

Sharing Winning Strategies Women's Empowerment Strategies

Round Table

Presenter: Sylvie Gendron
Facilitator: Carolyn Whitzman
Secretary: Jennifer Beeman

Summary

The 'Québec Women's Urban Safety Development' program (*le programme du Développement québécois de la sécurité des femmes en milieu urbain*) called *Aux portes des cités sûres* was launched at the *J'accuse la peur* conference in Montréal in 1992. A committee of municipal workers, outreach workers from women's groups, and community organizations conducted a major event to raise public awareness of women's insecurity in the city of Rimouski. The campaign aimed to develop concrete and ongoing measures to address women's safety problems. In 1994, Rimouski's municipal council officially created the permanent committee on women's urban safety (*le comité permanent de la sécurité des femmes en milieu urbain*). In 1997, a safety walk was used to identify dangerous places in the city and recommendations made to the municipal council following the walk have led to improvements.

In 1998, the committee launched a training program for taxi drivers in order to make them more sensitive to women's public safety issues. The program taught drivers ways to intervene and respond in the event of an incident concerning women's safety. Drivers were also informed on resources available in case of assault or other difficulties. Large *SécuriTaxi* stickers make these accredited drivers more visible to women and widely-distributed business cards allow women to call drivers who are trained to watch out for their safety.

The committee also launched a similar training program for security guards in public parks. The program could also be adapted and offered to guard staff at public swimming pools.

Discussion

One participant is surprised that such a small city could be so affected by women's safety problems. Johanne Bouchard, a CAFSU founder, responds that we shouldn't be surprised that violence against women is also a problem in small communities as it exists anywhere there is inequality between women and men.

A training program for park security guards in the City of Toronto (Canada) is going well. A successful element of the program is that taxi drivers report incidents of violence against women and have a special light on the back of their car that they can flash should they need to phone 911 emergency services.

A participant from Durban (South Africa) says that implementing a similar "safe taxi" driver training program would be a lot of work in her ward of approximately 27 000 people. Priorities in her community are more at the basic level of providing lighting and water. There are no real public transport partners to involve in women's safety. It is recommended that police be trained to identify areas where women would feel insecure.

A municipal tool kit is being developed to be distributed to 800 municipalities. The kit helps raise municipal workers' awareness of why and how they should tackle social problems through *crime prevention* efforts. The Tool Kit focuses on the process of conducting a community safety diagnosis/needs assessment, developing a targeted and thorough action plan, and evaluating initiatives so as to learn from them. The kit also gives examples of innovative and inspiring prevention policies and programs from around the world. Fact sheets give information on how different actors can become involved, realistic concrete roles that municipal workers can play, and building sustainable and enduring partnerships.

The City of Ottawa (Canada) has successfully formed a coalition of as many women's groups as possible to involve police groups and public transport in improving women's safety and

access to services. This partnership's success is partly attributable to its many diverse groups working together.

South Africa's Constitution previously excluded women but it has been amended to protect both men and women. The current government is addressing women's previous exclusion by using quota systems to increase women's involvement in local decision-making so that women can determine solutions to their specific problems.

In South Africa, it cannot be assumed that women in official government positions will necessarily act as allies, nor that female police officers will be sympathetic to other women in cases of rape or aggression. Cultural attitudes have a strong influence over the public's expectation of what women's role in society should be. In Nairobi (Kenya), strategies to tackle poverty are important, as is having special family courts to separately deal with women's issues.

Conclusions

- Men have a key role to play and must be involved in developing and implementing solutions if we are to make enduring changes to the socialized roots of inequality and violence, particularly against women.
- The more groups that are involved in safety partnerships increase likelihood of success by helping publicize and improve follow-up on implementation of recommended actions. Partnerships must be maintained in order to ensure that policies are respected and strategies endure. New partners continually need to be educated on the role that they can play.
- Media must be used strategically to educate the public and promote safety efforts as it plays an important role in how events contribute to feelings of public insecurity.

Recommendations

- To reduce violence against women, much work needs to be done to socialize children on acceptable and equal treatment of women and men and the just role of women in society. Education is essential to reverse negative stereotypes, attitudes, and violence toward women.
- Municipal decision-makers, urban planners, and workers may not be aware of how their decisions and work affect women's security. Challenging work must be done to improve their understanding of the very important role they can play.
- Police need to be sensitized to women's safety issues and trained to identify and respond to incidents of violence against women.
- Affordable training and materials need to be made accessible to all social actors who have a role to play in improving women's safety. Training of partners must be a continuing process, not just a one-time event.
- Quota systems should be used to assure women's representation and involvement in equitable local participatory democracy and governance.
- Initiatives cannot be directly replicated from other communities - they must be adapted to consider the cultural contexts, needs, challenges, and resources available (financial, human, material) in a particular community.
- Evaluation should be ongoing, not just cumulative and focussed on performance - practice *processes* should be monitored so that services can be adjusted and improved while still in progress. Women's feelings of safety could be considered an indicator of a community's level of social development.

- Ongoing relationships must be developed with journalists so that women's groups can also be a source of information and a different perspective informing the media.