



Comment [MSOffice1]:

‘Respect and value the full diversity of women’s situation and conditions and recognises that some women faces particular barrier to their empowerment’
(Beijing platform for Action 1995)

Assessing the Needs of African Women in Ireland

Conducted by AkiDwa

Funded By Combat Poverty Agency

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Introduction

This report is a narrative of project of activities on establishing African women's network that was carried out by AkiDwA with once off grant that was received from Combat Poverty Agency in November 2003.

Visits were made to 12 groups, 3 covering the Dublin area (Tallaght, Branchers town, Dublin inner-city), Longford, Droghda, Dundalk, Waterford, Wexford, Galway, Clare, Portlaoise and Eden Derry. Contacts through phone were made to other groups that were not visited such as Cork, Athy, Kilkenny and Kildare. Consistence meeting were held with 5 groups, in Dublin, Clare, Galway, Longford and Droghda. A total of 135 Women were reached by this programme.

Methodology/Activities

Group meetings with approximately 12 African women participating in each were held and women were encouraged to participate in discussion. A forum meeting was held in September.

Through brainstorming and sharing experiences the women were able to identify their needs. This was a healing and therapeutic process for some of the women as they realised their individual problems mainly isolation and social exclusion was very not unique they as well explored on means of tackling some of the problems. Areas identified were-

Racism and discrimination

Almost all the women who participated in this programme had experienced one form of racism or other ranging from verbal attacks, violence in streets to the subtlest forms like being rejected by GPs because they are medical card holders, some were not sure if they were communicating with doctors during medical visits' and hence not certain they were being treated for their conditions. Individual racism has had very adverse effects to African women and especially those living outside Dublin where social networks of other African Networks are not as organised. The negative effects of racism have been reluctance of African women to participate in community development process and activities locally and regionally.

Unemployment

This affects African women in the two categories,
(a) Those with residence status and hence allowed to work legally without a work permit. The biggest handicap for this is the lack of recognition of academic qualifications obtained from home countries. There is a visible discrimination for Africans in the job market, which can closely be identified with institutional racism since a considerable number of women participating in these need assessment workshops had been involved in projects providing a service to asylum seekers and refugees as volunteers but when opportunities arose they were never considered as potential employees.

(b) Those still awaiting a decision on their asylum application are not allowed to work thus resulting in a multiple and related problems including, depression, stress and increased isolation and further marginalisation.

Lack of training and opportunities.

Most of the training offered to refugees' falls within language and computing skills however for women that would like to establish themselves as entrepreneurs such skills are not offered within the accessible frameworks. This frustrates such women because they are forced to enter into business without the necessary skills or such aspirations are aborted before they are actually born. This problem was understood to be well planned to deter African women ascending into areas deemed too big for them and continue to contain them in less prestigious jobs. Women had issues with the amount of time lost from the period of entering reception centres to getting the application approved as crucial for training and this could help women from thinking of their loved and lost ones in far away lands. Hence training could be used as a therapy for these women.

Lack of childcare facilities

This is a widespread problem for African and has far reaching effects on how they integrate and participate in the Irish society. Removed from the African communal life it is difficult for African women to participate without having to bring along their children. This environment is not conducive for learning or effective concentration but also affects the state of the children who are confined in one place for several hours. Thus many women opt not to participate at all.

Limited mobility.

Women with more than one child find it extremely difficult to commute from one place to the other with children. The hassle involved in organising children makes it difficult for such African mothers to attend to activities that could enhance their capacities. This is made worse by the fact that such women might be required to pick children at schools so this change in social set up works against the efforts such women might be making to be more involved in the societies where they live.

Isolation, Depression and Stress

Most African women expressed concern over their peers who are undergoing untold suffering in hostels or their houses. Women who have arrived in the country with posttraumatic stress find it hard to disclose their circumstances to medical practitioners and most women would not disclose their ordeals to male doctors when the perpetrators of the crime they are running away from are men. Some women expressed distrust with medical establishments or government led initiatives to address their plight. Suspicion of confidential information being leaked to DJELR hence undermining their asylum process was seen as the main factor underlying their isolation.

The dispersal and direct provision policy that overtly isolates African women and the greater asylum seeker community from other settled or integrated refugees exacerbate

this problem. The rules governing the hostels are anti-integration and some with regard to women are cramped in a small room with their teenage children. This is not culturally accepted by African culture and such women are deeply stressed and depressed with such situation.

“ I feel like going back home, but where can I go it is too risky to go there and am scared for what may happen to my children, my husband is in exile in another country” A South African woman.

Poverty

Poverty is not unique to African women but too most asylum seekers and refugees as well as Irish people. What makes it unique to African women is that these women lost everything they had before fleeing and most of them cannot secure employment due to their fragile legal status and employment policy that discriminate against asylum seekers. Some women shared their experiences of reducing the feeds for their babies as they cant meet the demand the cost of food while you are not allowed to work to contribute to the little allowance you get every week. This is seen as a drive for African women to work in the black economy earning peanuts for long hours and those who cannot get employment engage in illegal activities, and neglect their roles as carers for their children which fuels to resentment from the Irish community and negative generalisations about African women.

Recommendations

AkiDwA has a pivotal role in shaping the direction of African women interest groups in Ireland. AkiDwA need to be resourced (finance and human) to implement actions and practises that can liberate African women from the bondage of poverty, psychosocial and emotional servitude. Nevertheless the complete liberation of African women requires concerted efforts between AkiDwA, Allies, supporters and government policies and enforcement of perpetrators of racially motivated crimes. However, most of all the great challenge and responsibility lies among African women themselves.

This work takes place at four levels:

- A) African women groups nationwide
- B) Support groups working with African women
- C) Service providers
- D) Government departments.

AkiDwA needs to:

- Dialogue with support groups for African women/asylum seekers and refugees to be able to identify critical problems affecting African women. This should take into consideration the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity among African women. While culture is dynamic and very fluid AkiDwA should not be complacent in challenging cultural beliefs that many non –African support workers fail to challenge for fear of being seen as imposing western ideas e.g risk of FGM, Domestic violence, early marriages being inflicted on Irish children of deported parents.

- Provision of interpreters for African women of their choice, AkiDwA should liaise with the relevant government departments, DJELR and Education and others in ensuring that translators and interpreters are fully trained and accredited to comply with International standards and that a pool of translators/interpreters is established that African women can tap into.
- Capacity building for African women on self-awareness, gender and civic education. Many African women have found themselves in cultures that are very different and distant from what they are accustomed to, this has confused many who to the extent of completely abandoning good African values. Many African women would be coming from cultural practices that have for years undermined their very well-being and many have internalised such practices and accepted them as the norm however to participate in a democratic society as they today find themselves in, AkiDwA needs to pilot training on gender education.
- AkiDwA should target women in hostels and those in the asylum process especially as they are discriminated by publicly funded service providers in training and giving of accurate information with regard to rights, entitlements and education on adjusting to foreign environment because AkiDwA has a pool of experienced women who have been through the process and could pass on some of the coping strategies on to the other women going through hard times.

Conclusion.

This programme gave AkiDwA the opportunity to make the first step of exploring and making links with one of the most marginalized group in Ireland. This work forms the first step for AkiDwA to critically start addressing the issue of isolation and representation. More work is needed and this should not be a once of exercise but a series of programmes that aim at empowering African women. Serious work needs to be done to liberate the situation of these women and many others who were not necessarily involved in the pilot project. To do this AkiDwA need to be resourced to keep up its work.