

## Why Place and Community Matter for Reproductive Justice



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**Dr Sophie Patterson and Professor Jasmine Fledderjohann, on behalf of ReproNorth**

Reproductive Justice is  
***“the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children,  
and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities”***  
(SisterSong)

Earlier this year, we conducted a [pilot project](#) using participatory photography—an accessible and inclusive research methodology whereby photography is used to explore social issues and elevate diverse perspectives. This was a moving and powerful experience for all involved.

Our research team included three academic partners; representatives from two partner [community organisations](#), serving women in contact with the criminal justice system, and women who are claiming asylum or have refugee status; and five people with lived experience of health and social inequity connected to the partner community organisations.

Adopting a [trauma-informed approach](#), all members of the research team participated in four days of in-person training on participatory photography, led by [PhotoVoice](#). This training covered broad principles of both photography as a medium and of the research methodology, with a particular focus on ethical considerations. We then worked together to design a research project exploring why place

and community matter for reproductive justice and collaboratively develop prompts to guide the photo-taking process.

We collectively agreed to take photos exploring:

- Being a woman in the north
- Interpretations and experiences of reproductive justice
- Understanding the role of place and community in reproductive (in)justice
- How local communities can advance reproductive justice
- Opportunities for change

## **What is reproductive justice?**

Reproductive justice is both a theoretical framework and a social justice movement. The term was introduced in the early 90s by Black feminists in the US to identify and address [reproductive oppression](#).

Reproductive Justice encourages us to consider the broader structural factors (such as our political systems and everyday social environments) that limit reproductive ‘choices’ and influence reproductive trajectories.

Reproductive justice centres on the core rights to:

- Control our bodies and our futures (bodily autonomy)
- Not have a child
- Have a child
- Parent children with dignity in safe and healthy environments

By centring the experiences of overlooked, devalued or marginalised people, reproductive justice reinforces that not everyone has the same ‘choices’ available to them. Reproductive justice advocates for locating power in communities – working for and with communities most affected by reproductive oppression. Local communities are best placed to contextualise local reproductive (in)justice, offer solutions rooted in community strengths and lived realities, and mobilise local action.

We decided to use participatory photography for our project because the values of this methodology closely align with those of reproductive justice (including social justice, power-sharing, collaboration and inclusion).

## **Who are we?**

[ReproNorth](#) is a network of academic partners, people with lived experience of health and social inequity, and community organisations with a shared commitment to reproductive justice. We adopt a [‘place-based’ approach](#), examining systems of oppression that impact reproductive choices available to people in northern England. This includes large-scale social and political environments, and local power and resource distribution. Importantly, we recognise the strength of local communities in resisting oppression, centring this in our approach to research and action.

## What did we find?

While our photographers had different backgrounds and life encounters, their shared experiences, conveyed via powerful images and the captions they wrote to accompany the photos, were notable.

Through group discussion, we identified five dominant themes:

- **Community norms and societal expectations**

The group emphasised how society places pressures and expectations on women, encompassing domesticity, caring, or reproductive expectations. Simultaneously, women's needs were seen as being deprioritised or not considered. The photographers urged communities to question these pressures, and to recognise the value of women in society.

- **Local health systems and community support**

Participants identified potential gaps in health services, including a lack of appropriate, person-centred service provision locally. Community organisations were highlighted as a safe space for local holistic, person-centred support and for responding to complex social needs.

- **Housing and local environments**

Housing was identified as insecure, unsafe and poorly adapted to diverse, evolving needs. Photographs illustrated that the needs of families who are claiming asylum or have refugee status were deprioritised. Green spaces, free from pollution, traffic and other risks, were identified as crucial for reproductive justice, but not sufficiently accessible within urban environments.

- **Community safety**

Fear and experiences of interpersonal violence featured in many photographs, with photographers commenting on the impact on opportunities, choices and engagement with local environments. Photographers also reflected on financial safety, and how lack of money limits choices.

- **Women's Voices**

Through the photographs, the photographers reclaim their agency and autonomy in a patriarchal society and tell their own story of reproductive injustice in their local communities. Photographs highlighted the importance of being heard, believed, respected, and trusted across social locations and reproductive trajectories.

## Fostering local conversations and action

As a group, we decided to exhibit these photographs to start conversations about reproductive justice in the communities at the heart of this work. We held a public launch at [Liverpool's Open Eye Gallery in Summer 2025](#). The exhibition will tour around partner community organisations in the autumn, concluding in Lancaster. A virtual exhibition is also available through our [website](#).



The impact of this work on our group was overwhelmingly positive. After training in participatory photography, both community organisation partners have expressed intentions to use this approach, with one currently leading their own project exploring stalking and harassment. Our launch reached members of the public, and representatives from local community organisations, universities, local authority, the sub-regional integrated care board and regional NHSE, with findings informing regional approaches to preconception care and local women's health strategies.

We challenged our audience to consider our key messages, and extend the challenge to you:

- **Reproductive justice is not just for women** – we have a collective responsibility to create social, political and physical environments to advance reproductive justice. Part of this involves breaking restrictive social norms. People (including cisgender, trans and gender diverse) must have full control over their bodies, futures and reproductive choices.
- **Cities must be gender response** - urban design and development should address how gender matters for whether a space is safe, welcoming and useful. Placemaking should prioritise inclusivity, accessibility and community safety to support diverse lived realities and respond to barriers to reproductive justice that violence presents.
- **Housing inequity is a threat to reproductive justice** – there is a need for safe and secure housing that can adapt to the needs of diverse, evolving families. This is particularly urgent for groups with limited control over housing circumstances.
- **Reproductive justice is intrinsically linked to social and structural context** – an inclusive, equity-informed and localised response to social and structural barriers to reproductive justice is essential. Holistic community support services can create 'safe spaces' and respond to complex social needs locally, with linkage to relevant specialty services where appropriate.
- **Listen to local people** – take active steps to centre perspectives of overlooked, devalued and marginalised people, who face the greatest barriers to reproductive justice, involving them on their own terms.
- **There can't be change without action** – big change often starts with small action. We can all do our part. This might include starting conversations about reproductive justice in your community or providing support to someone you see struggling. It could also include volunteering to support a local community organisation or writing to your MP.

To conclude, we take you back to the beginning. The photographer named her picture 'The Isolation', and this is what it means to her:

*"This abandoned pram is a symbol of the isolation and loneliness that so many women face- both mothers and those without children. Growing up with a single mother, I saw first-hand the solitude, the judgement, and the lack of support she endured. Society often overlooks the emotional toll of motherhood, especially for single mums, whose experience can be just as isolating – if not more – than that of women without children. This photograph also represents the heartbreaking consequences of lack of support for mothers whereby they could be forced to give up or lose their children"*

The virtual exhibition can be viewed at <https://www.repronorth.com/we-re-telling-our-own-story>

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