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The Shared Societies Project:
Leadership for Dialogue, Diversity and Social Cohesion

Building a world safe for difference

Replicable example of practice

Commitment IV

Ensure the legal framework protects the rights of the individual

Suggested Approach:

- Introduce programmes of affirmative action that include the equipping of members of groups disadvantaged and discriminated against, with the skills necessary to function confidently in work and other social and economic contexts.
- Use awareness campaigns and materials to inform citizens about their rights and obligations, including available resources and mechanisms to redress discrimination and human rights abuses.

Women, Health and Violence Program

Country: Spain

Background

- Bilbao is the largest city in the Basque region of northern Spain and like many cities in Spain, immigration is increasingly critical to its future.
- Since 2000, Bilbao has maintained its population of around 354,000 thanks only to the constant supply of foreign nationals which has offset the decline of the native population.
- Between 2000 and 2010, its percentage of migrants rose from 1% to 8.2% of the population, a demographic trend likely to continue towards the national average of 12%, or higher.
- Today, the majority of Bilbao's foreign-born inhabitants are from Latin America, with newer communities of Romanians, Chinese, Roma, North and sub-Saharan Africans.
- In 2008, Bilbao was galvanized to action by the tragic death of a young woman following an abortion and there was evidence that this may not have been an isolated case. Research suggested that lack of information and access to services increased the vulnerability of marginalized and minority women on health-related issues.

Goals

- To promote women's health in immigrant communities through "agents of empowerment".
- To promote sexual and reproductive health among immigrant women, including prevention related to gender-based violence and issues related to cultural and sexual identity.
- To empower individual women to participate and become leaders in their own communities.

Method

- Engaging Bilbao's diverse communities was the city's first step.
- To deepen their understanding of the needs of immigrant women and for more effective outreach and dissemination, the program partnered with community organizations, promoting the role of local institutions as a resource.
- The way to address immigrant women's health and safety was through "agents of empowerment", women trained to help each other within the comfort of their homes and without fear of discrimination or backlash.
- Women who had agreed to act as "agents of empowerment" received training; five women from each group.
- Health agents were selected for their leadership potential and ability to connect with other women in their communities.
- Their responsibilities included creating a safe space for conversation, encouraging intercultural exchange, and promoting the multiplier effect of discussions about gender violence and sexual health through community forums.

Impact

- In 2010, the Women, Health and Violence program successfully trained 35 empowerment agents and in 2011, 26 more women received the program's diplomas.
- To date, 465 immigrant women from 38 different nationalities have participated directly.
- The city has also distributed over 3,000 copies of a print and online resource, "Guidelines for Women," focused on sexual health among other topics. The guide was published in Romanian, Chinese, French, Arabic, Castilitian and Euskera.
- The Women, Health and Violence program was recognized by the Spanish Ministry of Labour and Immigration, as an example of city councils implementing local plans to raise awareness on equal treatment and non-discrimination (2010).
- The program was also recognized as a best practice by the European Network OPENCities (2011).

Enabling Conditions

- The City was faced with the challenge of the city's surging population and a high birth-rate among its new migrants.
- The shock of the death of the young woman created support for the initiative.
- There was a dedicated department in the council which could be given responsibility for developing the initiative

References

Bilbao City Council, Women, Health and Violence Program:
http://mujeresdelmundobabel.org/files/2011/10/guiacastellano.pdf