


the lack of services in their community. In an organizing and community building process of many years, the women later decided to join the Community Action Board (legally constituted community governance structures) and proposed Nelly Guapacha as a candidate. Nelly began as the secretary of the Board. She was president for several terms and currently is also the president of the Local Administration Board, (a district governance structure) which represents the centre and the zones. Of this new situation, Nelly comments: "We thought that if I was on the Community Board, we could have more support, and we got more involved in it. At that time, the Community Board was in the hands of men but the community's flag had been lost; the Board's books had been carried away by the river; materials arrived to build dressing rooms at the football field, but they disappeared. People saw cement arrive but it was never seen again; the toilets came but never appeared." Men showed little ability to manage and carry out projects.

Women joining the Community Action Board marked the beginning of a different management style. Nelly comments that, "Before, the little money that came was divided into some for Cauca Viejo, some for Cascajal, some for El Hormiguero [three different settlements]; instead we decided to reach an agreement and see where the work was most necessary." In this manner, a significant amount of cash was allocated where it could make a real difference rather than disbursing funds to scattered little projects.

Steinkopf, South Africa

Women in South Africa present yet another reality that speaks to the importance of women in local political decision making, according to Matilda Smith's research. It's best summed up by this woman from Steinkopf who said:

"We are better placed than the men to deal with local government problems. After all, during the week it is the women who manage and solve the daily problems,



such as no electricity and the consequent problems of feeding the family and children. All that the men do, on being informed of the many problems when they come home from the mines for the weekend is to ask: 'En toe? Wat het jy gedoen?' (What did you do?). And on hearing our strategies and solutions for dealing with the problems, they respond: 'Dis slim!' (That's clever) ❧

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Further Reading and Resources

Beijing Platform of Action. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform>

Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity. Women in Local Government. No. 26, 1995 Durban, South Africa

Accessing City Hall

The Working Group on Women's Access to Municipal Services in Ottawa

Caroline Andrew, Pat Harewood, Fran Klodawsky, and Alette Willis

The reporter caught both the diversity of women and their desire for full participation in municipal affairs in the description of our forum. This forum was part of a project to examine women's access to municipal services in Ottawa.

In 1998 the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) had issued a declaration on Women and Local Government. Montreal had endorsed this declaration and so had the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM). Diane Holmes, who was then a regional councillor and has since come back to the amalgamated City Council, felt that we could use the IULA

"They are an unlikely group of warriors: pregnant women, disabled, elderly and teens, black and white, homeless, rich, Anglophone, Francophone. But they are all women, and they are crying out to City Council to acknowledge them."

The Ottawa Citizen [September 30, 2001]

Declaration to advance women's issues in Ottawa. So the regional government adopted a resolution agreeing to set up a

Working Group to study the current situation of women's access to services. *Lesson No. 1: use the global to advance the local.*



We were successful in getting support from Status of Women Canada to do focus groups with diverse groups of women. We wanted the focus groups to represent the rapidly increasing ethno-cultural diversity of Ottawa and they did. Our success was due in part to our clear objectives and theoretical focus, and in part because the staff worked really hard, through good community contacts to put into practice what we had agreed to in theory. The focus group kit by David Morgan (Sage Publications, 1998) was a great resource. It gave us legitimacy in arguing for the need for there to be "within group similarity" and "between group diversity." *Lesson No. 2: both theory and practice are important in terms of integrating diversity.*

We held 20 focus groups, including about 160 women from very different perspectives. They discussed their experiences with municipal services; what had been frustrating, what had facilitated their access and what could make their lives easier.

We then held the community forum, captured in the *Citizen* article quoted above. The forum was a wonderful example of reaching across differences to establish shared objectives. With the help of simultaneous interpretation, sign interpretation, cultural interpretation and the ability to cover childcare and transportation, we succeeded in bringing together a wide diversity of women and achieved agreement on the recommendations to be made to the City. *Lesson No. 3: taking account of diversity requires resources, as well as careful planning.*

The recommendations that came out of the Forum were as follows:

1. Develop a City communications strategy that is built on an understanding of the diversity of women and on the ways in which diverse groups of women get information;
2. Ensure the equitable provision of services. This entails better information to people using services and strategies to reduce cost as a barrier to equitable access;
3. Consider the diverse needs of women in making program decisions, including

consideration of co-location, relation to OC Transpo service, physical accessibility, cultural interpretation, short-term child-minding, and accessibility in terms of time; and

4. Develop policies for engendering governance, including specific participation policies, cultural awareness training for staff, etc.

The forum provided eloquent evidence of the importance of inclusive social services as a component of social citizenship. It also highlighted some of the contradictory pressures on women's lives in Canada at the present time — between roles as citizens and roles as mothers, between policies directed to women as a generic category and policies relating to the intersections of gender, race, immigration status, age and class (not to mention sexual orientation, disability, language, etc., etc., etc.).

We also asked the City Manager's office to review our study and its recommendations and to report back. This was done and the City's review included descriptions of initiatives that existed. The Working Group evaluation of the City's report concluded that there was no comprehensive gender analysis as the basis for making policy decisions, nor in evaluating programs and activities, nor in decision-making processes. However, by the time the City's report had come out, the Working Group had spent its budget and could no longer pay staff to support and facilitate the on-going involvement of the focus group participants. *Lesson No. 4: similar to Lesson No. 3: resources are necessary to ensure organizational support for participation from marginalized groups.*

We are in fact now beginning a follow-up project, entitled City for All Women Initiative, to look at good practices for the engendering municipal practices, through a partnership of community-based women's groups and municipal staff and politicians. It is a one-year project to identify ways of ensuring that women and men in Ottawa have equal opportunity to make and influence decisions about our city.

What did the Working Group achieve? And, particularly, what were our success-

es in increasing the City's sensitivity to the diversity of women? This is obviously not an easy question to answer. On the positive side, the Working Group's findings were cited in the Human Service Plan, adopted by the City in the summer of 2003. Clearly the report resonated with People Services staff at the City. On the less positive side, the City is currently in a huge budget debate about whether to cut services or raise taxes, or some combination of the two. Clearly cuts to services would limit the capacity of the City to be more inclusive.

Perhaps most importantly, the project did prove the importance of municipal policy and inclusive urban services. Such services are a vital component of citizenship by recognizing that diversity is a valuable contribution to citizenship. Urban services that facilitate the full participation of all women in the economic, social, cultural and political life of the City of Ottawa would make an enormous difference. The Working Group's report presented the vision — it remains to make it a reality.

The inclusion of diversity requires commitment — and resources. It requires the head, the heart and the feet. ❧

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