

ACCESS 2000 Interlink Project



Evaluation Report of “Women Making Choices” Programme 1998

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1. Access 2000 Interlink Project.

Access 2000, Interlink Project is an EU N.O.W. (New Opportunities for women) funded initiative which is based in the Southeast Region, in two main areas, Wexford town and Waterford City. The Interlink project is phase 11 of the development of Access 2000, which was first funded in 96/97.

ACCESS is a key to effecting change for women in the Southeast region. It aims to address the needs of women in accessing Education and Employment opportunities through an inclusive, participative and accountable process. The project aims to address the current barriers which exist and exclude women from mainstream education and training by addressing activities to fill the gaps between existing service provision and locally based women's groups through Community Education. These aims are developed through three strands of the project.

- The Development of a Regional Task Force, which addresses the exclusion and inequality for women in accessing Employment, Education and Enterprise opportunities at a policy level by working with representatives from the statutory agencies in the Southeast region.
- Through the delivery an NCEA Diploma in Training and Development at Waterford Institute of Technology and to deliver Pre-development training under the Community Response Programme.
- The design and delivery of pre-development training for those who experience disadvantage and exclusion. The training would fill the gap in the lack of access for women to participate in education and training opportunities.

It is at the latter level, that the delivery of the Community Response Programme encompasses the Pre-development training, which is delivered, designed and co-ordinated by ACCESS Interlink and funded through FAS.

This evaluation will focus on the implementation of the Women Making Choices Programme delivered in Waterford and Wexford.

Access Interlink is directed and managed in a co-operative style basis, with equal participation in decision making by paid staff members and Voluntary representatives of local women's groups. There are six paid staff members,

One administrator, one Policy worker and four Development workers, the latter who are employed on a Job Share basis. The ethos of ACCESS Interlink

is underpinned by the values and principles of Community Development which "aims to encourage people to take control of their lives, to develop fully their human potential and to promote empowerment. Community Development involves people coming together in groups to identify their collective needs and to develop programme to meet these needs. The process or the way the work is carried out is as important as the programme of development being undertaken. The process of Community development stresses the need to develop community awareness, engender group cohesiveness and promote self-reliance and collective action. This logically leads communities to seek changes at policy level". (Access 2000, Interlink Project Plan, 97/99).

2. Evaluation and Methodology.

The evaluation is part of the on-going review and evaluation of the Access 2000 Interlink Project, however this evaluation will focus only on the implementation of the Women Making Choices programme delivered in Waterford and Wexford as part of the development of the projects aims and objectives.

The aim of the evaluation is to:

- Document the full process of implementing the Pre-development training programme.
- To document experiences of the participants both in Waterford and Wexford and identify their progression needs in relation to the learning that took place.
- To identify the impact that this strategy has in relation to the overall aims and objectives of the Access Interlink Project.
- To use the outcomes of the evaluation towards the long-term development plans for the project and its experience in Women's Development in the Southeast Region.
- To support the views identified by the project, that this process of development has a far-reaching impact on Women's development in the long-term and should be taken seriously by those agencies that have an input into education and training delivery.
- To identify the struggles that were experienced by all those involved in this process and look towards addressing these difficulties in an effective way.
- To use the document to place value and currency on this development process with women, to access funding opportunities and to develop new approaches to education and training with mainstream provider's e.g. FAS, Waterford Institute of Technology and local Partnership companies.

2.1. Methodology.

- Group Consultation in Waterford and Wexford.
- One-to-one telephone contact with participants.
- Meetings and telephone conversations with Tutors and Development workers.
- Meetings with FAS Representative.
- Review and examination of documents e.g.

“Women Making Choices” Programme Content.
Reports and documents from Development workers.
Review of participants Portfolios.

The need to carry out an evaluation on the Community Response programme was identified due to a number of reasons.

This need was expressed by the Tutors, Development workers and the participants as the implementation of training such as this takes time, planning, negotiation, accreditation and organisation – far more than was anticipated in the Access Interlink Project Plan.

There is also a need to celebrate the achievements of the participants by documenting the whole process to give it value and currency. The need for Access Interlink to impact at Policy level through this training posed another reason to evaluate the programme and consolidate the process of delivery.

3. Community Response Programme:

(3.1) Women Making Choices.

The Community Response Programme is a FAS funded initiative aimed at addressing the training and educational needs of the local Community. "Women Making Choices" is a pre-development training module developed and designed through this programme by Access Interlink by consulting with targeted participants, tutors (facilitators) and women's groups.

The content of the training aims to address women's needs while taking into consideration their levels of education, training and development. An awareness of women's individual and collective needs was included with the provision of practical supports for women to participate in any opportunities outside of the home – Childcare provision, Flexibility, Financial allowances, one-to-one support and guidance. "There is a need for a more focused and targeted provision of quality education skills training and work experience programmes for disadvantaged groups" (NESF Report No. 14 – Self-employment, Enterprise and Social Exclusion).

Women Making Choices was delivered over a six week period on a part time basis with full childcare and a Part-time training allowance. There were many facets to the implementation of this training and the following will discuss the process of implementing targeted and focused pre-development training which includes Outreach/Consultation process, Participants experiences, Content of the programme, Tutors experiences and the accreditation of the module.

(3.2) The Process – Community Education/Community Development.

The learning and development of Access Interlink education and training methods has been based on the practises and principles of Community Education and Development. Learning takes place in the Community and has been identified through consultation with the participants, while placing value on the skills and abilities of the individual and groups. The process through which the development of the project has taken place has clearly influenced the model of community education delivered and designed by Access 2000.

This is a structured and focused learning experience, which enables groups and individuals to participate in learning opportunities to develop their own

skills towards their own development, that leads to the enrichment and development of their communities and environment through collective action.

The delivery method of the content is facilitative rather than the more traditional method of learning as in the Teacher/pupil scenario. Participants share and listen to each other's experiences, knowledge and learning, but own that knowledge. Learning is then transferred into their own lives and communities. Mutual respect of participants is gained through listening and acknowledgement of previous learning/experience regardless of previous learning ability, social class or experiences. This process and method is called Community Education.

This report will outline that process and those methods through documenting the learning and outcomes of the Women Making Choices Programme.

4. “Women Making Choices” – Programme Implementation.

4.1 Planning and Development.

4.1.1 *Outreach/Consultation process.*

In both areas, Waterford and Wexford, the outreach and consultation process was carried out in a number of ways. The outreach process added to the underlying success of the training as “there is a lack of specific supports that disadvantaged and marginalised women need to access current provision, such as one-to-one support, childcare provision, mentors and help with transport” (Access 2000 Interlink Project Plan p.14).

□ Wexford.

In Wexford town, the development workers spent a considerable amount of time targeting the specific target group, through building relationships with local Community leaders, women’s groups and women referred to them through word of mouth. Prior to this there had been a base developed to some degree at local level by **ACCESS Facilitators*** in Phase One of the project (two of these facilitators are now employed as the Development workers), therefore the participants were from the targeted areas i.e. those with highest unemployment rates, had had little or no experience in education and training opportunities and most had spent a number of years working in the home.

The relationships developed by ACCESS with the local communities, was paramount to the success of the outreach and the targeting of participants. Links were developed with key Community workers in the town, whose knowledge and understanding of the communities in which they worked provided some of the key links to the participants.

The development of the relationship with the proposed participants gave women the opportunity to participate in the design of the training and to have their needs and issues identified and met prior to the programme implementation. Twenty-four women participated in the training and there is also a waiting list of others who wish to access Pre-development training.

***Access Facilitators:** Women from local communities who participated in the NCEA Training and Education Certificate at W.I.T. as part of the overall aims of phase 1 of Access 2000 Ltd.

90% of women who participated in the training had difficulties accessing mainstream training and education opportunities, due to FAS Policy on the Live Register and lack of information. It is FAS policy that only those who are signing on the Live Register can access training and education opportunities i.e. those who are in receipt of Unemployment Assistance, the dole and/or signing for credits. However, many women have not worked for many years and would not be entitled to sign on the live register.

Many of them were from low income or Social Welfare dependent families and had been rearing their children for many years. The women also struggled with their self-esteem and confidence and felt that they would not have accessed this training were it not for the support and encouragement of the Outreach work and the understanding of the issues faced by women returners to education and employment. All but two of the women participants were early school leavers and had not completed the formal education system.

□ Waterford.

The outreach process to target participants in Waterford occurred in different ways although the outcomes and success of the delivery of Pre-development training achieved the same level of success. However, a small minority of the participants did not necessarily come from the disadvantaged areas outlined in the Project Plan. However, "disadvantage and marginalised" does not necessarily mean for women – lack of adequate income, unemployed or living on Social Welfare, but includes lack of confidence and self-esteem, lack of financial independence, lack of childcare support and institutional blocking of access to opportunities due to the Live Register requirements. "Everything is geared to get you out of the workforce when you become a mother, and there is nothing to help you back into it" (Access 2000 Interlink Project Plan p.12).

Participants in Waterford were recruited through Home School Liaison Teachers Posters and flyers, FAS and through contacts with other women in the Community. Sixteen women participated in the training.

There is no doubt that the Outreach and consultation process, which included one-to-one support, encouragement, flexibility and follow-up were the factors underpinning the underlying achievement of women participating on the training.

□ The Region.

The effective use of outreach was clearly reflected in the numbers who participated in both Waterford and Wexford. – 40 in total, with others on the waiting list hoping for future courses with the project. The selection process based on the target group identified in the project plan.

- Women who could not access mainstream training, education and employment due to the “Live Register” requirements.
- Women who were parenting alone.
- Women who were dependent on Social Welfare.
- Women who had left school early.

4.1.2 *Supports.*

FAS supported the delivery of the training by providing a part-time training allowance, which allowed for the flexibility of delivery i.e. during school times and holidays.

Childcare was provided and could be accessed by using local Community Childcare services or by choosing their own childminder.

Other less formal structured supports were one-to-one contact with tutors and Development workers with personal issues and follow up support with Curriculum Vitae and Interview preparation.

The Waterford Institute of Technology provided career guidance for the participants if needed.

(4.1.3) *FAS.*

Since the establishment of Access 2000 in 1996/97, FAS have been one of the principal stakeholders in the development of the project and have continued that support in phase 2 (Access Interlink).

Relationships have developed positively over the past few years particularly on a regional basis as the FAS representatives are from the Regional office in Waterford.

This has had an impact in the negotiations of the Community Response programme delivery both in Waterford and Wexford. The Waterford project had little or no struggles in accessing training allowances, childcare or support; however, there were struggles at a local level in Wexford.

Negotiations had been agreed at a Regional level from the onset of the project in 95/96 with regard to the funding and support for the delivery of the training at the project development phase however, this did not occur in Wexford.

This posed a definite struggle when accessing funds and developing the relationship with the representative at the FAS office in Wexford. The Wexford FAS representative had no prior knowledge of any agreement having being made and as each FAS area has autonomy and is responsible for its own budget, this seemed to cause some confusion and frustration at the onset of the training in Wexford.

This had an impact on participants in receipt of the part-time training allowance in Wexford. Twenty-two out of twenty four received an allowance and it took four months to negotiate the payment of the allowance for those women who did not initially receive it. At the time, what seemed to be FAS policy in one area was somewhat different in another.

However once this had been overcome, however, the delivery was implemented and delivered.

The provision by FAS of funds for delivery and implementation of this initiative enabled the project to support women to access this training. The provision of these supports for women to access training opportunities is vital to the full participation for a number of reasons:

- (i) To justify women's absence from the home during the day. Women leaving home can cause enormous discourse and conflict with their families.
- (ii) To value their development in terms of becoming independent and valued members of society.

Also included in the funds provided by FAS, were Childcare supports.

4.1.4. Tutors/Delivery.

Most of the tutors employed to facilitate training were women who had/have extensive Voluntary experience with Women's development works over the past number of years. Most of them had successfully participated and gained an NCEA Certificate in Training and Development at Waterford Institute of Technology in 96/97 and have completed the Diploma course. However, it is the prior experience of the tutors, whose background is working at 'grass roots level' that cemented the delivery of the training.

However, in some cases, delivering and facilitating this training was their first step into paid employment of this type, despite years of Voluntary Community work and development. As well as their training at W.I.T. facilitators also participated in a practical 'Training for Trainers'*, course also designed by Access Interlink, but delivered by other Community activists in this field of work. The training included Advanced Groupwork/facilitation, Adult Literacy, Community Arts, and Prejudice Reduction. From this broad-based knowledge in Community Education and development, the Tutors delivered an effective and inclusive pre-development training module.

The main difficulty that arose for the tutors/facilitators was the time frame from which the course content had to be delivered. It was essential to deliver this training at the pace of the participants, to enable the group to have space to consolidate their learning. The length of time to deliver the course content was too short and this caused some difficulties for both the Tutors and the participants. Completing Portfolios, (a requirement for accreditation) was carried out outside of hours allocated for the training.

It was essential to deliver the training to the pace of the participants, to enable the group to have space to consolidate their learning. The length of time to deliver the course content was too short and this was expressed by all concerned in the 'Women Making Choices programme' - Development workers, Tutors and participants.

For those facilitators, with little paid employment experience in this field, it proved to be a valuable and positive stepping stone into paid work.

***Training for Trainers:** This training by designed by Access Interlink to address the gap identified by facilitators in phase 1 on the Certificate training. It provided practical training in groupwork, advanced facilitation, Community arts, Adult Literacy and Prejudice Reduction.

The delivery method was based on the experience of the facilitators/tutors and proved to be a very positive experience for those participants (see section 5.1) Regular meetings were held with all tutors for planning and evaluation of the delivery. The process of delivery was all-inclusive, with relationships developed with Tutors on a one-to-one basis and in the overall group. Other tutors employed were external facilitators with specific skills in Arts and craftwork and Yoga.

Integral to the process of Community Education is the method of delivery and this proved to be a very positive experience for the participants and there was 100% participation at all times.

4.1.5.Content.

The content of the training was designed in consultation with proposed participant's needs. The overall content included;

- ❑ Self-Awareness and Development.
- ❑ Stress Management and Relaxation
- ❑ Oppression and Conflict
- ❑ Art
- ❑ Yoga
- ❑ Listening skills
- ❑ Job Seeking skills
- ❑ Communication
- ❑ Information input on rights and entitlements.
- ❑ Information Workshops –
- ❑ Rape Crisis centre,
- ❑ Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs,
- ❑ JungleBox Crèche/F.D.Y.S.
- ❑ Money Advice and Budgeting Service.

The tutors expressed the difficulties of completing their content in the time allotted, particularly those delivering communications and Job Seeking skills.

This occurred as a result of the different levels of development of the participants. It was suggested that there were not enough trained facilitators in the Region to carry out the training and this put extra pressure on the Development workers to carry out this piece of work in conjunction with the other work of the project.

4.1.6. Accreditation

Accreditation of the pre-development training was also integral to this process of education for Access 2000. FAS required accreditation of the 'Women Making Choices programme' through the NCVA system of accreditation. The workers and tutors stated that this system was not conducive to the ethos and principles of Community Education and Development. As a result of their Transnational relationship with OUN Northumberland College, Newcastle, the project looked to the Open College Network for accreditation. This system provided a "structure whereby the collective and communal aspects of community education are not hampered whilst providing certification for those participants who desire this option" \9Access 2000;1998:P:8).

5. Experience and Progression.

5.1 Women's Experiences.

The participant's experience of this type of pre-development training and support initiative had a very positive impact on their lives. However, given that learning took place in two different areas, the following will highlight the women's experiences under Waterford and Wexford.

5.1.1. *Waterford.*

In Waterford there were many women eager and in need of a training programme such as this and experienced a lack of access to training and education opportunities despite the fact that a third level college exists in the area. However, the aim of the training was to address the gaps that exist in the provision of mainstream Education and Employment opportunities and in Waterford the programme certainly did achieve this.

In Waterford, evaluation and reviews were carried out throughout the process of delivery with participants to gain maximum benefit out of the training process. The women's experience was a very positive one and each participant came to the training with various life experiences. Some had been employed previously others had been at home rearing children for many years, one had a disability and most were at a stage in their lives where they were ready for different challenges. They needed something different other than life in the home, but did not have sufficient information or contacts to take the next step. Others had small children and would have been unable to access any opportunities at all were it not for the provision of childcare. The participants accessed the training through various sources (see 4.1.1.) and found the whole experience of learning very positive.

It was agreed by most of the participants, that the training was too short and that they could have been challenged a little bit more, however others felt that they enjoyed everything on offer. They were re-energised by the whole process i.e. they were ready to look outside the group towards their own progression (see 5.3). Most of the participants interviewed enjoyed the crafts, Yoga and communications content, but received most benefit from the Personal Development, Communications and Job Seeking skills.

The opportunity to have accreditation for the course was 'very important' and 'nice to have it', however most agreed that developing the Portfolio was time consuming. This has also been the experience of participants and everyone involved in Wexford, given that time had to be found by tutors and the Development workers after the course was finished to put the Portfolios together to gain the accreditation.

Due to the relationships and friendships developed during the course, many agreed that they had developed a network of women for support and encouragement for the future. At present, many of the group are still in contact with the project to complete portfolios, to have one-to-one support and to access information for their own developments. Two of the participants have become involved in the Access Interlink project in a Voluntary capacity.

5.1.2. Wexford.

Twenty-four women took part from Wexford town in the training. All but two had left school early, some participants had struggles with Literacy and many of them had spent many years working in the home. This group was divided into two separate groups, to enable group cohesiveness and space for individuals within the group to gain positive learning outcomes. The confidentiality of the groups was paramount to the development of the group, as a whole and all the participants felt very safe and supported. This group highlighted a number of areas that they developed learning from. This included the opportunities to share experiences and information on their lives and skills, with space to develop friendships, networks and skills.

While the Portfolio for accreditation caused some struggles, it was generally agreed that it was valuable in so far as participants didn't realise how much learning had taken place. This was a particular struggle for those with Learning and literacy difficulties.

The facets of the training most enjoyed and maximised was the Personal Development, Communications and Job seeking skills. Many of this group did not enjoy Yoga, they could not relax! Only two did not enjoy the crafts, the remainder were encouraged by what skills they had in this area without realising they had these talents, particularly the Arts workshops. The group all agreed that the accommodation was uncomfortable and cold, however they felt that everything was being done to rectify the situation at all times.

One suggestion that this group would have liked to develop was to meet and link up with the Waterford group and to spend more time on Communications and Job seeking skills. This issue, once again, is the underlying struggle of the whole training.

Meeting with this group afterwards to evaluate the project is a cause for concern for the project as most found it difficult to get back into the home again and felt very lonely and depressed. This was due to the lack of a clear progression route for those able to move on and for those who were not ready, the training was too short and participants were left feeling frustrated and lonely.

(5.2) Progression.

5.1.1. Waterford.

No. of Participants	Education	Employment	Community/Vol	Other.
3		3		
5			5	
4	4			
4				4

5.1.2.1 Wexford.

No. Of Participants	Education	Employment	Community/Voluntary	Other
3		C.E.	n/a	
1		Factory	n/a	
21				X

ACCESS 2000 have designed a progression route for participants wishing to work with groups and their local community. This is the Training for Trainers programme which will train potential group workers and voluntary and community activists. The tutors on the Women Making Choices programme had participated on this training for trainers programme.

6. Her Story.

To illustrate and give a flavour of Women's progression and development from their own point of view, the following are some quotes made by participants following the training.

"We did mock interviews and role plays for jobs. Within the group, I was terrified to do them and waited till last and then with the encouragement from the rest of the women I built up the confidence to do the interview and I actually got the job! It was the best experience and the first interview in ten years." (Women Making Choices, 1999).

"On a personal level I have a lot more confidence in myself. I like expressing my experiences as being involved with the Women Making Choices because I am a changed person. Community Education means to me people willing to help others in an atmosphere that you don't feel pressurised to do exams, it's about support and not being judged, it's about caring and people working together, friendship and support". (Women Making Choices, 1999)

"The Tutors were very approachable. It was a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. I have more confidence in myself to get up and go and get started. The course brought to the surface skills I didn't realise I had."

7. Conclusions and Recommendations.

7.1. Conclusions.

This evaluation aimed to document the process of implementing the Women Making Choices Programme both in Waterford and Wexford. The key factors in the achievements of this training has been the process through which it has been carried out – the complimentary values and principles of Community Development and Community education being employed in a structured and focused programme.

There was evidence of a great energy and enthusiasm by the Development workers and tutors and this in turn was reflected in the positive experiences of the women who participated. A central recommendation of the outcomes would be to ensure that participants in any new project such as this would have as much inclusion in the development of training modules for the future.

The overall aims of Access Interlink were to address the gaps in provision of opportunities for women, to access training, education and employment opportunities, through the processes of equality and inclusion. The Pre-development training went some ways towards addressing this issue. Given that this is a pilot initiative, the responsibility for mainstreaming this strategy in other agencies lies with those agencies themselves.

The process of delivery, outreach and participation in the development of the training ensured the positive outcomes of the training, however the time frame to deliver the course was too short for participants to fully benefit from this intervention particularly participants in Wexford. The progression for some participants into employment is evident however it will take time and further training for those who have been out of the workforce to make the progression into employment. However, this course is pre-development in nature and the outcomes of participants experiences on the training has formed the basis to take the next steps into other education and skills focused training to enable their access into meaningful and appropriate employment opportunities.

There were some struggles in implementing this project, time being one, which has already been mentioned. The project has the skills and experience with this particular process that the statutory bodies and agencies do not.

In conclusion it would be fair to say that Access 2000 has demonstrated the expertise with the "Women Making Choices Programme" to become a recognised training organisation in it's own right particularly in the area of community education and training.

(7.2) Recommendations.

To ensure that learning for participants can achieve maximum potential in any training initiative, it would be recommended that pre-training be extended from six to twelve weeks, with fully developed plans of progression for groups when it is over. This training should also include all the necessary supports provided in the "Women Making Choices Programme".

That a Training for Trainers programme be delivered as a progression route for those participants wishing to work in their own communities or similar type of work.

That Access Interlink nurtures and values their practise and principles for future developments of the project. It is clear that Access 2000 has the skills and expertise to deliver, design and implement Community Education training and could be part of their future plans.

That a further evaluation be undertaken, in relation to the progression of participants towards the end of the year. This review could be part of the external evaluation.

That the issue of the Live Register continues to be challenged within the remit of the project, locally regionally and nationally.

That the relationship developed with the principal stakeholders be nurtured and developed for the future by supporting them to mainstream this process in their own agencies.

For mainstream providers to develop new approaches to education and training opportunities for women experiencing social exclusion and disadvantage with particular emphasis on those who have left school early and those who experience difficulties with reading and writing.