



FOCUS ON WOMEN

Women's Counselling Skills Course

**Southall, West London
Autumn 2016**



KINGS CENTRE
SOUTHALL

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Background to the project

Women in the local area can face barriers to accessing support and services to improve their wellbeing and mental health. Many women face multiple pressures from family life and childcare needs, cultural expectations, housing or employment issues meaning that issues that arise include:

- Poor mental health
- Loneliness or isolation from others in their faith communities
- Lack of connectedness with other local women with whom they might share problems
- Women (and those dependent upon them) may struggle in silence with issues such as domestic abuse or financial worries etc.
- Limited knowledge of where to access support or counselling
- Hesitation to speak to those outside cultural or faith groups about problems due to stigma
- A lack of personal skills and resources concerning what can be done to help

Southall is an area of great diversity and also high deprivation, and inhabitants often face many disadvantages such as poverty, lack of job and educational opportunities, overcrowded housing, and high instances of drug and alcohol abuse. Many women struggle with family pressures or expectations, and also have low levels of spoken English meaning that simple tasks such as visiting the GP, accessing local services or socialising with neighbours can be difficult.

Recent healthcare concerns include the closure of the maternity ward and the proposed losses of the children's ward at the local hospital (Ealing) as well as the loss of 500 beds across hospitals in North-West London, including some for acute mental illness¹. Sadly, these kind of changes will disproportionately effect women, especially some of the poorest in the Ealing borough.

¹ www.standard.co.uk/news/health/revealed-london-nhs-chiefs-to-axe-enough-beds-to-fill-a-hospital-in-battle-to-plug-1bn-black-hole-a3244251.html

Women sharing skills at a recent event to celebrate Southall women for International Women's Day. Local relationships between women of different faiths are key to creating opportunities to thrive.



The Action

Two local women – one, a GP and one, a counselling student – saw the kind of issues that women in Southall face and realised that they had skills and some of the contacts needed to take action. Both women, who belong to a church and a mosque within the same neighbourhood, recognised that places of worship were seeing women enter their buildings on a regular basis and were well-placed to offer pastoral care to those in need.

The neighbours involved a local neighbourhood community worker, Rachel, who was able to help them develop their ideas further using her expertise as an occupational therapist. They decided to take action by creating a course for local women of faith to develop their listening and support skills.

The group approached their local Near Neighbours Coordinator who helped them to secure a small grant for £5,000 to help pay towards bringing in a professionally trained psychotherapist from The Metanoia Institute in Ealing, and running costs for a 12 week course for 10 local women.

The college and the group collaborated to create a unique programme of learning that would resource local women in therapeutic skills needed to support other women in their community. This included practical skills such as listening, communication, signposting, and also self-care and problem solving too. This community-centred approach allowed them to provide an inclusive space for learning that meant that women with faith and childcare needs could participate fully at no cost to them.

In total, 10 women were able to access this unique learning opportunity, which would have not been possible without a Near Neighbours grant.

The Impact

The project has enabled different faiths to come together by:

- Creating space for learning and developing new skills from a professional, which is accessible to women with unique faith and cultural sensitivities, such as prayer time, childcare arrangements, breaks for festivals and during school holidays and a venue in their local area meaning that travel is not a barrier.
- Allowing women to share their own problems and experiences with one another due to a safe environment being created. This has provided excellent opportunities for self-reflection and developing peer support and capabilities.
- Allowing time for genuine friendships to develop across faith boundaries. The participants have said that barriers have been broken down and they have felt able to discard prejudices or misconceptions. This has enabled them to realise that as women there are many issues that they share and ways in which they can support one another, regardless of faith.

This has empowered local community leadership:

- Encouraging solutions to problems from local women, who are best placed to know what they and their peers need.
- Providing gradual building up of self-confidence, skills and supportive networks which provide a solid foundation to take their learning out into the wider community. The women know that, through regular contact with their course leader, they have professional support. Near Neighbours is supporting a series of meetings with local places of worship to ensure that faith leaders and their organisations feel equipped to support women's needs.
- Inspiring further social action and collaboration. The women, who are calling themselves 'Support Practitioners' will begin 'The Space', which is a drop-in support service running on Wednesday and Friday mornings at the mosque and church. The course participants will provide support in pairs and signpost women where necessary, attracting attendees from local toddlers' groups, English classes, madrassahs etc. where women congregate.
- The women have been actively involved in seeking further funding to secure the future of the project and have secured a further £10,000 to support this initiative. This will enable them to have further training for themselves to further build skills, train other local women in support skills and strengthen the profile of women and their contributions to the faith leaders.

Quotes from participants

Heather, chair of the Equality and Diversity Committee at the Metanoia Institute said that

“We were delighted to get involved in this project, Razia, who is a psychotherapy student at Metanoia and I, had been talking about running something like this for a few years and so when Near Neighbours approached us, we naturally wanted to be involved. We intend to continue our involvement with this project, supporting these women to work in their communities and hope that some of them will continue into full counselling or psychotherapy training.”

Carole, from The Metanoia Institute commented:

“It has been my pleasure and privilege to be involved in the development of this exciting project, and to contribute to the members' growth, as we have met together to study over the last three months. The women have been hard working, and wise, and are committed to their own development. I hope we can go forward together in building a successful, effective and meaningful community based inter-faith counselling service to the benefit and well-being of all concerned.”

A Muslim participant in the course said

“Women's emotional wellbeing is most important for children, who are our future. This counselling course developed for us especially, was exceptionally outstanding, taught by the best and very inspiring!”

A local Christian GP who helped to organise the course said:

“Many women naturally care for and reach out to those around them. I'm delighted that this training course has helped ladies to do this more effectively and with increased confidence. But this is just the beginning – we are keen to explore how these ladies can continue to develop their pastoral care skills within their faith community networks, enabling others to grow in resilience and wellbeing.”

One local Muslim organiser of the course said

“I feel inspired to have witnessed such a distinctive project where women from different backgrounds, culture and faith have come together to train and develop their counselling skills with the aspiration to provide a service to help and support other women. I compliment the ladies who have bravely undertaken this emotionally demanding training and would like to suggest if we could collectively explore options to support the women to receive further training and support them to use their skills effectively in their communities.”



For more information on this project, please contact Becky Brookman, Near Neighbours Coordinator for West London on beckyb@kingscentresouthall.org.uk

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