

Countering a discourse of male dominance

A yMIND case study by Colin Isham, external evaluator

yMIND partner AÖF worked with a cultural centre supporting immigrants and refugees in Vienna to offer and deliver Popular Opinion Leader (POL) to women who attended the centre. For the most part, the participating women originated from mainly Moslem countries.

yMIND partners have applied POL in new contexts, centring on the potentially sensitive issue of gender discrimination. This focus on social relations, as opposed to health improvement, as in the original POL programmes, has created real challenges for partners in the implementation of POL. This has been no different in AÖF's experience, where original interest among a number of women did not translate into participation in the sessions, attended by four, three and finally only two participants. Nevertheless, three stories from this group illustrate how POL training can provide the impetus and support to challenge deep-seated discrimination.

Tiya

Between training sessions Tiya engaged in a conversation with a male friend about the POL topic, and was surprised to find out that he himself had been violent towards his wife. This was something new to Tiya. The friend had in fact been so violent, he was placed under an order by the police, and forbidden to return home for fourteen days. After the conversation Tiya saw the friend in a different light and began asking questions about why she hadn't noticed this herself and seen the signs.

Lateefah

Lateefah engaged with the theme of gender discrimination with enthusiasm from the first session. She took to heart the training and applied what she had learned between sessions, as foreseen by the model. As with Tiya, Lateefah engaged in conversation with a male friend about the topic of gender equality, and as with Tiya, she was surprised to find he had an underlying assumption that men should dominate in a relationship. In his opinion, a woman should not go to work once she is married. This was something Lateefah could not agree with: 'I can't say it's violence, but I can't accept it. This is my life, and I want to decide for myself what I do'.

As a result of the training, both Tiya and Lateefah found out more about the attitudes of male friends, and began reappraising their relationship towards them accordingly.

Afsana

Afsana found that negative attitudes towards women in her country of origin could surface again in different forms in Austria. She spoke of women in her country of origin not finding refuge with the police if they suffered violence at home, but rather police asking husbands in such cases why they didn't keep a closer eye on their wife. Discrimination in her workplace in Austria took a subtler form. Here she found that when she spoke up about a male colleague touching her thigh, that she was then ostracised for being 'too sensitive'. The man found sympathy as the victim, while Afsana in the end left her job because the atmosphere has become hostile towards her. Afsana continued to have difficulty in the workplace, which underlined the challenges women can face in standing up to discrimination.

In all three cases it is clear the young women were motivated to attend the POL training because gender discrimination played a significant role in their lives. The yMIND intervention provided a basis from which they could explore the issue in more depth and start taking a stand.

For more information on POL and the yMIND project, visit our website at:

<http://www.youth-mind.eu/>