

Sharing Winning Strategies Partnership Issues

Round Table

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Summary

After World War II, women from different political and social backgrounds united to try to influence the Dutch government's reconstruction programs. The first VAC (Women's Advisory Committee for Housing and the Environment) and National Board were founded in 1946 and there are now 200 VACs with thousands of volunteers. The National Bureau is financed by the national government and is responsible for the two-year training of volunteers to assess the quality, safety, and sustainability of housing and residential areas.

The Provincial Government of Zeeland financially supports VAC provincial meetings and special training. Members of the VAC Board are invited to participate in special provincial commissions since their work includes monitoring the government's work on housing, environment, and regional planning.

Local or regional VACs ranging from five to 15 members are funded by local authorities and sometimes partners such as housing co-operatives. As non-governmental community organizations, VACs monitor City plans and work with and advise organizations for tenants and the disabled and elderly as well as police and town-planners. Findings of a safety survey conducted by the VAC in the City of Terneuzen in 1991 prompted the establishment of the WKB (Housing Consumers Bureau) which advises residents on housing, rent, and social security and services. VAC members and police have set "office hours" at the WKB where they are available at for consulting on a variety of issues.

VACs give women a voice in decision-making and are often stepping stones to political careers. Although it is becoming more difficult to find volunteers with the time to be trained, particularly as more and more women have full-time careers outside the home, it is encouraging to see more men becoming involved.

Discussion

VACs do not specifically address domestic violence but rather how urban and household planning and design can improve women's safety in public and at home. Issues of violence against women can be incorporated into broader community safety issues such as lack of accessible and safe public transportation and the safety of schools and their surroundings. In Prague (Czech Republic), efforts to make the municipality safer for children also had the positive side-effect of improving women's safety. Concern is raised that lack of specific focus on gender considerations and the increasing use of gender-neutral terms create the false impression that women's emancipation has been achieved.

Round table meetings of women's groups and municipal government in Ottawa (Canada) provided a venue for dialogue between the two groups and for "gaps" in safety policy and services to be identified. These meetings also helped to ensure implementation and follow-up of women's recommended improvements.

Conclusions

- Services must be community-based and depend on local women to identify priorities and recommend the actions that would help them most.

- Giving community groups the tools and resources they need to conduct local safety diagnoses, needs assessments, or safety audits allows community safety data to be collected that can be used to analyse safety issues and monitor the success of interventions.
- Women's groups can greatly benefit from cross-disciplinary learning and training available when they work in partnership with diverse social actors who can influence violence and abuse issues.

Recommendations

- Efforts must be made to encourage and facilitate women's participation in safety efforts - for example, by funding their transportation or providing daycare support so that they can more easily participate in group meetings.
- Community groups need to have access to the tools and resources to collect community safety data and assess their own needs using safety questionnaires and audits.
- Research and action must be community-based so that realistic action plans can be developed that are tailored to a community's unique local needs, challenges, and available resources.
- More diverse interdisciplinary social actors need to bring together and the local coordination of these actors improved so as to improve service delivery and its comprehensiveness.