity across its aims, including in tackling poverty and inequality.

2 Underpin economic strategy with detailed baseline analyses and measures of success

All economic strategies begin with the analysis of data to understand the baseline and trends of local economies. However, few approach this task with a gender lens. To develop an inclusive economic strategy analyses should look to uncover the inequalities present beneath the averages – spatially, sectorally and demographically. We must seek to understand the makeup of our communities and be alive to the systematic barriers to inclusion faced by different demographic groups and the intersectionality of this challenge.

Leeds City Council has committed to using the indicators in this report, along with the [Social Progress Index](#) for Leeds and economic indicators, as part of reporting on progress on the city's Inclusive Growth Strategy. We believe that all councils should be measuring and tracking these inclusion indicators on an annual basis to track progress against inequality reduction aims. Qualitative evaluation is equally important, and gathering insight into the real life stories and experiences of women as part of progress reviews should be an integral part of developing any economic strategy.

3 Take a challenge-led approach

Better targeted strategies and programmes of action can be designed to deliver against specific gender inclusion outcomes by developing a set of challenge missions to drive gender inclusion work. These should be informed by local data and evidence and co-developed through engagement with communities, ensuring that approaches are rooted in the lived experience of women and their ambitions for change.

4 Build economies for and by women

All councils should adopt a philosophy of aiming to “do with” (rather than “to”) residents if they are to be successful in the delivery of their economic strategies and recommendations. Combined and local authorities should develop mechanisms (where they do not already exist) for meaningfully

CASE STUDY: BRISTOL

Women's Commission

The Bristol Women's Commission was established in response to Bristol's ambition to create gender equality in the city, as part of their strategy to deliver a post Covid-19 inclusive economy.

The Commission works as a partnership to identify the key issues for women in Bristol and produce an agreed Women's Strategy for Bristol, with a specific, time-limited and practical action plan for its delivery. The Women's Commission has established multi-agency task groups from organisations and individuals across the city, focusing on safety, representation in public life, health, economy and business.

Source: [Bristol Council](#)

engaging with representative groups of women across their areas on an ongoing basis, to move forward in a way that supports real impact on gender equality they must be shaped by the women who live there.

5 Take a partnership approach

No one organisation in a place can adequately address the challenges facing women. To adequately deliver the scale of impact required to reduce gender inequality in an area, partners across the public, charity and private sector must work together with a shared interest in improving the lived experience of women in their area. Local authorities are often uniquely placed to use their convening power, to collaborate with partners across an area and to build a shared agenda in the common interest of supporting a stronger, more equal economy.

In Leeds, the City Council has long supported the Leeds Anchors Network, which brings together public and private partners to take joint action on the key economic and social challenges facing the city. The concept of the anchor network first emerged in Preston through their work on community wealth building but are now a feature of place-based change in many parts of the UK including Birmingham, London and Dundee. In addition, like Leeds, many areas will have a crucial network of third sector organisations supporting gender inclusion. In a time of austerity, it is vital that we do not lose sight of the importance of this local joined up action to address economic inequality.

Action

Below are a set of proposed actions which we believe can help councils like Leeds deliver on the agenda for change. How these are implemented will vary depending on an area's economic and social context as well as the demographic characteristics of its population.

1 Caregiving support

Despite developments in policy from national government, supply-side constraints on childcare and adult social care remain a barrier to citizens accessing affordable and quality care provision. To tackle this at the local level, councils should be supported to pilot the development of new, more inclusive, care provision in their areas. This could, for example, consider how delivery can be supported in contrasting areas including deep rural areas, coastal communities as well as small and medium sized towns and cities.

It is imperative that councils continue to work with their local VCSE sector and their anchor organisations to explore options for childcare solutions. For example, the establishment of a childcare community enterprise and/or co-operatives to work in partnership with local employers (particularly large employers if they exist) could provide low-cost, flexible childcare for their workforce. These partnerships could look to redirect under-utilised premises to host pilot community childcare enterprises at a peppercorn rent.

Improvements in social care should focus on reducing the fragmented, extractive model of provision seen across the UK – which drives the lack of affordability, sub-optimal quality and inaccessibility of services, thus

amplifying existing inequalities. The homecare sector is the most fragmented element of adult social care services with over 10,000 different providers nationally, and the sector leaks over 10% of its entire income in “excess profits, rents, and debt repayments”.³² Some councils, like Newham in the case study below, have taken action on these issues by embedding social licensing in social care contracts.

CASE STUDY: **NEWHAM**

Social licensing in homecare

Newham Council has introduced social licensing in homecare to tackle fragmented care services and poor pay for employees. Part of this approach has been the move to a “patch-based” service that is broken down into eight community neighbourhood areas, lotting contracts and specifying providers can only deliver one lot each. The Council have also specified that providers must be based locally, pay the London Living Wage and adhere to the principles of the UNISON ethical care charter. In practice, this creates a disincentive for larger, more extractive providers to enter the market. As a result, Newham now have a homecare service provision delivered increasingly by locally-based SMEs, who operate with greater concern for the wider community and workers, alongside the pursuit of profit.

A similar approach can be found in Leeds, with a new community health and wellbeing service, co-commissioned with Leeds Community Healthcare NHS Trust, which aims to transform home care services from a traditional “time and task” model to an outcomes focused, personalised provision.

Source: [CLES](#)

³² CPHI. (2019). Plugging the leaks in the UK care home industry. [Link](#).

2 Flexible employment, education and progression

Councils and combined authorities, alongside other public sector partners, should be first adopters of progressive gender inclusive practices in house, then work to develop local campaigns to encourage all employers across their areas to commit to doing likewise.

The Mayor of West Yorkshire's pledges include a Fair Work Charter (of which Leeds City Council was a signatory and early adopter) that hopes to be applicable to all employers in the region and will encourage good pay, fair and flexible working conditions, and promote diversity and social mobility within the workforce. Meanwhile, members of the Leeds Anchor Network complete a progression framework, which helps them self-assess progress in key areas, including employment and recruitment that enables equality of opportunity.

Local and regional governments should work in collaboration to ensure alignment on similar charters and frameworks to elevate their potential for impact as well as including requirements for employers to adopt practice that will reduce gender inequalities in employment. Regular pay and progression reviews looked at through a gender equality lens are also critical to ensure individuals are not overlooked. Successful large-scale trials into reduced working weeks, such as the [4 Day Week](#), are demonstrating benefits to those balancing work with caregiving responsibilities and innovative business operational models with more inclusive hours, such as the Biskery bakery in Leeds, can be looked to for inspiration.

Councils and other public sector organisations can also use their own procurement and commissioning processes to accelerate the up take of good practice – through including key indicators of gender equality in the workplace in social value requirements for suppliers (e.g. including weighting to scores pertaining to a supplier's gender pay gap). Leeds anchor institutions are also encouraged to consider their role as a procurer, while the Leeds Social Value Charter extends good practice to other partners across the city and could be used to encourage the city's anchor institutions to include gender equality measures in their procurement processes. Leeds City Council, for example, captures data on how their suppliers are promoting gender equality, including the percentage of women hired on contracts.

CASE STUDY: LEEDS

The Biskery

The Biskery is a Leeds-based biscuit business founded and run by two women. Having located their first dedicated bakery in Chapel Allerton, the founders built their operational model around supporting working parents – with the team working school hours only, to enable all to work around their childcare commitments. One of the founders highlighted they have intentionally “built the business in such a way that it’s more sustainable for women who want to work and still be present parents.”

Source: [Yorkshire Evening Post](#)

3 Community connections and wellbeing support

There is a live debate about the value of council-owned land and assets in the UK with many under pressure to sell off buildings to help make budget shortfalls. Women need to be able to feel a sense of their own agency within the workplace and within society at large. Therefore, it is vitally important that women and their wider families/communities have access to public spaces which can help create opportunities for discussions, connections and networking as well as support services such as health, employability and training.

Any discussions about the sale of council owned buildings and land should fully evaluate the wider opportunity costs specifically for equalities and diversity through an equalities impact assessment process.

In addition, councils should encourage the targeting of social value commitments, specifying that contractors for new residential or commercial developments commit to supporting local community initiatives that focus on bringing women together. A good example of this tactic can be found in [Islington's Affordable Workspace](#) approach. Islington have transformed

unused and derelict garages on a Finsbury Park estate to create innovative new workspace that regularly serves groups of women at no cost to the community.

It is also important that councils involve women in the planning and design of their places, services and transport connections and that these are viewed through the lens of improved accessibility, inclusion and safety for women. It is also notable that authorities tend to prioritise commuter journeys over rural bus routes which [analysis shows](#) has a disadvantageous impact on women. Leeds City Council is already making strides in this area, through its new status as a Marmot City.³³ Women Friendly Leeds also run a number of campaigns and initiatives to ensure Leeds is a women friendly city, including a focus on [safety for women at night](#) in the city centre. Additionally, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority have launched a [visual communications campaign](#) – “Just Don’t” – aiming to tackle violence against women and girls across the region.

CASE STUDY: **BARCELONA**

Feminist urban design

The City Council in Barcelona have set out an action plan to create a “feminist city” – working to promote an urban planning model that responds to the needs of all residents. They are doing so through ensuring that women are at the forefront of planning and urban design, incorporating a gender analysis for all decisions regarding the City’s budget, urban planning and public services (to ensure implications for women and men are considered), and implementing progressive urban design initiatives to improve women’s experiences.

Source: [Barcelona City Council](#)

³³ Leeds City Council. (2023). Inclusive Growth Strategy. [Link](#).

Councils and commissioners brought into audit council finances, should consider the introduction of gender responsive budgeting in the allocation of resources to public services, transport connections and facilities. Councils should also ensure that this is understood as integral to an area's economic strategy and its statutory obligations within the area's Local Plan.

4 A commitment to womens' wealth and autonomy

In places like Leeds - where over half of all women are employed in the health and social care, education and public administration sectors - it is important that councils are working with their partners to explore how they can set the standard high in terms of the pay and conditions that these women receive. This could potentially have a transformative impact on the lives of women and their families.

As outlined in the Newham homecare case on page 42 and the Wigan Council approach outlined overleaf, councils have considerable power as a spenders and commissioners of goods and services to make improved pay and standards a requirement of contracts. Moreover, this can actively encourage more distributive business models to operate in the sector locally. Local and combined authorities and their partners should spearhead campaigns to make their places home to the highest standards of social care sector employment, working to drive up standards and pay. This approach would include working closely with trade unions to advocate for improvements to standards in the sector and encouraging employers to ensure that all jobs in the sector pay the Real Living Wage.

No woman should be left homeless, vulnerable, destitute and without support. Councils can take action to work with partners across their place to review access to support for vulnerable women, including refugees, asylum seekers and women escaping domestic abuse. To do this, the councils should engage closely with those VCSE sector services supporting women facing these hardships, undertake a review of the support they currently make available, seek to understand where the services are and are not working, listen to the issues women are facing and investigate what levers can and should be pulled to improve the support landscape locally.

CASE STUDY: WIGAN

Driving up wages in social care

In Wigan, spending on adult social care – traditionally a low paid sector – is understood as a key site for shaping employment opportunities and conditions for local people. Wigan’s approach to commissioning differently via an Ethical Homecare Framework and work over many years to embed the approach of the Wigan Deal among providers, reorganised the way the local care economy operates, has driven up employment standards to provide high quality, secure employment for the workforce, and grown local, ethical social enterprise suppliers in the homecare market, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for individuals and communities. In March 2023, Wigan Council took the next step and, as part of their budget, announced that thousands of care workers in the sector will be paid the Real Living Wage.

Source: [Wigan Council](#), [CLES](#), [Leigh Journal](#)

5 Representation in leadership

Councils and their partners can build on existing work to support gender disparities in leadership and decision making positions in their places with sectorally targeted approaches to improve representation in leadership positions across the public and private sectors.

To support the start-up and scale of women-owned enterprises gender inclusion targets should be embedded in key performance indicators for business support programmes and access to finance. These targets should focus specifically on increasing the rates of unrepresented demographic groups, such as women of colour. Supporting social economy organisations to thrive is also key to increasing the flow of local wealth and power to workers and communities, particularly in

sectors where women are more prevalent in the workforce and this, too, should be a focus for business support.

Councils can use their procurement and commissioning as a key lever, by using public spend and investment with greater intent to identify, value and weight gender equality in business. This could be achieved through, for example, the creation of a supplier directory or Dynamic Purchasing System for women-led organisations, or through social value score weighting pertaining to a supplier's gender pay gap. Councils can encourage other large public sector purchasers in their place to embed similar practice in their own commissioning, including through social value charters. Inspiration can be found in the [gender responsive public procurement guidance](#) designed for EU authorities or in local community benefits policies like that seen in [Cleveland, Ohio](#), which provides bid discounts to incentivise the contracting of local, ethnic minority and women-owned businesses.

CASE STUDY: SCOTLAND

Gender representation review

A 2023 review into gender representation in leadership in Scotland found that “nearly 500 women are missing from key positions of power in Scotland”. Despite some progress in recent years, the report found that men continue to hold two-thirds of positions of power and were significantly over-represented in 33 of the 38 areas examined. Women from minority groups, including women of colour and disabled women, were even further underrepresented.

The lead author of the report commented: “tracking who sits in positions of power is vital to shine a light on the extent of these inequalities and helps us better understand where priority action is needed.”

Source: [Engender](#)

Councils also have the opportunity to place a greater emphasis on the representation of women in decision-making, management and leadership roles in public life and the public sector. Targeted leadership and mentorship support programmes and networks for women (for example the [Leeds Health and Care Academy-funded Springboard programme](#)) should be encouraged to champion change in roles where women are currently under represented.

Support from Westminster

The story is similar in places across the UK, with – ultimately – barriers occurring on national and international scales. The specifics of how these challenges play out are different in every locality and so, too, are the actions required to ensure that local economic strategies make a tangible and meaningful difference to women’s lives. While the recommendations set out above may not suit all places, we hope that they will provide suitable inspiration for those with an interest in creating more gender equal local economies everywhere.

Finally, while it sits outside the remit of this report, it must be acknowledged that huge additional power to narrow gender inequalities sits with the government in Westminster, power that could make significant step changes that apply across England, and better support the UK’s devolved nations, regions and local governments to enact change. On the following page we provide some brief thoughts on key areas where the next government of the UK could better support this work:

Ending austerity budgets would better empower local governments to adopt and deliver progressive strategies while deploying fair funding based on local needs and enabling new and alternative local tax powers would enable local authorities to address long standing systemic imbalances.

Bringing into action the socio-economic duty contained in Section 1 of the Equality Act 2010 (that, since 2010, successive governments have not brought into force)³⁴ would introduce a duty that requires decision-making of a strategic nature be “designed to reduce the inequalities of outcome that

result from socio-economic disadvantage". The new [Procurement Act](#), too, could provide an opportunity to strengthen the process of harnessing social value in a way that is more impactful in reducing inequalities across public sector supply chains.

Fundamental changes to addressing hostile refugee and migrant policies, and systematic barriers to housing, childcare, social care, cost of living and energy crises that deepen inequalities and heighten poverty are all also critical to overcoming many of the gender inequality challenges outlined in this research. It is crucial that the government, through organisations like the ONS, review their economic data and indicators through the lens of gender. For example, the language of "economic inactivity" can be overly simplistic when it comes to the unseen and often unpaid work of caring and carers, many of whom are women.

³⁴ Despite not being enacted in England, both the Scottish and Welsh governments have enacted the duty, and a number of English local authorities are undertaking activities acting in its spirit.



Conclusions

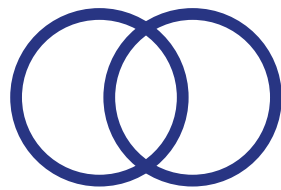
The purpose of our economy should be to generate good lives and wellbeing for all. Everyone, regardless of gender, race, class, sexuality or any of our myriad differences, should be given the opportunity to participate in economic activity and receive a fair share of the proceeds.

Increasingly, the UK's local, combined and devolved national governments are pioneering a shift in strategy and action toward the pursuit of more inclusive and sustainable local economies. But often these approaches struggle to tackle the hidden demographic inequalities that are widespread across all our neighbourhoods. Dismantling barriers to gender equality is often a neglected consideration in economic strategy, with many of the complex, intersecting, systemic challenges that drive them seen as purely “social problems” and somehow outside of the scope of economic priorities. This has led to interventions which routinely overlook the challenges faced by women and, as a consequence, generate significant opportunity costs for women, communities and economies as a whole.

At the heart of this project has been the objective to understand these barriers and provide recommendations for how overcoming them can be a part of a strategic local economic approach. We know that the challenges we have seen in Leeds are far from unique. Local, regional and devolved authorities can have a transformative impact on supporting gender equality in their local economies. This can be achieved in many ways: through procurement and commissioning, updating workforce policies and establishing best practice for workplaces, convening conversations with their partners, raising the profile of the agenda, and through designing targeted programmes of activity focused on delivering specific gender inclusion outcomes.

We hope the insights gained through this work have advanced the creation of a blueprint for better practice in inclusive economic development approaches - approaches that properly recognise and remedy the opportunity costs of gender-based economic exclusion for councils across the UK. Ultimately, our solidarity is with women everywhere. To them we say: **your place is in the economy.**





Centre for Local Economic Strategies

CLES, 52 Oak Street, Swan Square
Manchester, United Kingdom, M4 5JA
info@cles.org.uk | www.cles.org.uk
@CLEStinkdo | #clestinkdo