



What Black Women Really Need in the 2nd most Livable city???

Is Pittsburgh really the 2nd most livable city? Perhaps it is for some, but most certainly not for all. Pittsburgh is a city of progress overcoming the end of the steel mills and becoming the city of “Eds and Meds”. We have our bike lanes, robust trails, green infrastructure, ordinances and resolutions to protect our growing immigrant community. However, all of this progress fails to elevate the Black community in the city and outside the city, in particularly the Mon Valley. This progress is also not inclusive of Black women and girls across all identities in the region.

The basic concept for the Black Women’s Policy Center is based on 20+ years of professional public policy advocacy for social and economic justice combined with my lived experience as a Black woman in the Pittsburgh region.

The Black woman is the backbone of the Black family and almost 70% of Black households are headed by Black women. Black women are faced with earning lower wages, economic instability, expanding income inequality and less overall wealth. Low wage workers, many of whom are Black women and essential, are less likely to have key employee benefits and often are forced to use more of their income to maintain their households. Black women are disproportionately targeted by discriminatory behavior in the workplace. It is estimated that about 40% of Black women would receive a wage increase if the minimum wage is raised to \$15. The U.S. is the only developed country where the maternal mortality rate has increased over the past two decades and Black women are four times more likely to experience maternal mortality than white women. These are just some of the issues facing Black women in the United States and the Pittsburgh region has proved to be no different. In fact, a recent report by the University of Pittsburgh commissioned by the City’s Gender Equity Commission determined that Pittsburgh is one of the worst cities for Black women for a number of reasons, some of which include the high rate of poverty, income disparities, lack of employment and high death rates among Black women to just name a few. The report can be accessed here: https://apps.pittsburghpa.gov/redtail/images/7109_Pittsburgh's_Inequality_Across_Gender_and_Race_09_18_19.pdf

So maybe Pittsburgh isn’t the most livable city for everyone. There are many social and economic justice issues that disproportionately affect Black women and girls in Pittsburgh, and they need a safe space of refuge. Through my work as Director of Femisphere at the Women and Girls Foundation, I participated in many discussions, coalitions and debated various issues plaguing Black women in the region.

In fact, my work with Femisphere focused on single mothers struggling with poverty in the Pittsburgh region and was based on a report that the Women and Girls Foundation published in 2016, which can be found here <https://wgfpa.org/Femisphere-Phase-One-Presentation-September-2016-combined-3.pdf>. Recently the Pittsburgh Foundation also placed an emphasis on single mothers and poverty and published a report highlighting the issue as well, <https://pittsburghfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Single%20Women%20Report%202019%20-%20The%20Pittsburgh%20Foundation.pdf>. The data shows that single mothers are the largest group of folks impacted by poverty in our region but when you break the numbers down, Black women are disproportionately affected.

Both the Women and Girls Foundation and the Pittsburgh Foundation's reports do an amazing job at bringing the issue of poverty among single mothers to light along with recommendations on how we should address them. But let's keep in mind that this is just one issue disproportionately plaguing black women. There is great advocacy work taking place around the city with regards to black women, such as maternal mortality, infant mortality, low wages and the list goes on. The problem is that these discussions and efforts are taking place in silos which makes it very difficult to build momentum for real change, which is what we need. Not to mention leaving Black women unable to navigate this complex system of resources.

What we need in the Greater Pittsburgh region is a **Black Women's Policy Center** that centers, empowers and acknowledges the full experience of Black women. This is an opportunity to both advocate and shift our systems and change work to focus on the intersectionality of gender and race. The Black Women's Policy Center will move the dial and change the conditions in which all Black women and girls are surviving to thriving. We need a place that not only mobilizes all Black women to build power but also uplifts the whole Black woman.

Rochelle Jackson
CEO | Black Women's Policy Center