



Making Safer Places and Promoting Good Relations in Islington

1. Background

Women's Design Service (WDS), established 20 years ago and now based in Islington, works to ensure that the design and use of the built environment reflects the needs and aspirations of women. We believe that the diverse communities of women who live in towns and cities should enjoy a quality environment that is well designed, accessible, environmentally sustainable, affordable and safe, and to that end we seek to work with women to improve the urban environment.

WDS has developed a process called Making Safer Places (MSP), a community safety audit tool which allows participants to assess the level of safety in the area in which they live, work or play. It helps them to identify factors that make a place feel safe or unsafe and to decide what should be changed. These changes can be as small as lighting and mirrors or larger infrastructure works. Our work has often shown that people's actual use of space differs significantly to the perceived use of that space and the purpose it was designed for. One of our MSP projects highlighted an unofficial shortcut between two train stations which took a route through a local housing estate. This shortcut reduced the walking time by up to 10 minutes and was considered safer by many women; the social landlord had been approached with a view to discussing the possibilities and there has been considerable public support and press coverage of the issue.

The MSP programme aims to empower local women by engaging them in analyzing and assessing their own local built environment and in taking an active, upfront role in designing danger out of their environment – and who better to do it than the women who actually live there. We also hope that as a consequence women are encouraged to play a bigger part in decision making than they currently do. There is notable activity in many communities at grassroots level by women; at decision-making levels, however despite a number of initiatives which have increased women's participation there are still insufficient numbers of women at this level to make a significant impact.

Making Safer Places is a structured programme which supports participants and gives them the opportunity to work with other local women to highlight community safety concerns and any community safety 'hotspots' :

- Find out where to go for help with improving community safety
- Present ideas for improving community safety where appropriate
- Women are trained using a structured programme which is also supported by a workbook which has been published by WDS

Making safer places was developed in response to mounting evidence that safety in urban environments is of enormous concern to many who live there, particularly

women and others who may be vulnerable due to their age, ethnic background or other causes. Fears for personal safety can seriously affect the quality of people's lives, either by deterring them from going out at certain hours, or by causing them to avoid certain routes, buildings or places.

2. Promoting Good relations in Finsbury Park (PGR)

Our work with women involves women from diverse backgrounds ages, cultures and religious beliefs and we are currently working in Islington on a project funded by the recently established Equalities and Human Rights Commission , called - "**Promoting Good Relations**" which specifically targets refugee and migrant women in Islington. **Promoting Good Relations** specifically targeted women who spoke Arabic, Spanish, Turkish and Somalian and it sought to identify both safety and planning issues from the women's perspectives.

WDS agreed with **IRIS (Islington Refugee Integration Services)** a role for the project in the LBI (London Borough of Islington) strategy which ensures that the work was complimentary. Making Safer Places also partnered with **FINFUTURES** to develop the project so that it was able to continue to build on some safety related research undertaken in early 2007 in the identified focus area - Blackstock road in Finsbury Park. The identified focus area had been identified in consultation with a number of agencies and women locally. A series of flyers and bags promoting the project translated in all of the identified languages had been produced and used to generate interest in the project.

Focusing on the Finsbury Park area "**Promoting Good Relations**" has succeeded in developing links with Arabic, Spanish and Turkish speaking women but it has been the Turkish speaking women who have formed a group to take this project forward. The group, which consists of approximately 24 women with a core of between 8-15 women from Cyprus, Turkey or of Kurdish origin, who have been meeting regularly every week to look at safety issues within the area. The women have completed the mapping and discussion process and have recently undertaken interviews with other women on the street. The "Promoting good relations project had attracted 4 volunteers to help with its development, Ramadan fell in early September and impacted on some of the organizations and individuals being targeted, it was decided to defer the activity scheduled. The **Promoting Good Relations** project has also been selected and as one of s series of projects to contribute to an article on Planning and Immigration for Progressive Planning Magazine in the USA.

Islington Women's Design Group –

WDS have also established a Women's Design Group here in Islington which has an on-going focus on looking at the environment here. The participants from the "Promoting Good Relations" programme have met with the Islington Women's Design Group which is established and holds regular meetings to look at on-going issues impacting women as a consequence of inadequate consultation planning and design. The Women's Design Group in conjunction with the **Promoting Good Relations** group participated in a special consultation looking at Islington Council Islington's Core Strategy for the next 15 years, where it was discovered that the group had not been involved in the consultation process at all and had not been able

to make any contribution. The women had a number of concerns which could not be addressed by the council representative Sakiba Gurda from planning, but she had agreed to raise them with the relevant departments and respond to the women.

Regular meetings with the group began in October but it was not until the New Year that the training session began in January 2009.

3. Training programme

Meetings were held regularly with the women in October 2008 though to November when the programme was scheduled to begin, in order to build a relationship with the group which could be sustained. The group was not ready to participate in the programme and a series of illnesses postponed the planned programme until the New Year. Regular structured weekly sessions were held at on Thursday's at the Durham Road Community Centre throughout January and February 2009

Despite the fact that we had a very able and capable translator, the entire training course was not without its difficulties with regards delivery. It was necessary to translate the principles of the programme and the rationale behind the reasons why the course was delivered as outlined. This resulted in additional time being allocated to every session and event throughout the programme.

WDS had budgeted for beneficiary costs to cover lunch, travel and childcare, however following discussions with the women it was decided that a weekly allowance would be given to the women and that they would cook communally to accommodate all participants. This allowed for a cross-fertilization of recipes from women who were Turkish, Kurdish or who were Cypriots so there was a great deal of variety and a way of including many of the women who felt they could not actively participate. These sessions served to encourage women to participate as many came for the meal and stayed for the sessions after.

4. Participants

Many of the groups approached were self-contained and relied on key workers to service the groups, we made links with some of these groups with a view to bringing the women together by inviting some of the Somali women to eat with the Turkish women, but they did not turn up. The group of Arabic speaking women approached had identified that they were actively engaged with other priorities but did contribute some valuable views to the process, and felt that they might be involved but at another time. The Spanish woman identified was keen to participate but was already engaged with courses at City and Islington College where her classes clashed with the sessions which had been confirmed as the most suitable time slot for all other participants.

WDS held a joint launch event in conjunction with FINFUTURES in order to explore community views on safety in the area; it succeeded in attracting a number of local residents with diverse backgrounds including Italy, Saudi Arabia and was able to record their contributions.

Participant backgrounds -

Age 1 participant was aged between, 20-30, 4 participants were aged between 40-50, and 8 participants were aged between 50-60. **Ethnicity** 10 participants were of Turkish origin, 2 of Kurdish descent and 5 of Cyprian descent, others declined to answer the question.

Disability 9 applicants completed the monitoring forms 7 participants identified themselves as having a disability, 5 participants had a physical disability, 2 participants had a chronic illness.

Religion All participants identified themselves as Muslim.

Impact on participants

Prior to participation on the programme, participants were asked to gauge provide a snapshot of how they currently felt about:

- Their local area
- Their knowledge and experience of community safety
- Their level of community involvement
- Their level of influence around community safety in their area

The questionnaire was anonymous, i.e. they were not required to identify themselves order to complete it. Participants were asked to review/ revisit these on completion of the programme.

Participants were asked to identify their feelings about Finsbury Park:

Prior to participating in the programme

- **Their local area**
7 participants felt it was a good place to live and 7 felt that they could help change attitudes in this area. 8 felt safe in this area during the daytime, x 4 felt safe in this area during the night
- **Their knowledge and experience of community safety** 2 felt that they had some knowledge of the built environment and community safety, 9 felt they had little or no knowledge or experience of community safety
- **Their level of community involvement** 11 belonged to one local groups and/or organisation, 2 belonged to more than one local group.

After participating in the programme

- All the women felt they had some knowledge or experience of community safety following participation in MSP programme. In addition, nine felt that they could help change attitudes in this area; eleven said that they had enjoyed conversations with a new person from a different background to

theirs since participating in the training sessions. All participants said that they would recommend the training to others.

5. Findings

Language is still a problem

While Islington has a high proportion of residents of Black or Black British and Chinese/other origin, above the average for London as a whole, Islington also has the eighth highest proportion of residents in the 'other white' group, in Islington's case this includes Turkish residents.

For migrants and refugees, the women we spoke to have told us that language barriers continue to present the biggest problem and often deny them an individual voice, they remain very isolated and dependant on others, often children. In planning terms this relates to signage and the use of more signs which use more images than text. Where signage exists in areas like the transport infrastructure, it is often only in the more common European languages.

Local crime reports and local news affect the women

Many of the women reacted badly to local news reports of crime; they said they felt depressed and scared when articles of high profile stabbings and shootings in Islington amongst the Turkish, Kurdish and Cypriot community. Often the case is that many of the women in the group know, either directly or indirectly the victims and become afraid. The group has formed links with the "safer neighborhood team" who now visit them regularly as part of their patrol in order to discuss issues of concern for the women.

Participants had experienced crime

Discussions about personal experiences threw up a range of incidents, one participant had been robbed, another saw someone being robbed, one had problems with groups of youth. Another member who lives on the top floor of a block was terrified when someone came through her window; she now no longer opens the window any more not even during summer when it is hot. One member who lives in Holloway described how someone tried to take her mother's bag (a woman of 83) they felt strongly that more police and patrols and maybe cameras would help the situation.

Transport presented its own problems

Another member never uses Finsbury Park station at night, whilst another avoids it when the football is scheduled. Some members had heard of the stations reputation and decided never to use it. Several members reported problems with pickpockets but were unable to report incidents because they did not speak English.

Buses were also a source of concern, especially drunk people and the youth after school, students and pupils very noisy, should have inspectors on the bus. One member was approached by a man, she was afraid, he was swearing but she couldn't

understand him, language problems. Another member had an experience with a drunken person, she was with her daughter, and he was an elderly man with a freedom pass and was abusing other passengers. Also when people argue the driver has to stop the bus, it's a waste of time so they don't report problems.

There was a view of “More space more people”

Many of the women we spoke to had separately raised the issue of “numbers of people” it was one thing that they had in common which made them all feel safer. Our cross section of women in conclusion included women's opinions from Turkey, Algeria, Italy, Saudi Arabia and Spain and there was strong feeling from almost all of the women we spoke to for the need of communal spaces. Some of the women identified that they had formerly been involved in communal intermediary organizations which played a pivotal role within their countries of origin i.e. organizing weddings, cultural and religious events on a large scale and even feeding the homeless.

Council could consider “Revisiting the use of space”

In Islington there are slightly more women than men in the overall population. There appears to be a large population of both males and females in their 20s and 30s in the area as well as a substantial number of young families.

Statistics from a national viewpoint show that the age structure of the population in Islington is very different. The average age of the population in Islington is just under 35 years; this is the eighth lowest in the country. Islington stands out having the second highest proportion nationally of those in the 30 to 44 age range in the country.

Our target area in Finsbury Park includes Blackstock Road and many women have told us that feel intimidated by the dominance of men who use the streets to socialise. While they felt that people being in the streets was not a bad thing and should be encouraged because it encouraged activity, they felt that the gender bias does need to be redressed. Women told us they were unable to get by with prams and did not feel encouraged to shop in this area, impacting the businesses as a consequence. They felt the streets were simply not designed to accommodate this way of socialising; again a perspective which seems to support the concept of town squares which they felt would provide a much safer environment

The British Crime Survey of 2002-2003, identified that 29% of women were very concerned about violent crime in their everyday lives, compared to only 10% of men. Engaging women so that they can see how fear of crime can be alleviated in practical and design terms is a significant step.

Still held different cultural views

During the weekly sessions discussions a number of issues were raised concerning safety, the women's concerns and speculation:

- that there was an almost unanimous view that there was too much freedom in the UK in comparison to their countries of origin.

- there was lack of respect at all levels
- people needed to work together, family, friends, authorities to encourage children to go to the police in the event of problems
- there was no encouragement of the family as a unit-government encourages single parents
- in Cyprus students were very quiet, not like those here on the buses especially and not with the same problem
- in Turkey, students generally had more respect and better discipline
- in the UK, “there is more democracy, but the children are different”. “Social workers not in Turkey like here”- “children go to Social Workers first then to family, the other way around in Cyprus” , “the UK is very free”

6. Exit strategy

The formal programme concluded at the end of February but WDS continued to work with the group to explore progression routes.

- Progression routes include exploring possible participation on an introduction to enterprise for refugees. The women were all keen on developing their existing craft skills that they had brought with them to the UK and they were keen to take their work to market if support were made available for them to do so.
- Potential for a partnership was identified with FINFUTURES, IRIS and Islington Business Forum to explore the possibility of a women’s enterprise club as an exit strategy for the women WDS had been working with. This would allow many of the women the opportunity to develop further any existing craft skills and increase both their integration and employment or further study potential; many of the women are very keen on this possibility.
- The women’s findings have been discussed with IRIS and they are in the process of pulling together a core of appropriate Council Officers who the women can present their findings to. IRIS has held meetings with the women directly in order to expand of their findings and clarify for the women how they intended to take matters forward.
- Discussions have been held with key Councillors with a remit for refugees in order to explore further developments and a presentation ceremony at the town hall has been discussed in order to provide the participants with certificates of completion .
- The women felt that they had developed more confidence as a consequence of participating in the programme, budget provision had been made to provide some token of appreciation to all of the participants for giving up so much of their time, however the women decided on a more adventurous end to the programme.
- A trip to the London eye was organized at the end of the programme. This was so successful that the women are now exploring the possibility of a residential trip out of London; they are very keen on the Lake District and are trying to raise funding to do so. Following much debate the decision was made to go somewhere none of the women had gone before and children were to be included. This was an important decision because the women were keen to ensure that their children would have more exposure to

activities and events, in an attempt to avoid the insularity which had affected the quality of many of their lives.

- The regular Thursday slot has since been replaced by a Yoga slot; the group has also continued their discussions with Family Mosaic to publish a bilingual cookbook of recipes, which they have secured funding for.
- The women had been looking at their recipes and have decided that they would like to share them with a wider audience; they have developed this idea and created the template for a bilingual cookery book in English and Turkish. They have also secured funding for publishing this book from a local housing association.
- Group now want to extend this concept further and are keen to teach other women from different cultural backgrounds how to make yoghurt hummus and cheese, WDS has continued to explore ways of raising finance with the group to do this.
- The group is keen to explore providing support to other women in the community and is discussing possible funding sources with the WDS worker. They aim to provide specific support for the elderly and create a health project-to deal with a wide age range of participants – with disability and long term illness, also mental health and those unable to leave their homes that need visits from the community to prevent isolation.

7. Challenges

There were difficulties in accessing the women and a number of the agencies, to whom we distributed information, were unable to grasp the concept of the project and were unable to relay it effectively to their members. Many were concerned at what would happen when the project concluded – the short period of time made it appear transitory and had an impact on it being taken seriously.

- Such a short time period poses significant challenges for a project which has to adopt a community development approach. Process is as important as harder outputs, within a community development approach and a longer time period is required when working with the most excluded groups / communities
- Until a focus area was confirmed; recruitment strategy had to remain open and was borough wide, this made it difficult for the potential participants to engage at a local level. It was also difficult to engage a number of the referral agencies, our delayed focus came as a consequence of the deferred agreement with the local authority with regards activities which would compliment existing services
- We had a chicken and egg situation for a period of time and considerable time was spent in chasing individuals in an effort to pull a group of disparate women together, without a geographical focus it was difficult to keep potential women engaged. When the focus area was finally identified, some women considered Finsbury Park to be far from their immediate locality and were not comfortable commenting on an area because they were unfamiliar with it.

- Groups already had timetable of activities, project needed to fit in with that and respect existing priorities. It was necessary to spend a lot of time explaining the project because although it was important many women simply felt that no-one was very serious and that they simply had to put up with conditions and environments that they felt were dangerous. Many had raised issues with the local; authority but had no response assumed not high on the agenda. – Difficult to convince women to participate in that context.
- Refugee week event was very successful, we secured the interest of many potential applicants but many were ineligible and those who were local did not participate for the reasons outlined above During the recruitment phase, we met with many women who were interested but did not live in the target group; many of them attended local groups to support their peers so it was quite difficult to explain to the women that there would be support i.e. travel and childcare for beneficiaries (Islington residents) but not for non-residents when the women all wanted to stay together, as new arrivals they did not recognise the borough boundaries and borders.
- Constant language barriers have proved to be a major difficulty throughout, although we had a translator considerably more time needed to be allocated to every step of the programme. If the main translator was not available for any event the women would not participate, it was not just a case of language provision, because they also had developed a bond of trust which was very important.
- During the recruitment process, the champion for the Turkish women was hospitalised and the women would not attend without her, a similar meeting was held the following week for the Turkish group of women following which they then decided to join the programme.

8. Recommendations

The women had already established groups in which they were comfortable, so they were reluctant to step outside of that immediate comfort zone, activities needed to be taken into them future project with wide objectives to bring together different cultures in this way would benefit from either 3 separate workers, each working with a different group who could bring them together. Alternately one worker could work with a group at a time and use the former group to recruit and support the subsequent groups, because the process of gaining the women's trust and forming a group takes some time the project would need to be sufficient length to accommodate this. Such a short time period poses significant challenges for a project which has to adopt a community development approach. Process is as important as harder outputs, within a community development approach and a longer time period is required when working with the most excluded groups / communities.