



Women Take Part

Course Information Sheet

Background to Women Take Part

This course is part of a bigger Pathfinder programme which will continue in the Black Country till March 2011. It is funded by Communities and Local Government.

In addition, there will also be events for community groups and networks to think through how they can become more influential, and events for public agencies consider how they can change the way they work with people and become more open to community influence.

There will also be workshops which bring a wide range of people together - individual citizens, public officers, councillors, community groups and networks - to share experiences of getting involved and talk about how to improve that experience.

This activity will be spread out over the four Black Country boroughs.

Why women?

There has been much research done on the barriers to women's involvement and participation which has generated a great deal of knowledge, information and practical steps. However, looking at the statistics in terms of women's involvement, it seems that the situation has not changed that much and that women are still sorely underrepresented in the places where decisions are made and priorities are set. Just before it was subsumed into the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, the Equal Opportunities Commission published 'The Gender Agenda'¹ suggesting that it will take up to 200 years to ensure the equal representation of women in the British parliament, 20 years to achieve equality in civil service top management, and 40 years to achieve an equal number of senior women in the judiciary. Whilst these are shocking statistics, it is clear that there just aren't enough women in most areas of public life and for certain groups of women, including Black, Asian and minority ethnic women, their representation is even lower.

There is clearly a **power gap** in our institutions and workplaces. Currently less than 20% of MPs are female. . There are only two ethnic minority women MPs and there has never been an Asian woman MP. Ethnic minority women make up less than one percent of the House of Lords. Only 29% of Local Authority Councillors are women and of them only 3% are BME women. The power gap needs to be closed, with true representation for all groups of women, including ethnic minority women, disabled women, working class women, lesbians, and women of all ages and faiths.

¹ The Gender Agenda, EOC, July 2007. www.gender-agenda.co.uk



We need to increase the ‘pool’ of women who see themselves as active citizens; able to take on roles that are constructive, critical, cooperative, confident and challenging in the public domain. Policies and white papers about community empowerment, community engagement and service user power should take this gendered power gap seriously.

There seems to be a relationship between the position of women and the condition of women; the political status of women is mirrored in their relative economic status to men. Whilst the pay gap experienced by women continues to narrow, with the full time pay gap now at 17.2% and the part time pay gap at 35.6%, the underlying causes of the pay gap persist. Undervaluation of women’s work, a persistent employment penalty for mothers, occupational gender segregation, and discriminatory treatment in the workplace continue to hamper efforts to further reduce the pay gap.² Women are much less likely than men to reach the top of their professions. Only 10% of directorships of FTSE 100 companies are held by women. In today’s workplace requesting flexible working can still spell career death for many women. Instead they often have to ‘trade down’ when they take on caring roles and then lose out on the top jobs.

Centuries of systemic exclusion (both intended and unintended) mean that many of our organisations and systems of governance were built around the visions and needs of a small group of the population who had the right to vote - middle and upper class white men. It is only 80 years since **all** women won the right to vote in England and it takes a long time to change norms, cultures, expectations and attitudes. Currently, perhaps in recognition of the fight for universal suffrage for all, and an acknowledgement of the danger of losing the gains already fought for, there seems to be a lot of stocktaking and reflection going on.

As part of The Gender Agenda the EOC produced an ‘equality index’ that demonstrates the health of the nation in terms of gender equality across all areas of life and indicating what we need to be doing if things are to change significantly. They concluded:

“The index shows that in some instances, we’re heading in the right direction -the situation is improving. But more often progress has been painfully slow and there is much more we could do to speed up the pace of change, otherwise our children’s children will still be grappling with many of the same challenges. In other areas, the index suggests the agenda has stalled, or worse yet we’re actually going backwards. Unless further action is taken, nothing will ever change.”

Notions of gender go right to the heart of any culture and society - the expectations, privileges and roles of men and women are different. Being a ‘woman’ affects your life differently to being a ‘man’ and this varies through time, space and culture. Much current research on representation and parity, influence, participation, engagement and power, show hierarchies based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and notions of ability and disability, which are often hidden, invisible and not open for discussion. Women are clearly not a homogenous group, but there are enough common experiences to be able to argue for the existence of gendered experiences of the public domain, and to identify the many barriers that are beyond the control of the individual.

² Closing the Gender Pay Gap: An update report for TUC Women’s Conference 2008

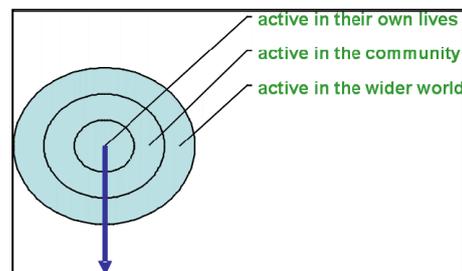


Women reading this may recognise the ‘zapper effect’ - feeling excluded, patronised, not good enough, not knowing the rules of the game etc. It’s likely to be the case whatever your class, race, ethnicity, education, sexuality. It is sometimes helpful to see beyond the personal and recognise that gender discrimination exists - that however knowledgeable and confident you are you may well be ‘excluded’ simply because you are a woman

So, as well as encouraging more, and different, women to become more constructive, critical, cooperative, confident and challenging in the public domain, there have to be changes in how organisations and structures work. If this doesn’t happen, even though the pool of women is increased and expanded, women will still experience the ‘zapper effect’.

Women are generally active in the public domain when they are active in their own lives. Women are active in different spheres at different times:

- ✓ active in their own lives
- ✓ active in the community
- ✓ active in the wider world



Exploring the tensions and contradictions involved in ‘citizenship and gender’ lead us to recognise inequalities in the structures, processes and cultures of governance. If we want to change these, then we have to challenge ourselves and others to become active critical citizens.

“The course has enabled me to develop my own voice, challenge gender stereotypes, to focus on my strengths rather than my weaknesses, whilst accessing opportunities to assist me to mature and grow.”

“The continued support of the course facilitators and other women has enabled me to begin working on other initiatives that I hope will inspire, encourage, and move women to be more active in their own lives, and within their communities”

“...lack of confidence is the biggest barrier to females being powerful and vocal. Remedies: Information, support, learning and finding common ground. Knowing what barriers you face and finding ways of overcoming and solving them”

(Italics are quotes from previous course participants)

Our commitment

..is to provide:

- **Childcare and respite care support:** please see our **care support protocol**
- **Tutorials:** the option of having one to one tutorials where you can explore course issues that appeal to you in more depth and reflect upon your own learning
- **A buddying scheme:** where course participants connect with people who already play a role in public life or who can provide some insight into how specific agencies work

- **Learning sets:** opportunity for participants to meet together outside of the course for further learning, action or reflection
- **Space to meet:** in Dudley and Wolverhampton we will create spaces for participants to be able to meet, use a computer with online access, and have access to a small resource library
- **Support network:** bringing people together from all of the courses we run - people who all have an interest and enthusiasm in being involved and making a difference

...and interesting and informative sessions!

Your commitment

We will ask you to complete a **Learner Contract** where you confirm your interest and commitment to the course, to the other participants, and trainers. The course is very participative and, if only a few people regularly show up and continue through the course, the experience is diminished for everyone.

Each of these courses costs about £18,000 to put on and that's a significant investment in people, in communities and in you...and we want to make best use of public money. You can benefit enormously as well as your community and family. This can sound all a bit rigid and strict - it's not meant to be, and we recognise that in life things happen and sometimes we can't always do what we want...but it's worth making the case for sticking with it!!!

Requirements

Speak and understand English, although not necessarily written English

Accreditation

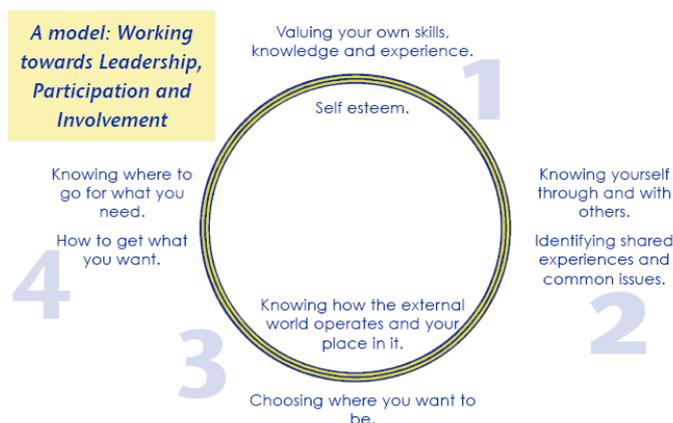
We are currently deciding the nature and type of accreditation that will be offered. The course is likely to be accredited with the Open College Network and we are exploring how the learning on this course can be linked to Foundation Degrees. If you chose to go for accreditation, you will be expected to keep your own diary or scrapbook of the course where you record your learning journey, any actions you take and your experiences. There will be help available in the form of tutorials.

Course outline

The course is based upon the **Four Essential Ingredients**. They suggest specific learning outcomes, which combine to create the conditions for women to be confident and active in the public domain.

1. Value your own skills

- Confidence building, validating life experiences or practical skills development
- Presentation skills, public speaking, chairing meetings, budgeting, planning, dealing with difficult situations, being more assertive



- These can be the building blocks towards increased self esteem and an acceptance of one's own value and experience

2. Know yourself through and with others

- Provides the opportunity to make sense of the factors that shape your life, for example, education, religion, family, motherhood, sexuality, class, race, economic dependence
- While we have many experiences in common, we are all products of our particular and diverse cultures, backgrounds and traditions
- If we can learn how to value ourselves and communicate with others in a genuine way, we are in a better position to develop a network of support, deal with inevitable conflicts and work together to make positive changes.

“I believe that my life experiences have acted as the trigger for me to strive to create a greater awareness of issues that impact upon women's lives, and in the knowledge that women can affect change if they can develop a deeper insight into their own experiences, and that of others. Only then can you begin the process of change on a personal level, before you can begin to work on the process of change on a much wider scale.”

3. Know how the external world operates and choosing where you want to be

- To make changes and get our voices heard women need to know how the system operates: how decision-making structures are set up, how these structures work, who is involved, how accountable they are, who holds power in any given situation
- This means knowing about the local, national and international structures that impact upon our lives
- If we are clear about our place within the system; as a voter, a constituent, a consumer, a citizen, we start to have a clearer understanding about our rights, and responsibilities
- Once we have this knowledge we can make choices about where we want to be and the roles we want to play, for example, an elected member, a school governor, an MP, a magistrate, on a Citizen's Panel.

4. Know where to go to get what you want

- In order to make changes women have to make their voices heard, ask people for information and know how to get what they want from individuals and organisations
- This can involve negotiating, campaigning, lobbying - or simply being more assertive!

“The course sessions were delivered in a non threatening way, which made me feel safe and not judged as a group member, which was made up of a diverse group of women. This in itself broke down our feelings of isolation as we were mutually supportive of each other, our experiences were validated, and our overriding desire to take collective action inspired us to stride forth. I keep in contact with a number of the women from the course on a regular basis with whom I have developed friendships...”

(Italics are quotes from previous course participants)