



Women Making Choices Programme

An evaluation of the following:

**Two Women Making Choices Programmes
under ACCESS 2000 (Wexford) Limited**

**Three Women Making Choices Programmes
under the ACCESS Interlink Project.**

D.H. RESEARCH & TRAINING Ltd.

Ms. Deirdre Hennessy

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Executive Summary

Access 2000 is a Women's Education and Training Project that was funded under New Opportunities for Women (NOW). It was initiated in 1995 to meet specific education and training needs identified by a network of locally based women's groups in Waterford and Wexford.

Women Making Choices is a pre-development training programme designed and delivered by the facilitators of Access 2000. The key aim of this programme is to engage women who would not usually access mainstream education and training programmes. The philosophy of this pre-development programme is based on the principles of inclusion, consultation, transparency, and equality. A parallel aim is to develop new multi-sectoral approaches to education and training, and to raise awareness at policy level to effect change for women experiencing social exclusion. The objectives of the programme are to:

- support marginalized women to review and evaluate their own personal situation
- increase confidence and self awareness
- enhance job seeking skills and identify their own personal skills
- identify mainstream employment opportunities for further education and training programmes
- develop literacy skills
- access job opportunities

This piece of research examines four Women Making Choices courses delivered in both Waterford and Wexford, to determine the impact and benefits for participants, and to document progression needs and policy implications identified.

It is clear from feedback from both participants and project partners that the Women Making Choices courses examined have made a positive contribution towards self-development, skills development, and progression into employment for the majority of participants. The process used in delivering these courses was based on the principles and practises of community education, and included the key elements of targeting, outreach, consultation with prospective participants, and a range of supports such as finance and childcare that addressed the specific barriers to accessing education and training options experienced by the target group. Key to the success of these courses was the links developed between Access 2000 and other agencies such as FAS, Wexford Area Partnership, and Home School Liaison Officers, which facilitated the development of a partnership approach to planning and delivery of the courses.

The Women Making Choices courses have provided a model of community education which incorporates a multi agency approach that has been demonstrably successful, and the specific approach developed by Access 2000 both underpins and is supported by policy developments in the area of community education as outlined in the recent White Paper on Adult Education. The challenges are both to provide progression routes for course participants and mainstreaming opportunities for this model of community education without losing the key elements of outreach, informality and specific supports as required to ensure equality of access and participation.

Methodology

The information, which informs this Evaluation, was compiled from the following sources:-

1. Desk research, which included a literature, review of all relevant Access 2000 documents and previously carried out Evaluations.
2. Review of relevant policy documents on adult and community education.
3. Postal questionnaire sent to each participant on the Four Women Making Choices Courses under Evaluation.
4. Interviews with Access 2000 Project Staff.
5. Focus Group discussion with eight Women Making Choices Programme participants.
6. Individual interviews with Women Making Choices Project Partners – FAS, Wexford Area Partnership, Home School Liaison Officer.



Women Making Choices Programme

BACKGROUND



Background

Access 2000 is a Women's' Education and Training Project that was funded under New Opportunities For Women (NOW). It was initiated in 1995 to meet specific education and training needs identified by a network of locally based women's groups in Waterford and Wexford. Each of these groups had accessed annual funding from the Department of Social Community and Family Affairs, which facilitated substantial development training and capacity building within the individual Women's Groups.

These working class women community activists who were making a valuable contribution to the local communities through their voluntary activities were unable to access paid positions in community development because they felt they had not the confidence to apply for these positions without accredited training. The need thus was identified within these communities to tackle barriers facing women wishing to access existing training and educational initiatives and also wishing to re-enter the workforce. By successfully securing core funding from the New Opportunities for Women (NOW) under ESF and match funding from the Department of Social Community and Family Affairs, and FAS, Access 2000 was in a position to develop appropriate progression routes for the identified target group.

Phase One

Access 2000 in partnership with Waterford Institute of Technology designed a National Certificate Course in Training and Development and Community Education. Eighteen women from designated disadvantaged areas in Wexford and Waterford who were active in their communities through working with Women's' Groups or involvement in community development in the area participated in this course. The following supports were integral to enabling participants to participate in and complete the programme.

1. Childcare subsidies and travel allowances paid by Access 2000.
2. Weekly training allowance paid to participants by FAS.
3. Technical Assistance and Mentoring support by ACCESS 2000
4. Co-ordinating and Administration by ACCESS 2000

In 1997 all eighteen participants successfully completed the National Certificate in Training and Development Course and Community Education, which was accredited by NCEA. In addition they completed their practical work experience within designated communities. A survey in 1999 found that of the eighteen participants who completed the course:-

- ☐ ¹Eight were in full-time employment
- ☐ Two were in part-time employment
- ☐ Three were self-employed as freelance facilitators
- ☐ Four were employed on community employment schemes
- ☐ One had emigrated

Eight of the original participants went on to do the Diploma in Training and Development and Community Education as well as working in full-time employment.

Both the National Certificate and The National Diploma in Training and Development and Community Education are courses run on a modular basis. Each of these courses was designed in collaboration with the community sector (Access 2000) and WIT aimed at people involved in community development and community education.

The certificate and diploma courses piloted by Access 2000 have now been delivered by Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) in several other areas of the Country.

¹ (Access 2000 funded application to Department of Social Community and Family Affairs 1999 page 2).

The Access 2000 Interlink Project

The second phase of the project Access 2000 Interlink was designed as a result of a consultation process with the facilitators and the participants of the National Certificate in Training and Development and Community Education. A need was identified for a progression route for the women community activists to third level education with specific support structures to enable participation.

Ethos and Philosophy

The Ethos and Philosophy of Access 2000 Interlink was to raise awareness of the barriers facing women wishing to access education, training, employment and enterprise opportunities. It sought to reach out to women experiencing educational and social disadvantage and those who are not accessing mainstream provision. The Philosophy was based on **inclusion**, **consultation**, **transparency** and **equality**. The aim of ACCESS 2000 Interlink was to develop new multi-sectoral approach to education and training and to raise awareness at policy level to effect change for women experiencing social exclusion.

Aims and Objectives

The Aim of the Project was to effect change for women in the Southeast Region by addressing barriers to accessing education, training, enterprise and employment opportunities through an inclusive, participative and accountable process.

Objectives

1. To provide supports that are necessary to enable marginalized women to access education/training and employment initiatives. These include childcare, travel expenses, guidance and one to one mentoring.
2. To develop effective outreach strategies for those that are most excluded.
3. To ensure that the principals and values of community development are fully adhered to by Access 2000.
4. To seek funding that adequately resources the egalitarian process of working collectively to promote equality, empowerment and inclusion.
5. To provide an integrated approach to training, accreditation and job creation for women at a local and regional level with a dual vision of access and equality, e.g. (Women Making Choices and Training for Trainers).
6. To develop an add-on degree in consultation with Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) with the participants as a progression of the National Diploma in Training and Development and Community Education.
7. To establish a panel of Community Trainers in the Southeast Region.
8. To disseminate methods of good practise in Community Education e.g. Outreach, Consultation, Inclusion and Guidance Support.
9. To develop progression routes and information access for marginalized and disadvantaged women into education, enterprise and employment opportunities in the southeast, in particular through local delivery training, e.g. predevelopment and pre-employment.
10. To develop relevant progression routes for marginalized women based on their own needs and issues.

Project Activities

This Interlink Phase of the Access 2000 Project which began in 1998 and was funded by NOW, Department of Social Community Family Affairs and FAS has to date delivered:

- a. A National Diploma in Training and Development and Community Education which was developed in partnership with WIT and from which thirteen community activists graduated in October 1999.
- b. Three foundation-training programmes entitled (Women Making Choices) were delivered to approximately 50 participants in the Southeast. These Women Making Choices Programmes were funded by FAS through the Community Response Programme and are accredited by the Open College Network (Northern Ireland) Level One and are based on the values and principles of community education.
- c. A Training for Trainers programme aimed at community trainers to enhance group work and facilitation skills, and to raise awareness of issues such as prejudice, equality and literacy difficulties. This programme is accredited by the Open College Network (Northumberland, U.K.) Level Three. Participants from this course now deliver the predevelopment course **Women Making Choices** to local communities in Waterford and Wexford.

Present Position

In the year 2000 when the NOW Funding had ceased, the Waterford and Wexford projects sought independent core funding to carry on developing their work. The Waterford project successfully gained ESF funding for a building and established the Waterford Women's Resource Centre. ACCESS 2000 in Wexford successfully gained core funding from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs to continue their work with women.



Women Making Choices Programme

**WOMEN MAKING
CHOICES PROGRAMME**



Women Making Choices Programme

Women Making Choices is a pre-development training programme designed and delivered by the facilitators of Access 2000 Wexford and Waterford. The aim of the programme is to engage women who would not usually access mainstream education and training programmes, to develop their self confidence, self awareness, access information within the local community and engage in skills development so that they can make informed choices towards their future development. Specifically this predevelopment foundation programme aims to:

1. Support marginalized women to review and evaluate their own personal situation.
2. Increase confidence and self-awareness.
3. Enhance job-seeking skills and identify their own personal skills.
4. Identify mainstream employment opportunities, further training and education programmes.
5. Develop literacy skills.
6. Access job opportunities.

This piece of research will examine the Four "Women Making Choices" Courses already delivered in both Wexford and Waterford under the following headings:

- 1. Impact**
- 2. Benefit**
- 3. Process**
- 4. Further Progression**

Ethos

"Whole Communities have been excluded, not only from the LABOUR MARKET, but also from the ESTABLISHMENT. As a result of the generations of multiple disadvantages, and a sense of powerlessness to influence and change the conditions in which they and their children live, many have concluded that the state run training and guidance programmes are not relevant to their needs. To tackle disadvantage effectively education in a community setting is vitally important, working with people as opposed to working for them".²

The Women Making Choices Programme takes as its starting point this experience by many women of exclusion from mainstream education and training facilities articulated initially in the Green Paper on Education, and subsequently echoed in the White paper. The Ethos of Access 2000 is rooted in both this community approach to education and the practise and the principles of feminist theory.

Community Education is understood by Access 2000 to be ³*"A process through which individuals/communities participate in learning opportunities in either small/large groups to develop their own skills and emotional needs towards their own development. This in turn leads to collective sharing of ideas, learning and skills development in an inclusive, participatory environment, which may lead to social action in addressing their needs and issues."*

In order for this process to be effective and relevant to those women-experiencing disadvantage, the following factors are critical to ensuring maximum participation of those most excluded.

- a. It needs to be based **within the Community**.
- b. It needs to be structured to **meet the needs** of the community.
- c. The **process** involved is most important.
- d. There needs to be an **awareness** of the **needs** and **issues** that exist **in the community**.
- e. The course needs to be relevant to **the lives of the participants**

² Green Paper on Education (1998 page 21)

³ Developing Community Education in Policy and Practise, Molly Brennan 1999.

⁴"true learning will only take place if the course content can be directly related to what is going on in peoples' lives, and this can lead to an understanding of broader community and social issues."

Feminist Theory

The Community Education process embraced by Access 2000 which has been influenced by Brazilian educator Paulo Friere is underpinned and further developed by feminist theory, practise and principles, which similarly aim to support individuals in communities to participate equally in society, through collective learning and social action. Women centred community action:

⁵"Focuses on Gender as a central feature of collective action taking place in the community and promotes social change which will foster gender equality, reduce the invisibility of women, and emphasis the processes where by interaction takes place as well as the outcomes being sought. It forms the basis of feminist community action".

Community Education and the principles and practises of Feminist Theory inform the process and activities of the Women Making Choices Programme which takes as its starting place the identified needs of participants and works through personal support, shared learning and collective action to bring about personal and social change which focuses on equality of access and participation.

⁴ (Community Education and Community Development – How it happened? Access 2000 Chapter 1, Julie Fleming).

⁵ Dominelli L (1990) Women Community Work and The State in the 1990s in Jacobs S and Popplek. (1994) Community Work in the 1990s page 53.

Methodology

The Women Making Choices Course is a pre-development training module, developed and designed by Access Interlink in consultation with targeted participants, tutors and women's groups. Delivered over a six to eight week period on a part-time basis with childcare subsidies and a part-time training allowance, the course proper is part of a community development process based on the aims and objectives of community education and feminist working class community development.

⁶*"The process of delivering the Women Making Choices Programme is concerned both with the individual personal growth and the collective solidarity of promoting change and challenging inequalities and giving women the opportunity to access further education, training and employment opportunities."*

The following are key elements to this process:

1. Targeting

Women experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation within specific geographic areas of Waterford and Wexford, both urban and rural were especially targeted. Disadvantage and marginalisation experienced by these women included –

- a. Women parenting alone
- b. Women who left school early
- c. Women whose access to training and employment opportunities was restricted by live register requirements
- d. Women dependent on low income or social welfare payments
- e. Women wishing to access enterprise/self-employment options
- f. Women wishing to return to employment either in a voluntary or paid capacity
- g. Women living in rural isolation
- h. Women educationally disadvantaged

⁶ "Should the Women Making Choices Predevelopment Training be mainstream?" ed Pauline Stone (WIT 1999) page 8.

2. Outreach

⁷*"There is a lack of specific supports that disadvantaged and marginalized women need to access current provision such as one to one support, childcare provision, mentors, and help with child support".*

ACCESS 2000 acknowledges that the use of effective outreach strategies is vital in targeting those most excluded.

In both Waterford and Wexford the outreach consultation process was carried out in a number of ways over a six-month period before delivery of a course. Elements of this outreach included:

1. Building relationships with local community leaders.
2. Making links with other women's groups in disadvantaged and marginalized communities.
3. Referrals from FAS and Health Boards.
4. Door to door contacts.
5. Contact with home school liaison officers.
6. Use of flyers and posters.
7. Links with other women involved in the Access 2000 Project i.e. facilitators who had worked with women while participating on the National Certificate in Training and Development and Community Education.

3. Consultation

Several consultation meetings were held with the proposed women participants in order to assess the needs of the target group and to ensure that the programme was learner driven. This also ensured that the women had ownership and had an opportunity to input in the programme's design and content.

4. Supports

FAS supported the participants by:

- a. Paying a part-time training allowance, which often validates the absence of the woman from the home.

⁷ Access Interlink Project Plan page 14

⁸ Access Interlink Project Plan page 14

- b. Provided unconditional childcare assistance, which could be accessed by either using local community based childcare or by participants choosing to select their own childcare.

Other supports included:

1. One to one contact with tutors and development workers.
2. Mentor support.
3. Information and guidance.
4. Career advice and guidance service which was provided by WIT where requested.

5. Delivery

Tutors employed to deliver the training included:

1. Women who had been involved in community and women's development over the past five to ten years.
2. Women who had participated (or were participating) in the Certificate in Training and Development and Community Education.
3. Women who have specific skills in areas such as arts/crafts, yoga, combined with experience of working in the community.
4. An Arts Facilitator

Delivery of the modules was facilitated in a way that acknowledged the emphasis on a community education process

⁹*"The emphasis on process at all levels of education and training arises from the experience that the way in which adults learn effects the quality of the learning. In assisting others to become adult learners the trainers "mind" the process, which means an awareness and attention to participants so they have a say in the course content and timetabling".*

6. Accreditation

FAS required accreditation of the Women Making Choices Programme through the system of accreditation with real currency. The workers and tutors felt that the NCVA system was not conducive to accrediting a pre-development programme. As a result of their transnational relationship with OCN Northumberland College, Newcastle, the project looked to the Open College Network for accreditation.

⁹ Further Footnote 7 Access 2000 1999 page 7

This accrediting body offered a more creative and open way of assessing peoples' learning outcomes, particularly for those with literacy difficulties.

This system provided a ¹⁰*"structure whereby the collective and communal aspects of community education are not hampered whilst providing certification for those participants who desire this option"*.

7. Content

The Content of the Women Making Choices Programme was designed in consultation with the participants. The overall content included:

- a. Self-awareness and development.
- b. Stress management and relaxation.
- c. Oppression and Conflict.
- d. Art & Crafts
- e. Yoga.
- f. Listening skills.
- g. Job Seeking skills.
- h. Communication.
- i. Information and input from relevant community and service providers, including:
 - ✓ Rape Crisis Centre.
 - ✓ Department of Social Community and Family Affairs.
 - ✓ Jungle Box Childcare Centre with the Ferns Diocesan Youth Service.
 - ✓ Money Advice and Budgeting Service.
 - ✓ Wexford's Women's Refuge
 - ✓ VTOS
 - ✓ FAS

¹⁰ Access 2000 1998 page 8

As a result of ongoing evaluation of each course, a number of changes have occurred:-

An introduction to Computers was later introduced in the programmes delivered in Wexford.

The programme was extended from 6 weeks to 8 weeks occurred also as a result of evaluation.

Portfolio building was integrated at the beginning of the programme.



Women Making Choices Programme

EVALUATION



4a Previously Documented Evaluations

Much of the information used in this section is taken from an evaluation report of Women Making Choices Programme as delivered in Waterford and Wexford prepared by Molly Brennan in 1998. Also used are internal evaluations documents from Women Making Choices, Faythe School and Women Making Choices Waterford Courses as well as snapshot evaluations from the FDYS Women Making Choices Course.

Participant Profile

- 1. There was 100% participation rate from the women participants on the Waterford and Wexford courses.**
2. 83% of participants agreed that they would not have been able to access a course were it not for the childcare provision and the support of the development workers and tutors.
3. 44% said they would not have been able to access this training were it not for the training allowance.
4. Many participants on each of these courses had left school early; some had literacy difficulties, and were living on low income/social welfare.
5. 87% of participants have spent many years working in the home said they had little or no self-confidence.
6. Many found live register requirements a barrier to accessing any form of training and also found that the supports such as childcare and training allowances were non-existent.

Experience of the Course Process

Feedback documented in previous evaluations clearly indicate participants experience of the Women Making Choices Programme as a positive opportunity to engage in community education. Community Education which takes a holistic approach to education, and in which the lived experiences of the members of the group contribute to, and become part of the learning, facilitates a process whereby the cultures and values of the group are incorporated into the learning. That this process was successful within the delivery of the Women Making Choices Courses is evidenced in the documented evaluations in which comments on the course process can be summarised in three strands namely –

PARTICIPANT INPUT TO PROGRAMME

1. That participants were involved and included in the development of the programme; course content etc. facilitated an ownership throughout the process and ensured that the course was structured to meet the needs of the participants.

However for some participants this process happened a little too fast and for genuine ownership they would have required a slower lead in period and a longer course period in order to gain the maximum benefit from this approach.

GROUP LEARNING

3. Learning within the group situation was key to much of the individual success in terms of reaching learning goals articulated by participants. Confidentiality within the group and trust in the tutors were named as key components of the success of this group-learning situation. The key role played by the tutors and other supports built in to the course is evidenced by the fact that though most participants would have indicated a desire to remain within a peer group situation for further learning and support, once the course finished, in reality this became extremely difficult and for most was not sustainable.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION

3. The community education approach which focused on the adult as a learner provided opportunities for participants to identify, share and learn from their own and each others life experiences, and for most this was a positive and in some cases personally transformative experience. The methodology used in delivering the courses "recognises the needs of those most educationally disadvantaged," "is learner centred, and starts from a base that acknowledges and values the validity of a participants prior experience and knowledge. It also takes into account greater community issues and needs and allows participants to see their role in the community and encourages their participation in responding to the issues they identify."¹¹ "Community Education particularly with women tends to have a ripple effect, they bring the learning back to their families in their communities. They encourage others to participate and to reap the same benefits that they have had."¹²

In this sense the benefits of the particular process used in delivering the Women Making Choices Programme while clearly articulated throughout all evaluations to date can be difficult to quantify. Many of the most beneficial aspects of the course identified by participants are not easily assessed through mainstream evaluations where the focus is generally on measuring outcomes in terms of economic benefits rather than personal growth and development.

¹¹ Julie Fleming

¹² Helen Rafferty

Benefits For Participants

Previously documented evaluations clearly identify **increased confidence** and **development of assertiveness skills** as overwhelmingly the key benefits for participants. Other benefits previously named include:

1. Accreditation i.e. having the learning valued and independently accredited as of benefit initially to the participant but also potentially as something to be included on a C.V.
2. The courses seen as many as a step on a journey perhaps an initial step out of the home situation and towards further training or employment. For many this initial step of attending a training course was hugely challenging and was experienced as a huge personal triumph.

Further Progression

¹³Progression of participants from the first course delivered to 20 women in Waterford can be summarised as –

1. Full-Time Permanent Employment three;
2. Part-Time Permanent Employment three;
3. Community Employment Schemes three;
4. Full-Time Temporary Employment two;
5. Community Involvement sixteen;
6. Part-Time Temporary Employment three.

¹⁴Progression of participants from the three courses delivered to 47 women in Wexford can be summarised as –

23 are working both in full-time and part-time jobs

7 have participated in further training

17 are working in the home

¹³ Application to Department Social Community and Family Affairs 1999

¹⁴ This information was accumulated by the Facilitators from ACCESS 2000 Wexford 2001

Recommendations from earlier evaluations is echoed later in this report where the need for sustained support and further progression steps are identified as essential to ensuring that all participants can work on enhancing job seeking skills and redressing skills deficits so as to access personally fulfilling job opportunities.

¹⁶Access 2000 is very conscious that predevelopment training programmes should not automatically be measured in terms of successfully securing employment but should also indicate benefits to participants in terms of increased confidence, becoming more active in their own communities, promoting equality and local community development, and valuing their role in the home. The success of this particular approach is indicated by the following three findings:

1. ¹⁷From the eighteen participants interviewed as part of the 1998 evaluation 76% said self-awareness and stress management was the most preferred aspect of the course.
2. 24% rated communication skills and awareness as their most preferred.
3. By 1999 most of the participants from Waterford had made some progression into part-time employment, or community employment schemes and were participating in a voluntary capacity in their own communities. However, the workers and tutors identified that this group was at a greater level of development, than that of their counterparts in Wexford.

¹⁸"There was evidence of high levels of illiteracy in Wexford and the programme needs to be delivered over a longer period in order to consolidate the learning and identify the routes of progression for individuals."

To illustrate and give a flavour of Women's Progression and Development from their own point of view the following are quotes from participants documented as part of the 1998 report:

¹⁵ Access 2000 Interlink Project Women Making Choices Programme 1998

¹⁶ Application to the Department of Social Community and Family Affairs 1999

¹⁷ Access 2000 Interlink Project Evaluation Report of Women Making Choices Programme 1998

¹⁸ Access 2000 Interlink Project Evaluation Report of Women Making Choices Programme 1999

"We did mock interviews and role plays for jobs. Within the group I was terrified to do them and waited until 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".¹⁹

"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. Its about support and not being judged, its about caring and people working together, friendship and support."²⁰

"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".²¹

¹⁹ (Women Making Choices 1999)

²⁰ (Women Making Choices 1999)

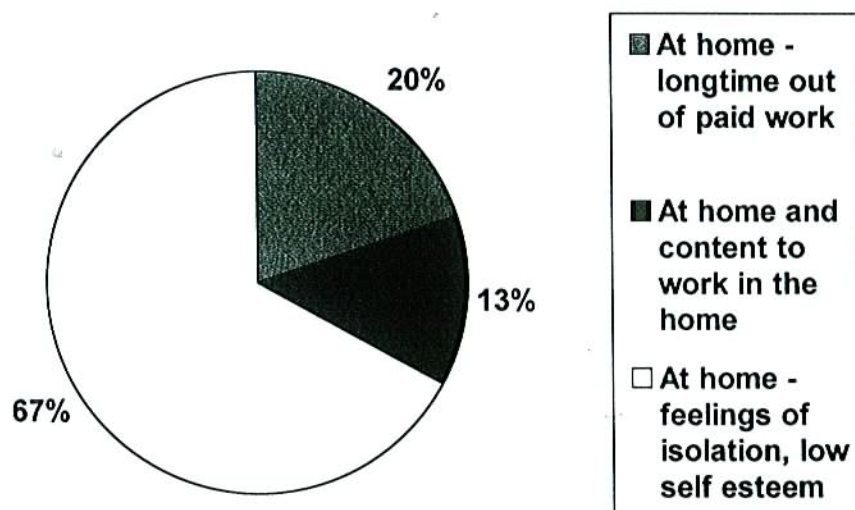
²¹ (Women Making Choices 1999)

4b Questionnaire Survey

Postal questionnaires were sent out (see appendix) with return rate of 21 or 29.16%. Some participants filled in and returned the questionnaires. Others responded through focus group discussion, and others were supported by the researcher to fill in individual questionnaires. Data received from these questionnaires has been collated and analysed under the following headings:

1. Participant profile before Women Making Choices Programme.
2. Participant experience of the process of Women Making Choices Course.
3. Impact/Benefit of Women Making Choices Programme for participants.
4. Progression of participants from Women Making Choices Programme.
5. Current Profile of participants.
6. Aspects of the course identified as least helpful by participants.
7. Issues identified by participants.

1.1 Participant Profile Before Beginning Women Making Choices Programme



It is significant that while none of the participants were working outside of the home before the Women Making Choices Programme, 57% primarily described themselves in terms of isolation, low self-confidence and being defined by and confined to their domestic situation. The feelings described ranged from boredom, to depression, to situations bordering on crisis.

"I was a housewife with nothing of interest to get me out of the home before Women Making Choices Programme".

"I was trapped at home, no ideas what I could do."

"Not taking time out for myself and sometimes you feel you are only good for housework and waiting on people."

"Depressed with the same routine minding my children, cleaning the house, cooking, washing and nothing to look forward too, not very outgoing."

"Very difficult home situation – Women Making Choices saved me."

Those who described themselves as being at home and a long time out of work also spoke in terms of isolation and low self-confidence, but clearly identified participating on the Women Making Choices Programme as a step towards working outside of the home. Feelings described were primarily of self-doubt and low self-confidence.

"I was quiet and nervous of trying new things."

"I described myself as brain dead."

"I was unaware of the different talents I had which I was using everyday."

"I had not worked for ten years and was very nervous about leaving the children, (The Crèche was great and made it possible for me to do the course)."

Participant Experience of the Process

33% of participants identified that the timing of the course was very suitable for adult learners and particularly those with young children. 53% identified the role of facilitators as key to the positive experience of the process. The experiences expressed were that the facilitators were down to earth, and specifically that they:

1. Were on the same wavelength as participants
2. Listened to participants
3. Acknowledged that participants were often vulnerable but made them feel well cared for
4. Provided a safe environment. The use of games throughout the course were identified as a aid to helping participants feel at ease

"Women delivering the course were great and made us think for ourselves."

"The women who took the classes helped us to take care of each other and give one another space. They showed personal interest in us and tried to direct us in different ways to help us."

Another key element of the process was the provision of childcare, which was identified by 46.6% of respondents as being an essential support to enable participation in the process.

"The Crèche made it possible for me to do the course."

"The Childcare was brilliant without it I could not have done the course."

The rôle of the other participants within the group setting as creating the safe space and playing a significant role in the learning that took place was also identified by 53% as being a key aspect of the process.

"There was a sense of nurturing from other women".

"Getting out of the house and meeting other women of similar background and building up our self-esteem was great."

The rôle of the group in identifying and planning course content was also acknowledged by 20% as being significant and a new experience.

"As a group we were listened to."

The rôle played by representatives from other agencies that were invited to give inputs as part of the process was also identified by 26% as being an important aspect of the process.

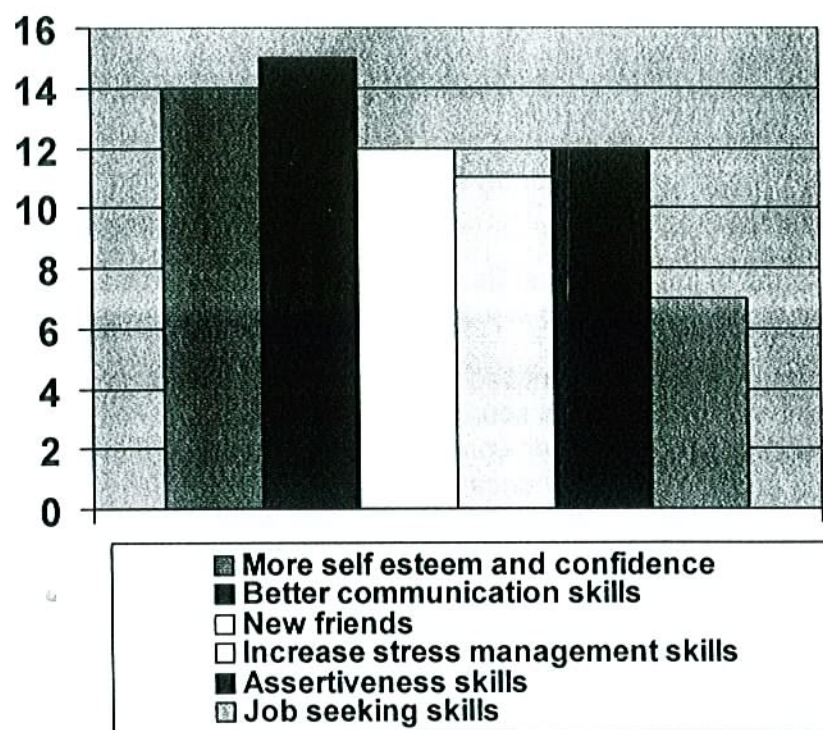
"I thought bringing in different representatives from other organisations was very helpful from family help to employment groups and other groups. It broke the ice if we needed to go to any of these organisations later on."

It is significant that a hundred per cent of respondents spoke only in positive terms when asked about their experience of the process, while later on in the questionnaire it was clear that there were some aspects of the process that participants might have liked to have had a different experience of but such is the feeling of positivity in relation to Women Making Choices Programme that participants have difficulty identifying any critical element.

Impact/Benefit of Participating in Women Making Choices Programme

1.2 Impact/Benefit of Participating in Women Making Choices Programme

%



In response to questions around impact and benefit of participating in the Women Making Choices Programme respondents clearly identified as the key benefits of participating.

1. Increased self-esteem,
2. Improved confidence,
3. Better communications skills,

4. Assertiveness skills.

Several respondents identified that the impact that the course has had on their lives has really only become apparent over time.

"I did not realise it at the time but the course has had a significant impact on my life. It has turned my way of thinking from being negative to positive."

In terms of increasing confidence the experience ranged from "gave me back some confidence" to "made me come out of myself", to "more self-esteem and confidence in myself", to "eliminate self doubt".

Better communications skills were also identified as a key impact/benefit of participating in the Women Making Choices Programme and here respondents identified coping with particular challenges such as job interviews etc. without embarrassment as a key benefit.

Related to this is the assertiveness skills people identified and articulated as *"being able to stand up and be counted, and also listen to others."*

"People did not take me for granted. I will not let anyone put me down and I take time out for myself."

"Help me to speak up for myself not to feel downgraded by people in higher authority."

In terms of job seeking skills seven respondents identified that the course gave *"a good grounding in job interview skills."*

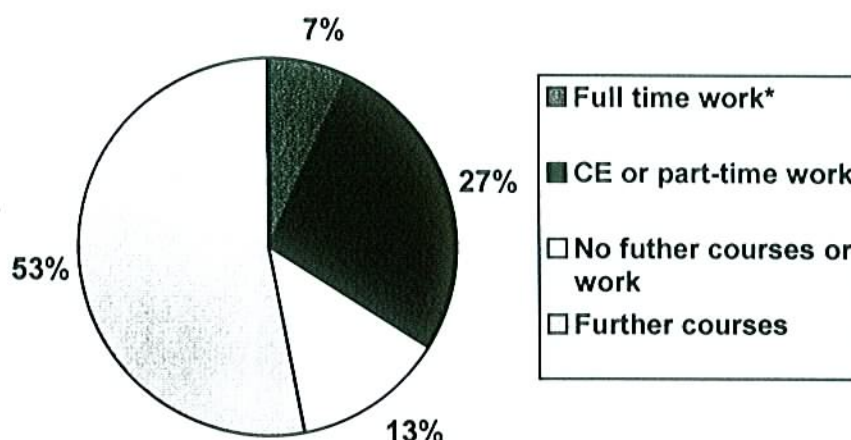
Another key benefit identified was making new friends and in particular linking with women as a source of support *"getting to know myself again. Spending time with other women and learning about them - learning to relax and use the experiences I have had in life as something valuable and to build on them."* Other benefits identified were the support to move through a difficult personal time and the opportunity to broaden horizons and move on to other new areas of learning or hobby or work activity.

"I was an early school leaver and now I feel I have had a second chance to learn."

"The course helped me through a difficult time and to set goals for myself."

Progression From Women Making Choices Programme

1.3 Progression From Women Making Choices Programme



* Temporary and not current for all respondents

The key area of progression identified by the respondents was to further training opportunities which range from IPPA Childcare Course, to FAS Computer Courses, to Interior Design Course, to Training for Trainers Course, to Literacy Support, and basic education courses.

"I went on to do further training which in time will bring a better education and the potential of a full time job I really like and feel confident and passionate about doing."

In terms of progression to work situations 27% of respondents identified that they moved on to CE or part-time positions but within this there was also a picture of some movement from job to job and some expression of a need for further support and direction in this area. A minority of respondents are clearly on an individual progression path that is taking them through training and part-time work to a determined goal to work within a particular area.

"I shadowed a Stress Management Facilitator on a second Women Making Choices Course and then designed and delivered my own Stress Management and Relaxation Session."

"I'm currently doing the Training For Trainers Course and this is a wonderful opportunity and is really opening doors for me."

13% of respondents identified that they have not progressed to further courses or work situations for personal reasons.

"At the moment I'm not in a position to go back to work as I have a young child but in the future this is what I want to do and now I have more confidence in my ability to do so."

"The progress I got from doing Women Making Choices Programme was for myself – I am still at home."

Further comments in response to the question re progression identified that participants understand progression to be much wider than progression to either further courses or work situations, but talk in terms again of the impact that the course has had on their lives.

"I no longer want to exist on the edge of reality, I want to live it, everyday I make the effort and when I look back I see the progress I have made. It is substantial."

Current Participant Profile

In response to the question asking participants to describe their current situation 86% responded in terms of their **self awareness** and **increased confidence** skills.

"I am still a housewife and mother but more aware of my own needs."

"I have caught up on the person I was before I was married and had children and who I am now."

"It has given me the confidence to feel I can do it if I really want to and how to go and get the skills to do other things if I choose."

"Women Making Choices showed me the way forward and made me believe in myself."

1. 46% of respondents identified that they now see themselves as better communicators and have found that the Women Making Choices Programme has helped them in their everyday life.
2. 40% named an increase in self-confidence when describing their current situation.
3. 26% said they now have a very positive outlook on life, which they didn't have prior to participating on the Women Making Choices Programme.
4. 13% identified a specific life situation that they have changed as a result or personal problem they have resolved as a result of participating on the Women Making Choices Course.

"I was in a bad marriage and didn't know where to turn but I got the strength to make life a lot easier for myself and to help me to know that there is more out there if you want it in life."

"There is no comparison really when I look back. Personal development is an on going process in a persons life and I don't think anyone can ever have enough confidence... but only for the first Women Making Choices Course I wouldn't be where I am today. It gave me a whole new beginning and whole new life, thank you."

Aspects of the Course Found Least Helpful/Beneficial by Participants

1. 46% of respondents identified the C.V. area as least helpful *"was just over the top, I felt I needed to be realistic about what is achievable."*
2. For others the Art and Crafts section of the course was challenging or boring or brought up feelings of inadequacy *"I'm just not good at it."* Others identified that Art and Craft provided an opportunity to bring out latent skill or develop new skills but felt that the time constraints made this difficult to achieve within the course.
3. Preparation of the portfolio was also identified as a stress factor. It took too much time and too much effort away from the experience of participating in the course for some participants. *"I would have liked to have started it from day one."*
4. The personal development aspect of the course was also identified as hard to take at times with Yoga and Stress Management either bringing up feelings or starting a process that some participants felt they didn't have adequate time to process.
5. 100% of respondents identified that the course was too short.
6. 87% identified that the fact that there was no follow up course was a let down. *"I felt lost after the course ended."* *"There should have been a follow up course for those who wanted one."*
7. One respondent identified that having to help out in the crèche sometimes interfered with her enjoyment of the course.
8. 33% identified that the course just moved too fast for them. *"There were stages I was not ready to take during the course like talking to a group."* *"More time was needed on things job seeking skills, addressing literacy issues and learning difficulties. Wording could have been simplified."*

Issues Identified

1. Benefits to participants from the Women Making Choices Programme were very easily articulated in terms of **increased self esteem** and **confidence** which individual women through narrative responses describe as a continuum which began with their participation on the course, and which continues to date either through continued informal support from ACCESS 2000 or as a result of particular transformative experiences which occurred within the course itself. In this sense any planning or evaluation of the Women Making Choices programme needs to be situated within the wider perspective of pre and post course supports.
2. In terms of work only a small minority of respondents identified that they are now in full time employment and it is significant that among this number the majority of full time positions are temporary or in one case not current. A larger minority (27%) have progressed to part time or CE positions. This may reflect the flexibility required by women in the workforce. It may be that for some part time work or CE position best suit their lifestyle and work requirements.

It is also clear however from some of the narrative responses that there has been some movement by these part time workers from job to job and some need further direction in this area. This would indicate that for these participants the time available for the process of moving from a position of isolation, through increased self esteem, and skills development to job opportunities as part of the Women Making Choices programme was too short. Some women were dependent on informal supports through ACCESS contact or isolated in working through this process within a timeframe suitable to their particular situation.

3. It is interesting to note the tension within responses between the transformative experience of increased self-esteem and confidence achieved within the short timeframe of the course, and the range of responses which identified some level of unease or inability to cope with certain elements of self development strands of the course.

A high number of respondents identified that their awareness of increased self esteem and confidence happened slowly. In some cases this awareness only occurred to them sometime after completing the course. This would seem to indicate that the course aim of facilitating personal growth and change was significantly achieved. Nevertheless the course could have been more effective and less disturbing for some participants if much more time had been available to ensure a gentle introduction to, and adequate process time for the personal development elements of the course.

4. That 53% of respondents progressed from the Women Making Choices to some type of further education and training clearly echoes the experience articulated by many respondents of participating in the Women Making Choices course as a first step on a journey to self fulfilment, community participation and meaningful work. The impact of taking this first step which has facilitated these women to progress further can be clearly seen in the large number that have not only moved from positions of isolation to engagement but became self determining in identifying their own personal progression route. For at least some of the participants the experience of being substantially supported through a largely informal support system provided by ACCESS 2000 staff has continued to facilitate their personal growth and development. A question arises whether this high level of post course support which is both informed by, and a natural outcome of ACCESS 2000 ethos of working from community education principles is sustainable as more courses are delivered and more women become involved in the process without dedicated resources.

The key issue identified was the duration of the course, which at six to eight weeks was identified by all respondents as being too short to achieve the stated aims. Particular difficulties identified as a direct result of the short timescale include; * A feeling of being let down once the course came to an end

- A desire to continue the experience by regular meetings with other participants with the aim of continuing the learning experience. This aspiration of continuing the self directed learning through informal women's groups was untenable. The reason for this was identified by some participants as having too short a time within the Women Making Choices course for sufficient capacity building and leadership skills development for the group to become self-directing.
- Some aspects of the course were experienced by some participants as too intense, or difficult to cope with within the timeframe. This was resolved in some cases by time, or by opportunities to engage with the particular aspect of the course again through further training, but for a minority there remains at least some unfinished business, if not a potential blockage
- An inability by a high number of respondents to benefit as much as they might have done from the CV preparation and progression routes to work preparation aspects of the course. It is clear that many of the participants gained a great deal from the personal development and consciousness raising elements of the course, but while engaged in this deep work were unable to absorb and benefit from these aspects of the course as much as they might have wanted to or needed to.

Focus Group Discussion

The findings documented in the questionnaire responses were overwhelmingly echoed within a focus group discussion with participants, which used the same questions and facilitated group as well as individual responses.

1. How would you describe yourself/your situation before starting the Women Making Choices Programme?

1. *"At Home"*
2. *"In a rut"*
3. *"Looking for a change"*
4. *"Looking for something for myself"*
5. *"At home and in a bad marriage – some personal issues"*
6. *"Involved in a lot of community activities"*
7. *"Saw going on this course as a challenge for me – I didn't know if I could do it."*
8. *"Saw getting paid for participating in the course as something positive and an attraction - something for me"*

2. What did you think of the process i.e. the way the course was run/ organised/delivered

1. *"The course was very well run, we got to set the agenda and put things into the programme, issues we wanted to address were done if it was at all possible."*
2. *"Some parts some of us didn't like e.g. the Yoga so if I didn't want to do the Yoga I got a change to do something else e.g. Sewing."*
3. *"The time of the course suited everybody."*
4. *"The Stress Management was very hard. Some of us got very emotional and found it heavy but others didn't mind it."*
5. *"Stress Management did not work for me while doing the Women Making Choices Programme but now I'm doing it as part of Training for Trainers Programme and it's much lighter and I'm more able for it."*

6. *"I found it hard to move on to discussion after doing something like Stress Management or Yoga."*
7. *The Course should have been longer e.g. "we did two sessions on Women's Health but we didn't have enough time to go into it in detail. It was rushed and we did not go into it deeply enough."*

3. What if anything would you have changed about how the course was run/organised/delivered?

1. *"There could have been less content if we looked at fewer things and looked at them in more detail, it might have been better."*
2. *"I would have liked more people coming in so that we could addressed more issues."*
3. *"The course would need to be longer."*
4. *"We might have looked at some of the issues in more detail rather than hitting the surface."*
5. *"I would have like the course to have gone a bit a faster. It was a bit slow for me and not in depth enough."*

4. What impact if any has the course had on your life i.e. did it change anything for you and if so what and how?

1. *"It gave me confidence."*
2. *"It gave me a broader outlook / horizon."*
3. *"It helped me with interview skills. I picked up a job out of it and I am better in a group."*
4. *"I always wanted to speak in front of a group of people and now I've done that."*
5. *"I am now involved in a training for trainers course. It gave me a routine through the winter and got me up and motivated."*
6. *"The money i.e. payment was great. Have gone on to Access 2000 Management Group and further facilitators training."*
7. *"I felt very frustrated after the first Women Making Choices Programme but then I did a second one and progressed from there great. My increased assertiveness skills – I can now stand up and take responsibility for myself and be confident."*

8. *"Learning to value myself."*
 9. *"Opportunity to gain confidence on computers."*
- 5. What aspects of the course did you find least helpful/beneficial?**
1. *"Art – the teacher was excellent but it just wasn't for me."*
 2. *"Most of the course happened indoors – there was no outdoors / visiting opportunities or at least not enough."*
 3. *"Stress Management – I found very difficult."*
 4. *"Jargon. We could have broken down some of the words."*
 5. *"The venue for the FDYS course wasn't a very positive environment."*
 6. *"The length of the course - it really should have been longer." (This was echoed by a large number of respondents)*
 7. *"After the course we planned to stay together meeting up once a week but people didn't turn up. We had planned to look at things like health and women's rights, and other issues and a lot of participants wanted to do it but we just couldn't achieve it."*
 8. *"During the course there was a lot of disruptions / changes e.g. re the employment and C.V. preparation and sometimes the progression of the course got lost e.g. the timetable changed when the school closed etc. and to do the C.V.s we had to go to a different venue (The Faythe Course)."*
 9. *"There was some dropout from the course, some people not turning up, taking time off, or people not staying for the full session, not really getting involved. The course was not necessarily suitable for everyone but there was nobody there to support them and this caused some friction between people."*
 10. *"Smoking was an issue (Faythe Course). The rules were changed so that we had a set time for smoking but some participants didn't stick to this and even though it was brought up and clarified it still didn't change and caused some friction."*
- 6. Did you progress from this course to any other course/training/work situation/group or community activity?**
9. *"Participating in Training for Trainers course."*
 10. *"Involved in management of ACCESS 2000."*

11. *"Involved in other community groups."*
12. *"Computer Courses."*
13. *"City and Guilds Certificate Course."*
14. *"Evening Classes."*

7. How would you currently describe yourself/your situation and how is that different from the picture you describe of yourself before starting the course?

1. *"Was encouraged to start writing and have now written an essay which I wouldn't have done before.... as part of another course I'm doing."*
2. *"I'm more confident, can get up and speak at a conference and have done so."*
3. *"Have more admiration for women."*
4. *"I will ask questions now."*
5. *"I can say I am wrong and feel free to change my mind without embarrassment."*
6. *"A school liaison officer has asked me to talk on a course which I did."*
7. *"I spoke as part of a FAS Course, made a group representation and feel very proud of this."*

4d Interviews with project partners

Wexford Area Partnership

Wexford Area Partnership delivered the job seeking skills aspect of the course and also provides on going follow up support to participants.

Feedback from interviews with Mediator and Programme Manager of Employment Guidance Series

- The design of the course with the particular women in mind and involving the participants in developing the content made it a meaningful experience for those who were part of it. It gave participants a start and left them wanting to do more, even if employment was not always an obvious next step
- FAS funding necessitated a Back to Work dimension in the course e.g. CV preparation which is where Wexford Area Partnership became involved, by delivering that section of the course, and further providing follow on support .
- Benefits to Wexford Area Partnership from participating as a partner in delivering Women Making Choices Programme include:
 - a) It facilitated the Wexford Area Partnership to promote the Employment Service Network
 - b) It facilitated Wexford Area Partnership to register more people on this network and so widen the client base with whom a long term relationship could be developed to facilitate progression to employment.

An average of 50% of participants have made contact and this contact has ranged from availing of a 'Drop in Service', to being supported to progress to further training and work opportunities.

Significantly there are still some women from the initial Women Making Choices Course calling in for support with CV preparation and job seeking skills.

- Challenges identified include:
 - a) Participants were at different stages and some were able to benefit more than others from job seeking skills. Some may have needed more education / training time before coping with job seeking skills
 - b) The person who delivered the job seeking skills and provides the follow on support had been a participant herself in ACCESS 2000 and so had a well developed understanding of the process involved. It may not always be possible for Wexford Area Partnership to have this particular type of involvement in delivering the Women Making Choices course
 - c) Some participants from the Women Making Choices courses did not avail of the services of the Employment Service Network. It is not clear whether this is because they progressed without the need of further assistance, or were not ready or able to take this step on their own initiative
- Suggested changes to the Women Making Choices Course:
 - a) The course could be longer and so not leave participants with high expectations but no identified next step once the six or eight weeks course is completed
 - b) If the course was longer more time could then be devoted to developing links with the participants and beginning the support process. One specific suggestion was that an individual session for each participant could be part of the structured sessions. If this occurred there would be less pressure on participants to absorb information re job seeking skills and C.V. preparation , and more time devoted to the earlier stages of this process
 - c) Participants should be very clear at the beginning of the course what the potential progression steps are, and so a range of next step options need to be in place. Wexford Area Partnership is currently involved in talks with FAS re developing a progression phase course which may meet some of the needs identified but would not be confined to Women Making Choices participants, or indeed to women.

FAS

FAS as a partner in the Women Making Choices Programme supported the participants by:

- ✓ paying a part-time training allowance, which allowed for flexible delivery, i.e. not during school times and holidays.
- ✓ Providing childcare which could be accessed by either using local community based childcare or choosing to select their own childcare.

Feedback From Senior Placement Officer, Community Service, FAS

Motivation for FAS in becoming a partner in the Women Making Choices Programme can be summarised as:

- ✓ FAS recognises that there is a definite need to offer alternative education and training opportunities and supports in areas where people have not traditionally taken the mainstream opportunities on offer.
- ✓ FAS was interested in supporting a programme that would work to motivate people and provide the necessary supports to facilitate them to engage in:
 - (a) Personal development;
 - (b) Skills development;
 - (c) Progression towards work opportunities.

FAS saw in the Women Making Choices Programme an opportunity to support this group through the informal atmosphere and community approach developed by Access 2000.

Impact Of Women Making Choices Course

1. FAS measured the impact through the certification that was available as part of the Women Making Choices Course but have not tracked individual participants and so does not have a composite picture of a progression.
2. Six to eight weeks is probably too short for people to have taken significant steps towards work.
3. FAS is aware that a significant number of participants from the Faythe Course went on to get work.
4. No participant has come into FAS subsequent to the Women Making Choices Course asking for support.

Challenges Identified and Suggested Next Steps

1. Part of the Women Making Choices Course should be an integrated follow up plan with progression routes identified.
2. These progression routes should be focused on skills development with paid support for participants and some personal development built in as part of the course.
3. The progression routes will not necessarily work for all of the participants e.g. for those for whom the paid support remains the key motivating factor.
4. The success of the follow on courses needs to be measured in terms of outcomes and progressions. These outcomes and progressions should encompass:
 - (a) Personal development and growth;
 - (b) Skills development required to do the training;
 - (c) Progression towards work.
5. While there has been an inter agency approach to date it has not been as integrated as it might be. The multi agency approach to identify and plan a progression route for Women Making Choices needs to identify clearly the role of each agency and also possibly expand to include other agencies. FAS has a role to play in developing these progression routes with a particular area of expertise and a funding capacity, but not to be involved in as detailed a way as other agencies with the day to day running of the programme.
6. Wexford Area Partnership may take a lead in the community support aspect of the course as they have a strong brief for disadvantaged areas and they may have more capacity for on the ground contact and support. The Department of Social Community and Family Affairs could be part of around the table discussions, as to whether or not they are in a position to contribute funding. This multi agency approach to financing and managing the progression routes for Women Making Choices could possibly draw on other agencies some of which could play a stronger lead in various aspects of the programme or at various times in the programme.
7. Access 2000 are the lead agency in the Women Making Choices Programme and it will be their task to identify the progression route or progression routes and further to draw together all of the potential partners in such a progression to ensure that the progression is planned and delivered in a co-ordinated way. Outcomes and progression routes need to be the focus here before we go much further with the Women Making Choices Programme.

8. The role of Access 2000 as lead agency in this planned progression needs to be clarified.

Home School Liaison Officers

Part of the brief of the Home School Liaison Officer is to target women who are in a cycle of disadvantage and to find ways of supporting them to identify and address their needs.

Feedback From Local Home School Liaison Officer

Benefits

The Women Making Choices Programme was of benefit to me in my role as Home School Liaison Officer because it can be very challenging to engage with the women who might need such support and to find appropriate ways of facilitating their development. Wexford Area Partnership informed me of the possibility of such a course from Access 2000 and I then made a direct link with Access and from that the Women Making Choice Course happened in the Faythe School. The course was very worthwhile and I as Home School Liaison Officer can see an increased level of confidence in the participants around the school now.

The women are now more supportive of the school and are more involved in the day to day activities in the school and are more supportive of me and my role of Home School Liaison Officer.

"I was astonished that the women got involved with the course and managed to stay with the course. For some payment was a good incentive but it also worked and allowed them to take the time out for themselves."²²

The participants enjoyed the course and attended pretty regularly which was a major achievement for some of the participants.

Progression

Two participants from the course went on to do an ECDL Training Course.

Two others went on to do a Shop and Business Course.

One other that I know of went on to further training.

Challenges Identified By Local home School Liaison Officer

For some of the participants eight weeks was not sufficiently long enough for them to address their personal needs or be supported to deal with life situations that have been very challenging over a long period of time.

²² "Quote from Local Home School Liaison Officer"

These participants would need more sustained individual and group support over a longer time in order to successfully address these issues and develop the capacity to move on.

A longer course could include more personal development and practical ways for participants to deal with life situations.

The participants enjoyed the Art and also the Crafts elements of the course and perhaps more of this could be built in.

Some participants may have benefited from more basic education and literacy support.



Women Making Choices Programme

POLICY



Context

The White paper on Education suggests that learning is a life long process building on the foundation of formal schooling. It goes on to say "that access to life long education and training is important for all people, and including those who, for whatever reason, completed their formal education without reaching their full potential. Adult and continuing education empowers adults to take more active and effective part in society"²³

A report on Labour Market participation further suggests that education, training and personal development, including the promotion of lifelong learning, continues through training and updating as skills are crucial stepping-stones to labour market participation.²⁴

The concept of lifelong learning is underpinned nationally and internationally.

1. The European Commission adopted a strategy for lifelong learning in 1996 called " Into The Learning Society."
2. The National Employment Action Plan for Ireland recognises that "A key element of current policy includes providing a continuum of quality education and training from early childhood through to adulthood, addressing disadvantage and early school leaving and maximising participation rates in education. Providing targeted actions for those who left the school system early."
3. The Green Paper on Adult Education – "Adult Education in an Era of Life Long Learning" states

"Education can play a key role in the promotion of equality of opportunity or in the perpetuation of poverty. Education qualifications, or lack of them, determine to a large extent the life chances of people. It further states that the well educated, flexible workforce which has been a central part of Irelands' current economic growth is itself a wasting asset, unless renewed on an ongoing basis through a continuous drive to upgrade and re-skill."

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy

The National Anti-Poverty Strategy helped placed the elimination of educational disadvantage as a key objective and has identified the following areas for inclusion in its strategies to combat educational disadvantage and social exclusion.

1. Financial support to low-income families to facilitate participation.
2. The provision of accessible pre-school education to ensure basic literacy and numeracy skills at an early age.

²³ Charting Our Education Future White Paper on Education page 77

²⁴ Expert Working Group on Women and the Labour Market

3. The provision of expansion of the school services and new initiatives to work for the prevention of educational disadvantage.
4. Supports for special educational needs.
5. Specific assistance to travellers.
6. Responses to early school leaving.
7. Opportunities in life-long learning and the provision of key supports and in particular childcare to facilitate women's participation.
8. The report from the working group on Women and the Labour Market posits a view of community education as having "Enormous potential to address the critical needs of the most excluded of women. Local women's education groups act as a first point of contact for women, particularly those in the home, who wish to widen their horizons, develop confidence and skills, gain qualifications and explore the possibility of returning to the workforce. The report goes on to say that through the provision of community based educational opportunities for women the circumstances of women's lives are recognised and women's culture is respected. Their multiple roles are recognised and all of this informs the development of specific methodologies of teaching and learning. The main emphasis of these methodologies include **participation, co-operation and creativity**. These new approaches to community education and specifically in meeting the educational needs of women acknowledge the importance of the holistic approach to education that integrates physical, emotional and cultural needs with intellectual needs. Two key issues arise here which are of direct relevance to the Women Making Choices Programme –
 - (i) An holistic approach to education which uses participation, co-operation and creativity as its key tenants, poses questions of credibility in terms of how such activities can be adequately accredited. Access 2000 has addressed this issue through the provision of accreditation for Women Making Choices Programme but this issue remains a key challenge for any progression route identified.
 - (ii) For many women returning to education after a long absence this approach will of necessity provide a long lead in period where the emphasis needs to be on personal development and confidence building before any formal skills development or specific training programme becomes relevant.

"For some individuals there may be a number of personal or social problems to be addressed before labour market interventions can be considered.

By their nature, many of these difficulties could be better addressed by voluntary and community organisations. Such as lack of motivation, lack of literacy or interview skills."²⁵

A further challenge to those engaged in community education such as Access 2000 in the development of Women Making Choices Programme and potential progression routes from there is to find ways of impacting on the dominant educational mainstream policy and provision and provide opportunities for the complementarity of the different methodologies to work hand in hand rather than the community education remaining eliminative sometimes and somewhat under valued activity.

²⁶"While Adult Education responses such as those discussed" (Community Based Initiatives) "have been in operation and successful in engaging vulnerable sections of the populations, they have found it difficult to influence mainstream practice. In particular acquiring formal qualifications or accreditations for the learning undertaken within these initiatives remains difficult."

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 initiated the establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, which has a responsibility to develop mechanisms for the accreditation of prior and experiential learning and the development of Credit Accumulation and Transfer Schemes.

Lessons Learned From The Successful NOW Models

Projects involved in the 1995-1997 phase of Employment NOW produced a significant policy statement in "NOW Find A Way"²⁷ demonstrating and naming the barriers that exist for Women Accessing Labour Market Opportunities and goes on to make concrete recommendations on how some of these issues can be addressed. The common theme of these unconnected pilot projects was the provision of flexible and women friendly programmes and the lessons learned from these programmes have been documented as:

(i) Recruitment

In recognition of the fears of many women in regard to finding out about training opportunities a number of projects were conscious of the need to go out actively into the community to the women and hold small, informal meetings for such issues could be addressed.

²⁵ Report Four "Ending Long-term Unemployment" NESS June 1994 page 97

²⁶ Expert Working Group on Women and the Labour Market

²⁷ NOW Find A Way Recommendations For Ensuring Flexibility For Women Accessing Training Education and Self-Employment Opportunities

(ii) Selection

All of the projects employed an open selection policy, including women regardless of their age, economic status, educational background or life circumstances, i.e. women who might ordinarily have difficulty accessing mainstream provision.

(iii) Design of Programme

Many projects actively sought ideas from the target group when it came to designing the various programmes. In some cases this went one step further when the projects were managed by steering committees with a balance in favour of local women who were acutely aware of specific needs and could come up with creative strategies to overcome them.

(iv) Childcare and Domestic Responsibilities

While it is a criterion of all of the Employment Initiative Programmes that Childcare requirements are considered, it is particularly important within NOW. All of the projects are committed to developing childcare in Ireland from a variety of different prospective (a) the need for childcare provision to facilitate women's participation in the labour market and in education and training; (b) Women interested in childcare as an employment opportunity; (c) The social and educational advantage to children themselves.

(v) Women Friendly Training

The typical approach taken on all projects involved a holistic approach to design and delivery of training, particularly building in a support system to take account of personal needs, domestic circumstances, and educational disadvantage. Many of the projects employed facilitators and tutors who were women, and in some cases local women who had come up through the ranks. This had a dual advantage, as many of these women shared common life experiences and could serve as role models in that they had overcome their own personal and structural barriers to employment. In some cases depending on the project, the approach taken to training was very much that of a group learning context and this lateral approach was seen to be particularly useful and productive in a women's training environment.

The Women in the Labour Market suggests that the working group were impressed by the NOW Programme and were of the view that the lessons learned from the practise on the ground in this programme are of significant and strategic importance for women in the context of the future development of all labour market programmes.

Many of the recommendations in the working groups report are in line with the lessons learned from the NOW experience which have been tried and tested and shown to work in practice.

The Women's Education Initiative

The Women's Education Initiative funded by the Department of Education and Science and in part by the European Social Fund was initiated in 1998 to assist projects to address the current gaps in provision for Educational Disadvantaged Women. This initiative has supported thirteen projects to develop models of good practise and to improve such Educational Provision for Women. The aim of this initiative is that these pilot models will be capable of wider application and will in fact impact on future policy. A budget of six hundred thousand pounds was made available over a two-year period (1998 – 2000) to voluntary women's groups to enable women to plan and pursue lifelong education opportunity and to acquire access to mainstream programmes. The specific criteria for distribution of these funds were drawn up by an expert group made up of representatives from a number of organisations active in the area of women's education. The criteria identified included:

1. Address gaps in provision for educationally disadvantaged women.
2. Build local capacity.
3. Develop structures.
4. Accredit womens learning.
5. Encourage partnerships between voluntary, statutory agencies.
6. Mainstream learning processes.
7. Enable progression in education for women.
8. Disseminate information.

Recommendations From The Working Group on Women in the Labour Market

1. Recommendation 21

The working group acknowledges the potential and value of community based training and education, support the emphasis placed on this in the green paper on adult education, and endorses the recommendations made in this context in the green paper.

2. Recommendation 22

The group recommends that the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, once established, should pursue as a priority the development of mechanisms for the development of credit accumulation and transfer schemes and the accreditation of prior and experiential learning. In the course of this process particular attention should be paid to gender proofing.

3. Recommendation 23

The group notes that funding for the Women's Educational Initiative is only provided until the year 2000. It is the view of the group that this is a very important and worthwhile initiative which has to date demonstrated a capacity for achieving important outcomes which have the potential to influence mainstream policy, for a minimal outlay of funds, the group therefore recommends that when the current programme expires in the year 2000 additional funding should be provided to continue the current initiative or initiate a new one.

4. Recommendation 45

The working group having considered the experience of the EU NOW programme in Ireland since 1992 recommend that the lessons learned with the regard to process and procedures should be integrated in to the development of future mainstream policy and practise. Many of these pilot projects have demonstrated successful practises in meeting both women's and labour market needs and should be used as a model for the design and implementation of future labour market initiatives. The operational programmes which would give effect to the national development plan 2000-2006 should reflect and draw on this experience and should also have regard to the gender mainstreaming approach to which the government has committed itself under both the National Development Plan and Guideline 19 of the Employment Action Programme 1999.²⁸

Women and Poverty

"Out of Sight" a National Women's Council of Ireland Policy Discussion Paper on the hidden poverty of Ireland makes link between poverty and poor educational attainment among some women. The report suggests that women experience educational disadvantage because the present provision of education and training is neither structured nor resourced in a way that recognises the social culture and economic needs of women. The reports suggests that this results from a number of interlinked factors including:

1. Formal education provision reinforces inequalities already evident in society, including those based on wealth and social background.

²⁸ Women in the Labour Market Report page 76 and page 92

2. The majority of education and training policy is gender blind. It does not recognise or respond to the different needs of women and men, including those at the most socially excluded.
3. Formal education provision tends to view education as a passive process of accumulating knowledge and preparing for employment rather than as a tool for active participation in, transformation, of family, community and public life. The discussion paper goes on to suggest that what is valued and rewarded through the education system "does not fit with the values and needs of women living in poverty or at risk of poverty. Structures of provision are not flexible to the reality of women's lives as mothers, carers and family members."²⁹ The Discussion Paper goes on to suggest that for both women and men low educational attainment leads to various forms of poverty but the implications of this educational disadvantage are different for women and men. This is due to gendered differences in the relative position of women and men in society and consequently different opportunities and outcomes in relation to their participation in education and training. "Broader patterns in employment, education, training, family and social protection policies act to increase the gap between women and men with low educational qualifications with respect to economic and social opportunities."³⁰ A key suggestion in this policy paper is that inappropriate forms and types of education and training delivery act as a disincentive to participation by marginalized women.

The Discussion Paper suggests that the most socially excluded women need active encouragement, positive feedback, and specific guidance and supports if they are to overcome low levels of confidence, lack of information, and previous poor experiences of the educational system.

The Discussion Paper suggests particularly importance for women who are marginalized in multiple ways as their specific needs are the least likely to be met by the mainstream. Courses must be planned and delivered in a way that is relevant to the specific needs and situations of these women. The report underscores the significant achievement of the NOW and Women's Education Initiatives Programmes in identifying empowerment as the key underlining Philosophy for alternative interventions in the mainstream systems.

This Philosophy is understood by the National Women's Council of Ireland as guiding the choice of methods adopted and highlighting the importance of a holistic approach to education and training for women who are specifically disadvantaged.

²⁹ Out of Sight, The Hidden Poverty of Women, National Womens Council of Ireland, Policy Discussion Paper.

³⁰ Out of Sight, The Hidden Poverty of Women, National Womens Council of Ireland, Policy Discussion Paper.

"No strategy to overcome Women's Educational Disadvantage will be successful unless it sustains and supports women's personal, social and political progression."³¹

Specific Recommendations From The National Women's Council with regard to Educational Disadvantage

Educational Disadvantage

1. The implementation of the following measures to ensure access to education and training for marginalized women:
 - Provision of adequate childcare and eldercare supports.
 - The development of flexible provision, including part-time and distance learning.
 - The development of progression routes and systems of accreditation, including accreditation of prior learning.
 - Increased eligibility to courses for women from low-income households and women returners.
 - Additional financial supports for low income women.
2. The development of a holistic approach to meeting the education and training needs of marginalised women, including:
 - Expansion of literacy, pre-development and outreach services.
 - Recognition of and support for community education approaches as models of provision that enable marginalised women to devise and participate in education and training relevant to their own needs.
 - Development of guidance services.
3. The commitment that the models of good practice and policy recommendations developed under NOW (New Opportunities for Women), the WEI (Women's Education Initiative) and the POWER Partnership will inform mainstream policy and practice.
4. The recognition by VEC's, the Department of Education and Science and other relevant government departments of women-centered education and training services which women's groups and women's networks provide through:
 - The provision of on-going support to provide lifelong learning and access routes for women's personal, social and political progression.

³¹ Out of Sight, The Hidden Poverty of Women National Womens Council of Ireland Policy Discussion Paper, page 18

- The inclusion of such groups as participants on policy-making and decision-making bodies, such as the National Adult Learning Council, Local Adult Education Councils and the National Qualifications Framework.
5. The expansion of gender-specific initiatives targeted at enabling women who are marginalized in multiple ways to pursue lifelong learning, and access the mainstream. Specific groups of women to be targeted to include: Traveller women, minority ethnic women, women with disabilities, women asylum-seekers and refugees, rural women, lone parents, women in prostitution, women who have experienced violence in intimate relationships, women drug users, homeless women.
 6. The implementation of the PPF commitments to:
 - Enable young parents to participate in education and training through the provision of specific supports.
 - Commission research to examine the implications of women's and men's different learning styles and needs, and the development of models of provision that are responsive to these differences.

In conclusion The National Women's Council Discussion Document highlights the inexplicable link between educational disadvantage and poverty and its belief that the absence of education qualifications has a greater impact on women and on their children than it has on men. The strategy which will break the cycle of poverty, and support the more socially excluded women in to and through education and further education and into training and paid employment will of necessity have to recognise these barriers and resource their removal.

“Substantial additional resources and direct representation of women's groups on national and local policy decision making foras are required to implement the commitments outlined in the White Paper.”³²

Current Experiences

Community Education is now widely acknowledged as the key response to addressing the needs of educationally disadvantaged women for whom the traditional mainstream response has not worked. The key tenants of this community based educational approach as a response to educational disadvantage among women can be identified as:

- (a) Flexibility;
- (b) Creativity;

³² Out of Sight, The Hidden Poverty of Women National Women's Council of Ireland Policy Discussion Paper, page 19

- (c) Including specific supports particularly childcare (and sometimes financial payment);
- (d) multi agency approach.

The National Development Plan 2000-2005

A National plan for Women is currently being developed for the period 2001 2005. This plan is being drawn up under the same priority actions or critical areas of concern as defined in the Beijing Platform for Action agreed by the participating one hundred and eighty five governments at the Fourth International Conference on Women held in Beijing China in 1995.

Education and training for Women

The objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action in relation to Education and Training are to:

- Develop non-discriminatory education for women and girls
- Improve women's access to vocational training, science and technology
- Allocate sufficient resources for and monitor the implementation of educational reforms
- Improve the lifelong learning of women and girls

“ Education is a human right and an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality, development and peace” ³³

“ Women should be enabled to benefit from an ongoing acquisition of knowledge and skills beyond those acquired during youth . the concept of lifelong learning includes knowledge and skills gained in formal education and training , as well as learning that occurs in inform always, including volunteer activity, unremunerated works and traditional knowledge”³⁴

³³ Beijing Platform for Action paragraph 69

³⁴ Beijing Platform for Action paragraph 73

Beijing +5 An alternative to the Government report on progress made in the first five years since Beijing, makes the following critique of the Government's performance in this area:

1. The Green Paper on Adult Education represented the single biggest opportunity to address women's educational disadvantage, yet it does not include a gender analysis, neither did it make proposals that recognised the gender specific realities and needs in adult education.
2. Models of good practise have been developed to address barriers to women's participation in education and training in a range of specific areas – but they have not been mainstreamed to have a specific impact on women's lives
3. Access issues – childcare, eldercare, the Live Register barrier, cost, information, transport, family-friendly timing of courses, disability access – remain at the centre of women's unequal access to education and training.
4. Community education, part-time and distance learning need to be valued as lifelong learning opportunities for women, and resourced appropriately as crucial access routes for women.³⁵

The Government's draft National Plan for Women asserts that these issues will be addressed, and specifically that "Opportunities for educationally disadvantaged women will be promoted and the recommendations of the Life Long Learning Task Force will be considered"³⁶

The work already carried out by ACCESS 2000 through design, delivery and evaluation of the Women Making Choices Programme provides an opportunity for the Irish Government to advance some of the specific issues for the advancement of women's education identified in Beijing, reiterated at the Beijing plus 5 conference, and further articulated in the Draft National Plan for Women.

³⁵ Promises Made-Promises Broken, Beijing plus 5, An Alternative Report for Ireland, National Women's Council 2000

³⁶ Draft National Plan for Women 2001-2005, Consultation process Background and Summary



Women Making Choices Programme

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS



Conclusions

It is very clear from feedback from participants that the Women Making Choices Programme is experienced as making a positive contribution towards self development as well as a to a lesser extent skills development and progression into work.

The Women Making Choices Course has been seen as an important resource to Home School Liaison Officers who work with the target group and previously have experienced difficulties in finding an appropriate mechanism for supporting and facilitating the development of this target group. The Women Making Choices Programme was recommended by the Home School Liaison Officer in the Faythe School to four further Home School Liaison Officers and consultation is also on going with Carrick on Bannow and Ramsgrange Womens' Groups re the provision of Women Making Choices Courses in these areas.

Access 2000 is also in consultation with Wexford Area Partnership providing training to the Traveller Women's' Group in Wexford, and is also receiving on going referrals from Wexford Women's' Refuge and the Wexford Young Women's Project.

These recommendations, referrals and requests for similar programmes being received by Access 2000 from other agencies are keen indicators of the success of this programme as a predevelopment gateway for women who are not benefiting from mainstream provision.

Consultations with participants similarly indicate an extraordinarily high level of satisfaction with the self-development and personal capacity building elements of the Women Making Choices Programme. The fact that a very high number of participants on the Women Making Choices Programme progressed to further education or training opportunities is also an indicator that the methodology and approach of community education is appropriate as a progression too for this target group.

Given the starting point of disenfranchisement and alienation described by participants as their situation before beginning the course it is no small feat that so many have progressed to part-time or full-time work opportunities as a direct result of taking part in Women Making Choices Programme. Nevertheless the very success of this course in terms of progressing individuals and providing opportunities for groups at community level raises some serious questions of resourcing and appropriate accreditation and opportunities for impacting on mainstream policy.

It is significant that current educational policy within Ireland embraces community education as an appropriate, and to some extent proven tool for facilitating participation by those most marginalized in society.

Significantly however neither the structures nor resources are as yet in place to facilitate a cohesive and integrated development of such an educational approach as part of mainstream provision within Ireland.

Recommendations

Specific recommendations are articulated through or as a result of the evaluation process:

1. Outreach Support

It is clear from feedback from participants as well as project partners that an essential and significant element within the community education approach used by Access 2000 in the Women Making Choices Programme is the provision of extended Outreach Support to identify participants, develop relationships and encourage participants to take that first step into the predevelopment training programme.

It is very clear from the feedback throughout this evaluation process that the success of the Outreach element of the Women Making Choices depends in no small part on the very high level of commitment of Access 2000 staff and in particular supportive relationships developed by them with potential, actual and past participants of the Women Making Choices Programme.

A question arises however if this level of support which was provided in this case is possible for further Women Making Choices Courses if not significantly and specifically resourced. In terms of progression courses further question arises whether Outreach in terms of individual support which has been identified by the theorists and policy makers as an integral part of community education will similarly be resourced and seen as core to any course planned and delivered.

2. Extension of Current Women Making Choices Course

Feedback from participants and projects partners overwhelming indicated that the current Women Making Choices Course is too short to adequately facilitate womens' participation in and through the content identified as relevant to their individual and group progression. Two choices:-

- (a) Reduce the content and focus specifically on personal development and capacity building initially with C.V. preparation and specific jobs skills development happening at a later date perhaps within a second course option.
- (b) Extend the time of the course by another four to eight weeks, which would facilitate participants to have more time to both work through the process in terms of self development and capacity building elements and absorb the material in terms of the skills development and job preparation element.

3. Specific Follow-on or Progression Courses

Many participants interviewed as part of this evaluation articulated a feeling of being let down or unsupported once the Women Making Choice Course finished and there was no obvious progression route identified. For some individual participants through support of staff at Access 2000 or Project Partners individual progression routes were identified so that individuals moved on to specific education or training opportunities or in some cases part-time or full-time work opportunities.

A clear need however was articulated by both participants and project partners for a well defined specified progression route to be in place prior to a Women Making Choices Programme commencing so that from the beginning participants have options and can understand themselves to be on a journey that will facilitate their movement beyond the pre-development stage through further support linkages to either mainstream educational training opportunities or work.

This progression need poses some specific key challenges to Access 2000 namely

It is likely that only very small numbers will want to progress in any one direction and so the possibility of either extending the initial Women Making Choices Programme or adding a follow on generic step two programme is unlikely to complete the journey for those individual who want to move on into a specific skills area.

In terms of progression it is clear from consultation with some of the participants that there is no clarity at the end of the Women Making Choices Course around what might be the most appropriate progression step for them. This would indicate that the notion of progression needs to be expanded to include many small steps that while accredited and seen as being on route towards self actualisation of the participant may not be directly or swiftly linked to easily identifiable skills training or work preparation opportunities.

A further issue arises in terms of the role, the small financial payment made to participant plays as a motivating factor for a small number of participants. It is clear from the consultations that for some participants progression is not a felt need and is unlikely to happen at all in the terms currently understood by a progression route or at least until other significant supports have been put in place for those participants to engage in resolving personal and family situations.

While it is quite relevant to think of the provision of such supports within the terms of community education, it is more challenging if this community education is resourced by an institute or group whose philosophy with regard to progression would assume much more direct straight forward linkages.

4. Extending The Partnership

Feedback from consultations indicate that the experience of having a multi agency approach both in terms of funding and delivering of the Women Making Choices Programme has been a positive experience. Challenges identified within this relationship include:

- a. A better integration in terms of programme planning and delivery among the agencies currently participating in the partnership approach.
- b. An extension of the partnership approach to include other agencies that through funding or specialist supports or expertise could enhance the experience.
- c. The mainstreaming of a community educational initiative such as Women Making Choices poses specific challenges not least of which is the existence of the programme as a result of the inability of current mainstream provision to address the needs of the target group as identified and in appropriate way.

It is possible however and increasingly important for Access 2000 through the Women Making Choices Programme to ensure that this community educational experience does not remain minimal and extraneous to a mainstream provision by working in partnership with mainstream provided to develop new approaches to education and training opportunities for women who do experience social exclusion and disadvantage.

- d. This partnership is already in place between Access 2000 and Waterford Institute of Technology but it remains a challenge for Access 2000 to ensure that the specific philosophy and practices of community education as understood and articulated through Women Making Choices Programme remains to the fore in joint ventures with that institute.

5. Accreditation

Women Making Choices Programme have reached a significant milestone in accessing accreditation for the six to eight week programme.

Feedback from the consultations with participants and project partners strongly indicate that accreditation will play a key role in any progression routes identified from Women Making Choices Programme. This accreditation will of necessity need to be flexible and achievable for participants within the terms of the principles and practices underpinning in community education while simultaneously having a transfer value that is independently recognisable within mainstream education.



Women Making Choices Programme

APPENDICES



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ACCESS 2000 (Wexford) Limited

86 North Main Street, Wexford

Tel: 053 21200/21201 : Fax: 053 21818 : Email: accesswex@iol.ie