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Engaging Young Women Young Leaders: A Tip Sheet



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Are you a group coordinator? Are you interested in starting a young women leaders' group or making your young women's group more effective? Are you a young women leader wanting to start a program for like-minded women inspired to take action? If you have answered yes to any of the above then this tip sheet is for you!

It is intended for practitioners of all genders and levels of experience who are interested in developing programs that aim to strengthen young women's participation and leadership in community life.

What is the Young Women Young Leaders Tip Sheet?

This tip sheet is based on lessons learned from Equitas' Young Women Young Leaders (YWYL) program. From 2012 to 2014 Equitas collaborated with 60 young women and program coordinators who participated in the project and shared their reflections which are captured here.

What is Young Women Young Leaders?

Young Women, Young Leaders (YWYL) was an Equitas program that aims to strengthen the participation of young women (15-25yrs) in civic, political and community life in Montreal. It is aimed at increasing the meaningful inclusion and effective participation of young women in decision-making processes that impact on their own lives as well as life in their community. To do this, YWYL integrates an Action for Change process, where young women initiate projects that addressed issues that most affect them in their daily lives, in collaboration with a strong network of community organizations, mentors, municipal leaders and institutional partners.

In 2012-2014 local activities took place in 4 communities across Montreal (Verdun, Saint-Michel, Côte-des-Neiges and with Aboriginal youth in the Greater Montreal area). This included capacity-building workshops for 60 young women, 4 young women-led action projects, regular gatherings across communities, a final Young Women's Forum and frequent opportunities for young women to interact with decision-makers and mentors from varied backgrounds.

Young Women, Young Leaders was funded through the generous support of Status of Women Canada and TELUS Montreal's Community Board.

Some Important Features of this Tip Sheet

- The tips included here are examples of practices and approaches to working with and for young women that are derived from our experiences. They are not absolute and we expect will evolve over time.
- They are here to inspire you. You know your groups and your organization best and you should adapt these practices and approaches to suit your context.
- While we have added quotes from young women and group coordinators that reflect some of the know-how that emerged from our experience, we know there is a lot of tacit knowledge in the hearts and heads of the young women and partners who participated in this program. It is important to talk with the young women who may be a part of your program to understand what drives them in their context.
- There are many factors that influence young women's participation, but the three in particular we feel should be taken into consideration are motivation, capacity and opportunity. The tips included in this tip sheet are framed within these three categories which fit together and overlap.

This project has been funded by Status of Women Canada and the Telus Montreal Community Board





Motivation

Motivation is the desire or willingness of individual young women to participate, and possibly to commit to involvement or action over the longer term. Motivation varies according to the personality, preferences and interests of an individual young woman, but is also influenced by her experience and the opportunities afforded to her to change things in her own life or community.

“It’s all about having the desire to participate and the ‘guts’ to do so.”

- Coordinator, Dawson Community Centre

Tips for Engaging Young Women:

- **Figure out if you are motivated and committed to embark on a journey with a group of young women**

Know that it will be a journey full of ups and downs, but the final destination is amazing! Map out why you / your organization has or should have a young women’s group. Take some time to consider how the goals of a young women group is in line with the goals of your work and determine the reasons why you or your organization should move forward. Think about what you hope the group may achieve and what role you will play in supporting the group.

- **Foster ownership, a sense of responsibility and accountability among young women in the group**

It’s important to foster a sense of belonging and attachment within the group so that young women feel not only empowered to make decisions but they start to perceive themselves as a support network for each other.

“What really motivates women, to me, is that they feel that they have responsibilities and that their voice is being heard. If they don’t feel that I believe that they won’t act and implicate themselves in the community. It is a matter of them feeling that they have something to say, that people will hear what they have to say, it’s just as important as the next person who is going to speak.”

• *Coordinator, Carrefour Jeunesse-emplois Côte-des-Neiges*

- **Expose young women to positive examples of female participation and leadership through networking and mentorship**

Mentorship and networking opportunities enable young women to share their experiences and discuss strategies for breaking down the barriers they face. There is “solidarity in numbers” and knowing one is not alone in their community or alone in responding to various challenges in one’s life. Mentors share their expertise, teach specific skill sets, and provide general guidance for young women. For example, YWYL included bi-annual meetings and a final Young Women’s Forum to provide a space for young women to meet others and engage with mentors.

“Personally, what motivated me to become a leader in my community was that I don’t see so many females my age out there, I see many more males. I wanted younger generations to see that it’s ok to want to be a successful female and to get your name known at a young age.”

• *Young woman, Dawson Community Centre*



Motivation

- **Ensure that the approach you use is inherently flexible to allow for real life to happen**

Every young women in your group has a full life where stuff happens, good and bad. If you are developing schedule of activities, make sure you leave time during every session for young women to talk about life and what's on their minds. This will go a long way to make the space safe and welcoming for young women.

"Give them time, respect their personal schedules. Girls Group time is important for them to be with each other, gossip , share, etc."

- *Coordinator Dawson Community Centre*

- **Recognize the effort and time young women are putting in when they participate in the group**

We all have other things we could be doing, but your group keeps coming back because they have a lot to offer and so do you. So take a moment to acknowledge their time and energy with something formal like a certificate of participation or a letter of reference. These are rewarding and helpful for their resumes.

- **Provide good food made with love and if possible, from someone local**

Having pizza and soda isn't the only way to get youth in the door. Demonstrate that you care about the women in your group by providing food that is delicious and also healthy. Modelling consumer behavior that supports local caterers or restaurants is also motivating as young women see the connections that a simple choice can have within the community.

- **Communicate outside of the group using their tools**

Email, what? Engage with your group using the platforms that they are into, like texting, Instagram and Facebook. It helps keep them up-to-date and engaged in group decisions. Many of these platforms have integrated survey tools which is a great way to get the group's input on decisions in the project.

- **Encourage young women to play an active role in recruiting others**

Who better to get someone to participate than a peer? Young women are motivated and inspired by other women they meet, so encourage them to go out and recruit others to join your group.

"Other women motivate young women to participate. Simple as that. We hear but most importantly listen to what they have to say and create a [group] that is inclusive"

- *Young woman, Dawson Community Centre*



Capacity

Capacity includes the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors that young women need in order to participate effectively. Capacity will of course vary according to the inherent strengths of an individual young woman, but it will also be shaped by an individual's life experience, by opportunities afforded to her to express thoughts and ideas, to work in teams, to address challenges, and develop self-esteem.

"We started off with ourselves, by changing ourselves (...) You gotta start with yourself."

- *Young woman, Dawson Community Centre*

Tips for Engaging Young Women:

- **Include a knowledge building component to the group's program**

Young women want to learn. They might not admit it at first, but they want to talk about and better understand the issues they are facing. So get on board, ask them what they're interested in learning about in this area and try to lead workshops on topics like women's rights, gender equality, how to take action, etc. Where possible, have a woman leader (i.e., mentor or role-model) come in and talk about their experiences and share their expertise in these areas.

"One problem we identified was the lack of knowledge of laws, or lack of knowledge of the society where they live. Even if they came here early, as kids, but this doesn't stop the fact that they are girls who live enclosed, in a little community, living with their parents and who do not know the laws or their rights. (They also need) to know their strengths, we tell them you have strength. It's not because you live that you are a weak women, that you are ignorant. Acquire information and it works. "

- *Coordinator, Maison d'Haïti*

- **Infuse your program with life skills**

Life skills include strategies for building a culture of respect, inclusion and participation, such as how to communicate with others, critically reflect on issues, and resolve conflict peacefully. These skills support positive interpersonal relationships and enables both the individuals and their relationships to flourish. They will help young women participate more effectively in the group and in their communities in the long run.

"You have to cultivate that self-esteem and self-respect. I believe it will lead to [young women] acting more in the community and them wanting to act more in the community."

- *Coordinator, Carrefour Jeunesse-emplois Côte-des-Neiges*

- **Build skills for taking action in the community**

How to research a topic; How to make a phone call to the director of an organization; How to manage a budget; How to plan an event; How to make a presentation; How to mobilize a group of young people; these are examples of relevant and transferable skills for taking action in the community that should be included in your program.

"I can do this!! ... I learned how to be more of a leader and get girls involved and I'm still learning how to get other girls involved." at a young age."

- *Young woman, Dawson Community Centre*

Capacity

- **Include practical and authentic experiences to scaffold learning**

There is a middle ground between throwing a non-swimmer in the deep end of a pool and starting them off with a how-to video in a classroom. It's important to find the right amount of challenge for young women so they are motivated to learn, but not so challenging that when they do make mistakes they don't give up.

"Start small and work your way up to that ladder. Because if you start big and then all of a sudden, you hit a failure, you're not going to want to keep going. And if you don't have that support system to say it's just one knock keep going, you're going to quit. So start small, have that first success in your pocket. Feel inspired to do other things."

- *Young woman, Dawson Community Centre*

- **Build your own skills to be an effective facilitator of the group**

Effective facilitation is important to creating a climate of respect, inclusion and participation. A good facilitator is someone who helps mentor learning, rather than imposing it on a group. They are people who young women can trust and who encourage them to have fun and grow at their own pace. Check out the list of facilitation characteristics (see below) to help you create this kind of environment for your group.

- **Have trust!**

Trust yourself, the young women in your group, and encourage the women to trust themselves and each other too!

"They need to be trusted. They need people to believe in their story. We show them we want to know their stories, to know them through their stories and to accompany them. Sure sometimes they need a helping hand, it can be economically or in terms of motivation. Someone to tell them "You are capable! You are capable and I am here for you"

- *Coordinator, Maison d'Haïti*



Take a moment to reflect on whether you as a facilitator...

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Understand your own identity as a facilitator and how your experiences might be affecting the group | <input type="checkbox"/> Challenge participants in a respectful way |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are aware of the influence you have on the group | <input type="checkbox"/> Are inclusive of diverse opinions, even when you may not agree with them |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Model behaviour that you wish to foster in your group | <input type="checkbox"/> Use the varying strengths and abilities of individuals in the group |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Listen carefully and ensure open lines of communication with the group | <input type="checkbox"/> Share your knowledge openly and respectfully, while recognizing that of the group |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Manage conflict and generate solutions in a transparent and participatory way | <input type="checkbox"/> Enable shared decision making with the group |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Encourage dialogue rather than debate | <input type="checkbox"/> Encourage feedback on your style and approach, and provide it to others |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Balance the needs of individual participants with those of the group | |

Opportunity

Opportunity refers to any situation where young women can participate effectively. Opportunities vary according to local capacity to recognize the needs and interests of young women and to create spaces, events or circumstances favourable to their participation.

"In our community, there are a lot of possibilities. It's a matter of taking action -getting the girls to take a step forward and taking action in the community.(...) We have to make time for it and take action, do the research and have the proper people to talk to and take action."

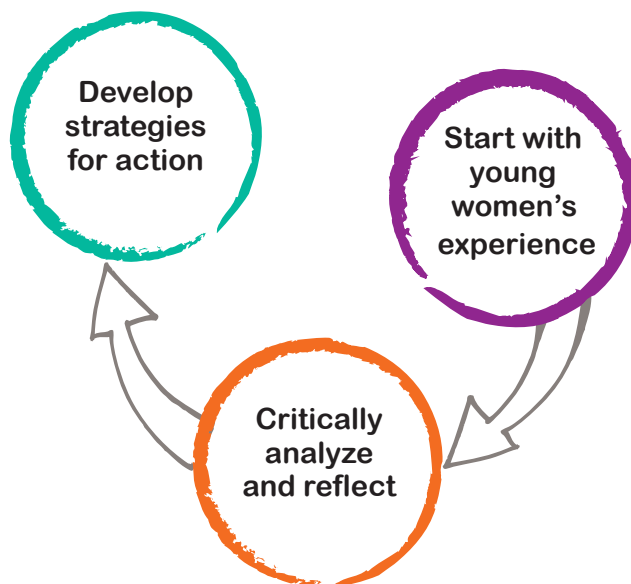
• Coordinator, Dawson Community Centre

Tips for Engaging Young Women:

- Use a participatory approach when you are planning, implementing and evaluating your program

A participatory approach promotes young women's empowerment by ensuring their voices, needs and interests are at the center of the process (see box). Some underlying beliefs of a participatory approach are that people learn more effectively when their own capacity and knowledge are valued, they are able to share and analyze their experiences in a safe and collective environment, and they are active participants in the learning process. A participatory approach is flexible, allowing program staff to really meet young women where they are at and helps build positive relationships that reflect respect, trust and confidence between young women and their facilitators.

The participatory approach-in-a-box



1. Start with the experience of young women through activities that build on their life experience and are learner-centred, aiming at reinforcing self-esteem and self-confidence
2. Encourage critical reflection and analysis of the issues important to young women by enabling them to question their assumptions, share ideas, look for patterns in their experience and learn from their peers. To complement the knowledge and experience of participants, add new information and theory from experts
3. Develop strategies for actions that lead to social change by including opportunities to practice and apply what has been learned.





Opportunity

- **Create spaces for young women that are safe and welcoming, culturally relevant, empowering, and action-oriented.**

The spaces where young women meet should make them feel like they belong and that they can work together to identify their strengths, plan how they can influence real change and carry out effective actions for change that matters to them.

"They have the skills that they need to actively participate, they just need to know that they have that option out there. Some sort of program that they can get involved in. I think that there are enough opportunities for them to get involved but it's not necessarily publicized in the correct way. We see more males in our community, we don't see as many programs specifically dedicated to females, and if there are, they aren't publicized, they are not advertised correctly, women don't necessarily know about them until it's closed down or being threatened to being closed down."

- Young woman, Dawson Community Centre

- **Ensure your program is accessible to all young women**

It's important to think about how your group actually welcomes a diversity of women and allows them to participate effectively. For example, ask yourself: Can we offer child-care? What about bus fare if we're meeting somewhere special? Can someone join online or by Skype? Are we always excluding a certain group of women because of the time and/or location of meetings?

- **Make room in your budget**

It might not be "about the cha-ching cha-ching or the bling bling", but if you can, allocate money in your budget to support community actions. Even the smallest amount of money can go a long way to validate the importance of community actions and allow young women to put their ideas concretely into action. It also builds important skills for budgeting and planning.

- **Include opportunities to dialogue with decision-makers.**

A decision-maker isn't just a politician or the head of a company, they are people who are in a position of power in any given context. It's important to open up channels of communication so that young women's issues and concerns are taken into consideration when decisions are being made. These opportunities also support young women in developing their communications skills and expose them to various leadership styles.

"[At the beginning of the project] I was pessimistic about making change. But getting involved in the project and working with other girls and hearing their stories made me realize that we can have an impact (...) I see that we can have decision-makers involved"

- Young woman, Dawson Community Centre

"Women's participation is essential. We need to hear women's voices, particularly in a city like Montreal, and we have a diversity of voices, Anglophones, Francophone, Allophones, Canadian citizens, refugees, and many of the women who experience living in Montreal and Canada have a voice in issues that are important to government and to elected officials. It is my job and my passion to help empower young women, and women in general to make their voices heard in parliament."

- Representative of MP's Office, Westmount-Ville-Marie

