

JULY 2023

WHAT YOUNG WOMEN WANT

FINDINGS OF THE
WASHINGTON STATE
WOMEN'S COMMISSION'S
FALL 2022 LISTENING
SERIES



INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the past several years, Washingtonians have faced unprecedented challenges. In particular, women and girls in Washington have been greatly impacted by a growing public health crisis, widespread gun violence, recession and inflation, and a new uncertainty regarding reproductive freedom.

As an agency that represents in state government the voices of Washington women, there is no more important work for the Washington State Women's Commission than providing opportunities for women to share their opinions on the issues that matter to them. The Women's Commission seeks, in particular, the opinions of women who are members of groups that have been historically excluded. **In the fall of 2022, the Washington State Women's Commission developed a series of listening sessions targeting young women & girls (ages 16 - 30) and service providers who work with them.**

The Washington State Women's Commission sought to hear from young women across Washington to learn "What Young Women Want", and to ask young women in Washington about their concerns, priorities, and insights for our state government to consider. The feedback received has been culminated in this report and will be used to identify opportunities for further engagement and research in preparation for the 2024 legislative session.

OUR TEAM

The Washington State Women’s Commission’s first step in ensuring the voices of young women were at the forefront of the creation of this listening series & report was to put the planning & execution in the hands of young women themselves. **The listening series was designed & facilitated by three Women’s Commission Fall 2022 interns:**

Isabell Murray | Policy Fellow
Listening Series Lead
Report Author



Shanell Powell | Policy Fellow



Janae Paige | Policy Intern



**In addition to our three talented interns, listening sessions were co-facilitated by Commission staff.*

LISTENING SESSIONS

October 12, 2022

Tacoma, WA

University of Washington Tacoma

Co-hosted by: University of Washington Tacoma Milgard Women's Initiative & University of Washington Tacoma Center for Leadership & Social Responsibility

Facilitated by: Isabell Murray, Janae Paige, Kate Sowers (Staff)

October 21, 2022

Vancouver, WA

Clark College

Co-hosted by: Clark College

Facilitated by: Regina Malveaux (Staff - Executive Director), Leah White (Staff)

November 5, 2022

Seattle, WA

WOW Gallery

Co-hosted by: WOW Gallery, Seattle Women's Commission, Destiny's Foundation, MultiCare Capital Medical Center

Facilitated by: Shanell Powell, Regina Malveaux (Staff - Executive Director)

**This unique session focused on gathering insight from Black young women and other women of color*

November 7, 2022

Spokane, WA

Woman's Club of Spokane

Co-hosted by: YWCA Spokane

Facilitated by: Kate Sowers (Staff)

December 19, 2022

Spokane, WA

Leadership Spokane

Co-hosted by: Leadership Spokane

Facilitated by: Kate Sowers (Staff)

OUR METHOD

Each of these community conversations centered around broad questions & prompts which addressed the issue areas the Women's Commission prioritizes:



Health



Safety



Economic Security
& Opportunity

This qualitative report highlights the recurring themes within those issue areas. Participants were encouraged to share their concerns, priorities and insight. Each listening session was recorded for internal purposes.



Participants of the Young Women Listening Session at Leadership Spokane in Spokane, WA on December 19, 2022

HEALTH

The participants of the “What Young Women Want” listening series had concerns about their health, particularly regarding **Reproductive Justice** and **Healthcare Access and Affordability**.



REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Young women who attended the Washington State Women’s Commission’s “What Young Women Want” listening series expressed a lot of uncertainty about women’s reproductive rights. In the summer of 2022, only months before the listening series, the United States Supreme Court released the *Dobbs v Jackson* decision, reversing the previous *Roe v. Wade* ruling, allowing the states to create new restrictive laws concerning abortions. Many women discussed their concerns for not only the right to contraceptives and medical procedures such as abortions, but also the impact on other marginalized groups. During the November 7th listening session in Spokane, one participant stated: **“I am concerned about people’s rights, reproductive rights and concerned about trans people’s rights, especially trans kids’ rights”**, referring to the implications of the ruling for gender-affirming care. During the December 19th session, also in Spokane, the participants discussed the impacts of the reversal of the decision. **“I know that with *Roe v. Wade* being overturned, as a young woman surrounded by women who are also younger than me; I’m almost terrified of what the world could be from now,”**. Another participant echoed the sentiment: **“I was going to say that too...the idea of teen pregnancies is already terrifying to most demographics and then to not be medically supported if something went wrong - it’s terrifying. Most kids feel helpless and lost and don’t even know where to start with that.”**

Another participant at the same session raised concern over the impacts of women’s general healthcare: **“It doesn't even just affect abortion. It affects a lot of medical procedures that actually have nothing to do with having an abortion. It affects a lot of our...medical flexibility as people, as human beings.”** One participant shared that because of the impact of COVID-19 on public education, many young students did not receive proper sex education. **“My sister is in middle school, and she never got, like, the basic fourth and fifth grade growth and development thing. And I think that’s important to address because a lot of people didn’t get that and they need that information in order to be safe as a teenager, especially with lower access to abortion and birth control.”**

REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Although many shared these sentiments about the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, some participants from multiple sessions expressed little concern that the Supreme Court's decision would impact Washingtonians. A participant from the October 12th listening session at the University of Washington Tacoma stated, **"When *Roe v. Wade* got overturned...I was so scared for my cousins...Not only have Black women been medically violated for years, it's like, this is just a whole other level across the board of disrespect and refusal of autonomy. So being in Washington, I felt a relief. I was like, 'Okay, I can relax a bit'"**. Other participants communicated mixed feelings about the protections afforded to them regarding health and safety in Washington. Participants acknowledged the worry they feel in regards to a rollback of reproductive rights on a national level, and also the relief they feel knowing that, at least for the time being, their reproductive rights are protected in Washington. Speaking to that nuance, one participant stated,

 **It was scary to know we can move backward in that extreme of a way. And that did make me feel unsafe, even though currently, you know, Washington's a good place to be in that sense.** 

While there was an overwhelming sense of gratitude for living in a state that prioritizes reproductive justice, some participants agreed that Washington state could advocate further for women's reproductive healthcare protections. **"I think it would be really nice to see Washington State advocate for other states to protect rights for abortion and contraceptive care as well. We're right next to Idaho, and Idaho is completely different in their stance. It makes me really nervous to go to...certain states...that don't have protection in place to counteract *Roe v. Wade* being overturned... Washington can lead the charge, that'd be really great."**

HEALTHCARE ACCESS & AFFORDABILITY

Another recurring theme across sessions was the high cost of healthcare. One participant of the December 7th session in Spokane shared the impacts that high cost of medication has had on her life: **“I have a disability, and there’s a medication that I need to take that is very expensive. And I know that’s not uncommon, and that is something that I find very upsetting. The medication that I take has a patent on it. Why should you patent something that is necessary for some people and use that as a way to influence how much you’re going to charge for it? I don’t think you should have ownership of medical intervention.”** A participant of the December 19th session in Spokane tied the disproportionately high cost of healthcare to other economic issues:

“ I think another thing is inequitable access to healthcare. Just like I’m sure everyone here pays vastly different amounts for their healthcare and receives vastly different services. Coupled with student debt and housing, I feel like there’s a lot of expenses that are disproportionately put on women.”



SAFETY



When participants were asked the broad question, “Do you feel safe as a woman in Washington?”, many young women expressed that they generally felt safe, particularly in regards to the rights afforded to young women when making medical decisions. However, participants shared concerns about other safety-related issues, particularly **gun safety**. **BIPOC women** also highlighted the **specific ways in which their safety is at risk**.

GUN SAFETY


Across listening sessions, participants addressed their safety concerns as they relate to gun violence, gun safety, and gun responsibility. One participant of the October 12th event in Tacoma shared that her concerns around gun access have led to an increased fear for her safety. **“This is one of the biggest cities that I have ever lived in, and so kind of bombarded by crime...We have a lot of access to guns, there’s a lot of gun violence. That’s in the back of my mind, a big fear that I have.”** A high school student participating in the December 19th event in Spokane expressed fear and around gun violence in schools, not just for herself, but for her family, friends and peers.

 **My cousin told me how a kid brought a gun to school. And they only found that I think, because they happened to open that kid’s backpack. I’m kind of terrified that they’re going to go to school and one day, and they’re not coming back home, and I have no way to prepare for that. I just have to...be scared and hope that nothing’s going happen.”**

SAFETY FOR WOMEN OF COLOR

On the discussion of safety, many participants - particularly on the eastern side of Washington - raised concerns about safety as women of color. One participant at the December 19th session in Spokane shared, **“In Spokane, it is very anti-Black. And even some Black people are anti-Black. They understand that the closer you are to Blackness, you can get ostracized, you can be pushed away, you could lose opportunities...When you have a child and you hold a Black child in your hands, you already know that that Black child, depending on what they look like, how they act, could lose their life.”** Another participant offered, **“I work with a lot of students of color, and the stories they’re telling me - their experiences of being a child are being taken away. We need to take an aggressive approach to preserving and not adult-ifying young Black girls, we need to take an aggressive approach in understanding that many young Black girls... they’re raising their siblings. They’re running their homes, they have no access to people who can help them with rental assistance.”**

The conversation at the October 12th session in Tacoma also centered the experiences of women of color in a particular region of Washington. **“I think what I see here in western Washington is we have been very understanding of race and its impact,”** said one participant. Although other participants in that session, as well as participants in the November 5th session in Seattle, expressed that there was more of a safety-net living in metropolitan areas, participants did stress that our communities have a long way to go to reach equity. Participants stressed the importance of education in shifting mindsets, with one participant saying,

 **Education absolutely has a huge impact of why a newer generation might feel differently [about race] than the older generation.** 





ECONOMIC SECURITY & OPPORTUNITY

Participants of the “What Young Women Want” listening series voiced concerns about barriers to economic security and economic opportunity. Of particular concern, they referenced the **rising cost of rent**, the struggle to find **quality, affordable childcare, cost of higher education and student loan debt**, and issues of **housing access and affordability**. As with other topics, participants addressed the **unique ways BIPOC women are affected** by economic issues.

COST OF RENT

Due to rising costs and inflation, many young women have been impacted by high rental rates. One participant at the November 7th session in Spokane described rising rent rates as “horrific”. She continued, **“It’s unacceptable to me. I think there needs to be rent control, where there is a standard of what landlords can charge for what they’re offering.”**

The impact of rising rent rates has been a harsh burden on women in particular.

 **Women generally have more expenses, especially if they are parenting. But even if they’re not, the pink tax still exists, and women are paid less,** 

said one participant at the December 19th session in Spokane. On top of the financial burden, high costs of rent can lead to unhealthy, and potentially dangerous, living situations. Among the listening series participants were professionals who worked with women experiencing domestic violence. Keeping women in situations where they may be dependent on a secondary income in order to afford appropriate living conditions may allow for an abuser to retain control over her. Said one participant at the December 19th session in Spokane,

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“ Her abuser [can] use money to control her...there aren't external resources that can help people in those situations and it's being left up to nonprofits like the YWCA and other service providers to fill that gap that the government can easily step up and do, ”

CHILDCARE ACCESS & AFFORDABILITY

When asked what economic issues burdened their households, many participants mentioned the cost of childcare. During the October 12th session in Tacoma, one participant shared that the cost of childcare has become burdensome, and the lack of options has led to lack of opportunity. **“...Moving out here, getting married, getting my undergrad [degree], getting a job in a nonprofit...when we start a family, childcare would have cost more than what I was making...**

“ I would have paid to continue working...staying home wasn't my dream. That's not what I wanted to do. I wanted to work. But I didn't have any options.”

Women at the December 19th session in Spokane resonated with the lack of opportunity for women with children, and the limited benefits afforded. **“You should not have to return back to work three weeks after having a baby,”** said one participant. She also highlighted the experiences of childcare providers, calling on legislators to address licensing complications, which have burdened many small-business owners offering childcare services. **“A huge percent of childcare facilities in...Spokane County closed during COVID. And like one or two percent of those that closed are reopening right now. So, we need that legislative session to push through all of the licensing hurdles and make that process simpler, especially for... the east side of the state.”**

Another participant at the December 19th listening session in Spokane discussed working in a childcare facility, and how the employees were impacted. **“I was a director at an early learning center during COVID. Many of us stayed open. We did not receive any worker’s compensation for staying open during COVID. Many people who choose to go into early childhood education are new moms. There are not any postpartum plans or access to care for those spaces. Also, when it comes to pay, that pay is going to someone else.”**



The young women at the December 19th session in Spokane agreed that childcare facilities should receive more funding for staff from the government, and that the costs of childcare are currently too high. One participant shared, **“For me, childcare was a good majority of my paycheck when I was in my 20’s.”** Another participant replied, **“Universal childcare is a great solution...people should be able to access free preschool through those programs.”**



Policy Intern Janae Paige and Policy Fellow Isabell Murray prepare for facilitating the October 12 session at the University of Washington Tacoma over coffee

HOUSING ACCESS & AFFORDABILITY

Another common theme across the listening series was young women's frustrations with the lack of affordability in the housing market, as many young women are unable to purchase a home. While participants of each listening session discussed home-ownership in addition to high rent rates, the November 5th session in Seattle centered largely around barriers to home-ownership due to the economic impacts within the Black community.

 **We lack homeownership in our community...Historically, there have been intentional strategies to exclude us from...economic wealth, generational wealth, and social mobility.** 

said one participant. Participants highlighted issues of income inequality, including how communities that have been disempowered from building wealth and equity still may not have the same access to resources or education to build wealth, putting home-ownership out of reach.

HIGHER EDUCATION & STUDENT LOAN DEBT

At the October 12th listening session in Tacoma, the young women were asked to name their main economic priority or concern. In response, participants agreed there were limited career options presented for young women outside of higher education. In addition, they shared that the debt accrued in order to champion that goal has been too burdensome. **“I only have \$11k in loans, which isn’t bad, because my school is \$75,000 a year. I want to go into public administration, so I need to go get my Master’s [Degree]. And I’m not going to be able to afford my Master’s [Degree] if I want to be able to live in this economy,”** said an undergraduate student. Another participant shared that they were unaware of the debt that they had signed up for at 18-years-old.

“ I would never have taken out that much money if I had thought it would take me a decade to get to a place where I can just afford my basic necessities, which it has. ”



Policy Fellow Shanell Powell leads the community conversation at WOW Gallery in Seattle, WA on November 5, 2022

ECONOMIC SECURITY FOR WOMEN OF COLOR

At the December 19th session in Spokane, participants addressed how race may impact certain types of funding. **“I just feel that schools don’t prioritize education about [race]. Our school recently formed the Black Student Union, and we have a Pacific Islanders club, and an Indigenous club. And I hear about all the events that they’re doing. And like, I go to them and they’re trying to raise awareness about issues that they face, and our school doesn’t care. None of those clubs get funding, yet Future Farmers of America gets \$20,000 a year.”**

Participants also addressed issues with government grant funding for communities of color. **“I think that the Governor should really consider the grants that they’re putting out. There’s a lot of multicultural grants and things like that. But guess what, none of the multicultural people can get it, especially over here on our side [Eastern Washington], there are not that many nonprofits that are run by people of color. So we need lower barrier access to grants, there needs to be grants that are available for for-profits, because we have people that are making non-profits and doing inequitable things because that is the only way to access the funding.”** Another participant shared,

“A lot of grant funding in general is based in white supremacy...There is something about, like, gifting a community that needs you. That’s based in a power-dynamic relationship. It does need to be easier to get grants, and communities of color do need to be prioritized.”

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

Listening Sessions As a Model for Community Outreach

Historically, Washington State Women's Commission listening sessions have been well-received by the community as a model for community outreach. The robust nature of the conversations in our "What Young Women Want" listening series reflect the usefulness of listening sessions as a tool for community engagement. However, we did find that these listening sessions were more sparsely attended than past sessions, and we would like to explore additional and alternative opportunities for engagement for members of this age group (16-30), to be sure a wide range of diverse voices & viewpoints are included. In future community outreach to this demographic, we also hope to include more voices from Central Washington & from the Latiné community.

Commission Priorities

The themes highlighted in this report indicate that several of the Commission's current policy priorities are in alignment with community concerns. As the current legislative session comes to a close, the Washington State Women's Commission will continue to support legislation including securing critical access to women's healthcare, ensuring safety, and promoting economic security & opportunity for all women. The Washington State Women's Commission's 2023 Policy Agenda and list of legislation we supported can be found at [wswc.wa.gov/legsession2023](https://www.wswc.wa.gov/legsession2023).

Issues Needing Further Attention

The speakers also highlighted additional issues that may need further attention. The Commission plans to research each of the below issues, and to consider each issue as a potential area of focus for the legislative interim. These issues include:

- Students missing basic sex education due to educational interruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic
- The effect of patents on prescription drug costs
- The financial burden of student loan debt
- Childcare licensing hurdles
- Availability of government grants for BIPOC women on the east side of the state, including more grants available for BIPOC- and women-owned for-profit businesses

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

Next Steps

As the Washington State Women's Commission plans its priorities, activities, and communications in the coming year, this report serves as a summary of select community input to guide where the Commission's attention should be focused, and how the Commission can advocate for the needs of young women & girls in Washington.

The Commission's next steps include consideration of this material, revising current priorities and defining new legislative priorities, and incorporating community feedback into the Commission's future plans, ensuring responsiveness to their constituents. **The Commission will use this report as a guideline for legislative interim research and activities.**