

Supporting Women Project

ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2015



24th of June 2015

London Metropolitan University



PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Evelyn Oldfield Unit's Supporting Women Project held its annual conference on the 24th of June in the London Metropolitan University.

This event was the culmination of a year of work designed to support refugee and asylum-seeking community groups to be in a stronger position to support women affected by violence and trauma.

The Supporting Women Project has been set up to build capacity of 3rd sector refugee and asylum-seeking groups and facilitates links with mainstream and statutory groups working with women who have experienced trauma and violence.

CONFERENCE SUMMARY

80 women representing refugee community organisations and mainstream charities and agencies gathered at this conference, all motivated by the desire to take action to tackle violence against women and to support those affected by trauma. A key idea behind the conference was to network and connect and many were motivated to attend because of this.

This full-day conference began with keynote speeches, followed by five workshops. The afternoon session started with a mindfulness exercise and showcasing innovation and good practice in the sector. A creative input was provided by Praxis Family Care, a peer to peer support group for trafficked women who shared their facilitation tools and creative project outputs with the conference. A final input was from Asylum Aid who shared their work on the Protection Gap campaign. The conference was closed with plenary session to share discussions from each workshop and certificates for the all the volunteers who have contributed to the project.

This event was chaired and run by the Supporting Women Project steering group, all women representing the community sector, and mainly from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

Timing	Activity
10:00-10:15	Opening-women from steering group
10:15-11:15	Keynote speakers
11:15-11:30	Q and A
11:30-11:45	Coffee break
11:45-1:15	Workshops
1:15-1:45	Lunch + networking exercises
1:45-2:00	Mindfulness exercise

2:00-2:30	Showcasing innovation & Good Practice
2:30-3:15	Creative input from Praxis Family Care
3:15-3:30	Coffee & sweet treats
3:30-4:15	Plenary/ Input from Asylum Aid /Certificates /Project planning
4:15-4:30	Evaluation and close

OPENING

The session was opened with the Introduction from the Steering Group Women. The entire event was chaired by Princess Cheney Onyeukwu, volunteer with several agencies, qualified in law and Salna Abdallah, Director of Stepping Stones 4, a Swahili women support agency.



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS



Mulat Haregot is the Director of The Evelyn Oldfield Unit, one of the key second tier voluntary organisations working with refugee and migrant community organisations in London. In the last 20

years he has been working with a range of voluntary and community organisations in a number of roles.



Donna Covey is the Director of Against Violence and Abuse. She worked in the trade union movement, specializing in equality and diversity issues, and has run third sector organisations, including Asthma UK and the Refugee Council. She is a founder trustee of Counterpoints Arts- a refugee and migrant arts charity. She has written extensively on health equality and human rights issues. In 2013 Donna was awarded the CBE for services to equality and human rights. She presented on *'A broad overview of developments in the Violence against Women sector with a focus on refugee + migrant women*



Rupinder Parhar works at Eaves an organisation that aims to address violence against women and girls in the UK. Eaves specialises in supporting women exiting prostitution as well as tackling sexual violence and trafficking. Rupinder provides training, advice and advocacy around access to support services for migrant women, who are victims of domestic violence or in other vulnerable situations. She presented on *No Recourse to Public Funds: Current Policy and a Case for the Future*



Aaliya Abdirahman is a community worker, advocator and activist. She focuses on domestic violence and abuse within the Somali community in London. Aaliya works in a women’s organisation - Positive Action for Somali Women Association ‘PASWA’- which empowers women through knowledge and experience. She is a from the EOU research and advocacy course, presented on *Domestic Violence & Abuse within the Somali Community in London*.

Highlights of the session (from the evaluation):

- All speakers highlighted the vital role of grass roots organisations and the need for mainstream organisations to link with, and support the grassroots.
- Screening of *Our Girl* a short film on the forced marriage.
- Input from a refugee community organisation on their work to tackle violence against women.
- In the Q and A round, the questions were asked to sought clarification or elaboration from the speaker. The inclusion of written questions was enabled more people to participate.

WORKSHOPS



The practical workshops focused on the themes from the keynote speeches. We broke into 5 groups and moved twice in total. Discussions were on the following:

- Supporting refugee women who face domestic violence - challenges and successes - sharing good practice
- The networking table: supporting refugee and mainstream women's groups to work together more
- Supporting those without recourse to public funds challenges and successes - sharing learning
- Mental health workshop - supporting refugee women with mental health needs to access support
- Resilience for women's projects - sharing ideas post-elections



MINDFULNESS EXERCISE

Sheena Vella, volunteer with the Evelyn Oldfield with a psychology background, ran a 10 minute mindfulness exercise, designed to relax everyone after the challenging topics that we were covering in the morning.

INNOVATION

At this stage of the conference, Maslaha and Sodabeh Gashtasebi presented their respective projects.

Speaker Sarah Hobbs for Maslaha outlined the work of Maslaha whose aim is to “change and challenge the conditions that create inequalities for Muslim communities” particularly in the areas of health, education and criminal justice. As part of ‘One Billion Rising’, Maslaha facilitated 50 young people to have the opportunity to discuss violence against women in Parliament, alongside an expert panel and representatives from various organisations working with these issues.

Sodabeh Gashtasebi presented on behalf of the Islington Women's Centre. She presented their work as a newly established organisation supporting vulnerable women including ethnic minority homosexual

women. This was identified as an area to which very few, if any, services are targeted. Islington Women's Centre is equipped with the transcultural knowledge and expertise to assist homosexual women from ethnic minorities.

Finally, to conclude, Asylum Aid's Policy and Research Manager Debora Singer and Zoe Gardner gave a presentation on the ongoing Protection Gap Campaign, and suggested ways how everyone can get involved. The campaign addresses deficiencies in the asylum system when it comes to assessing the claims of women who have experienced rape or domestic violence. The presentation outlined that there are various barriers that inhibit women with such experiences from disclosing sensitive but important information, or place them in very difficult situations in doing so. Furthermore, women may not be aware of the importance of such disclosures as part of their asylum claim to allow for a fair assessment. The campaign advocates for a gender-sensitive asylum procedure and appropriate provisions for childcare, a right to a female interviewer and interpreter, training for interviewers on the impact of trauma on memory, counseling provisions and better information provision for women in the asylum process. The audience was encouraged to sign and send pre-designed postcards to the House of Commons requesting these 5 rights for women in the asylum procedure.

SPECIAL INPUT FROM PRAXIS FAMILY CARE

NB no photos are available due to the sensitive nature of the group.

An innovative and creative input was given by Praxis Family Care. Praxis Family Care is a peer support group for survivors of trafficking and gender-based violence. The presentation was an in-vivo experience of the process of support that takes place in the group's meetings. The group used prompt cards and a system to talk and open up to each other about what is going on in group members' daily lives and life circumstances. The group also used each others' talents, such as singing songs from their homelands, together with humour, to express their commonalities and differences and bring forth catharsis.

CONFERENCE EVALUATION

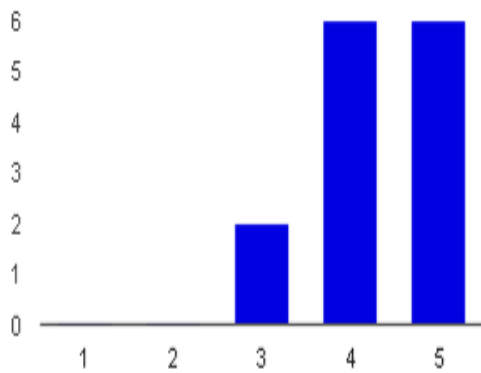
Only 16 people filled in the evaluation which is an area that needs to be improved by the EOU. We had invited a critical friend along to observe the entire conference and her feedback is also given below. Furthermore we received a great deal of informal feedback and emails following on from the event enthusiastically stating what a powerful and uplifting event it was, despite the hard topics being covered.

1. Please tick if you are a ...



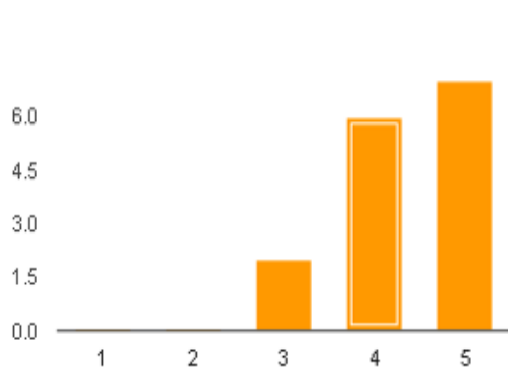
Mainstream group	5	41.7%
Refugee / migrant group	7	58.3%

2 a. I know of other mainstream agencies that can support me on these issues now (or at least more than before)



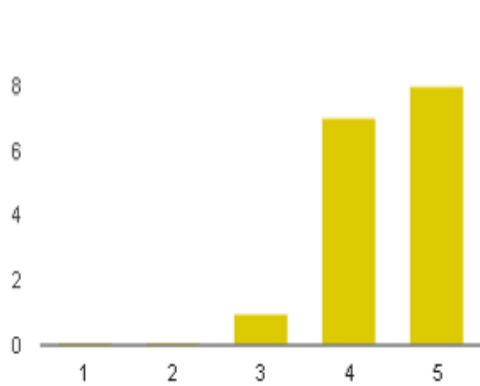
Don't agree at all / weakest score: 1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	2	14.3%
4	6	42.9%
I strongly agree / highest score: 5	6	42.9%

2 b. I fell better linked to community groups working on these issues now



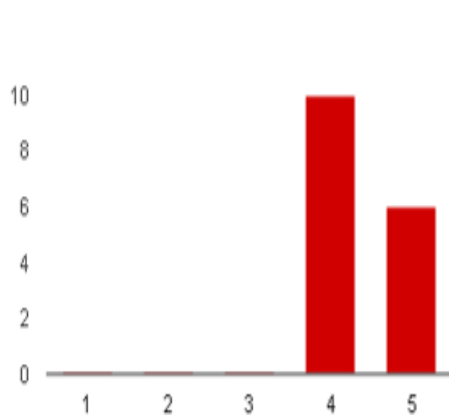
Don't agree at all / weakest score : 1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	2	13.3%
4	6	40%
I strongly agree / highest score : 5	7	46.7%

2 d. This new knowledge will help me to be better able to deal with vulnerable women (directly or through referral)



Don't agree at all / weakest score : 1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	1	6.3%
4	7	43.8%
I strongly agree / highest score : 5	8	50%

2 c. I have increased / updated my understanding of the needs of refugee / asylum seeking women on the issues listed today



Don't agree at all / weakest score : 1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	10	62.5%
I strongly agree / highest score : 5	6	37.5%

What were the highlights of today's event for you?

- Praxis family care- 8
- Workshop- x 6
- The keynote presentations x 5
- Meeting people from different organisations we could work with x 5
- Networking- 4
- Knowledge of current research
- Updating my knowledge
- All areas
- Maslaha
- Hearing various women's stories
- Princess + Salna's charring
- The "education"
- Ongoing ideas
- Networking + coffee!
- Positive energy to keep us going in our work

4 a. Can you identify any ways in which you think the event could be improved?

- The event was well run
- It's already improved a lot (from last year)
- It was very slow moving at the beginning
- Could have talked about one silent victims of the children
- Giving more time to key speakers or splitting their papers into two parts x 2
- Less time on house-keeping etc - just needs a simple statement
- They did very well
- No, very well organised

5 a. Do you have any specific ideas of topics that you would like the Evelyn Oldfield Unit to deliver training on?

- Women leadership x 2
- Networking
- Policy analysis
- Overall a brilliant event! Thank you! Networking sheet great idea!
- Making referrals
- Fundraising x 2
- Can you please let me know if you are running your counselling course again as it sounded fantastic
- Advocacy training
- Yes, McKenzie Friends. For those who find themselves caught up in the tribunal and court service
- Improving lobbying strategies

- Accredited trainings
- Child protection and FGM
- Circulating networking sheet ahead of the event including a brief description what the organisations, individuals do, and where they are based and their details etc.
- Introducing ESOL courses so that people who don't speak English can benefit

OVERALL: SOME CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

Time Constraints and Depth of Information

Time constraints were perceived as possibly the major limitation to this conference. It is clear that there was detailed information to be imparted throughout, and while the Chair did a skilled job in acknowledging everybody's contributions, a quicker pace and smoother transitions would have improved the timing.

The speakers usually had significant detailed and valuable information to contribute to the audience. The number of written questions submitted demonstrates that this was a really useful innovation and enabled more people to participate.

All speakers highlighted the vital role of grass roots organisations and the need for mainstream organisations to link with, and support the grassroots.

Active Participation

The steering committee and speakers who had benefited directly from the services of Evelyn Oldfield Unit emerged as clear examples of the positive work of the Unit, and all felt a need to contribute back to the Unit and their communities. In the workshops as well, it was also evident that women were using to the full the learning and support they had received from the Supporting Women's Project - a testimony to the work of the project, it is clearly highly valued by its users. The Networking opportunity was very well received and continued well into lunch break.

Workshops

The workshops revealed that in some sectors such as domestic abuse, conference participants had a lot of expertise to share and contribute. In other areas such as policies and legislation, participants seemed more interested in receiving information and learning in detail from the group leader's level of expertise, although they were also encouraged to contribute.

There seemed to be a lot of sharing of information, experiences and practice in all the groups. This meant that the workshops were an opportunity for women to learn from each other and it felt as if they each had different pieces of the jigsaw that when fitted together contributed to a bigger picture. The

level of knowledge and expertise these women have and the amazing work they are doing was truly striking.

Innovation and Relevance

It was refreshing to learn about innovative practices such as Sodabeh's project, addressing the needs of homosexual women in an inclusive manner that challenges the status quo. The Praxis Family Care project was also presented in an innovative manner which allowed the participating women to speak (and sing), rather than the group leader. The presentation was very empowering and uplifting and demonstrated rather than presented the support strategies that are used within the group. The Malasha project, addressing mental health, also received a lot of interest and seemed to address relevant needs among participants. The use of video was well received. Clearly other groups are interested in accessing these materials.

Call to Action

The presentation by Asylum Aid about the Protection Gap campaign was a good call to action and it was particularly impressive to see that they are wanting to support asylum seeking women to shape and lead the campaign, working with them not doing things for them.

OVERALL

Final comments – the Unit is very pleased with the event and the sheer number of people who turned up. We will take on board all of the learning and strive to continually improve. Most importantly, we will continue to build spaces to bring activists together to share learning, experience and therefore build capacity to support some of the most vulnerable women in society.