

Playing it safe

Mary Hampshire on a scheme breaking down barriers between women in Bradford

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As their children sit in school lessons, mothers from Bradford's Asian community attend a class to discuss their fears about crime. They are taking part in a six-week course at their youngsters' school, Westbourne primary, aiming to improve personal and community safety skills.

"I want you to consider how safe you feel within the community of Manningham and at home," says course leader Donna Harper, a freelance schools and community training consultant. "What frightens you? It's important that everyone shares any fears eating away in their head." The atmosphere is informal and relaxed. The women chatter and divide into two groups to mark their general fears on a flip chart. These include being attacked on the street, burglary and, after the Soham tragedy last year, worries about their children disappearing.

The mothers go on to discuss their actual experience of crime. One confides that a home burglary has left her feeling insecure. Another says that a relative and her child were held in a bedroom by burglars who broke into her shop during the night. Another woman's friend was robbed after she had been to the post office. About 180 women of all ages and backgrounds, from the Manningham and Heaton districts, have attended the personal and parental safety skills course, also known as the Safe (Safe Areas For Everyone) Project. The youngest have been in their 20s; the eldest - a couple of east European women - in their 80s. About 90% are from the Asian community, however.

The project was formed as a result of the 2001 Bradford riots, which dispersed from the city centre to Manningham. Following the disturbances, West Yorkshire Police organised community forums to discuss residents' concerns. "What I picked up on, attending the women's forums, was a heightened and disproportionate sense of fear," recalls Elizabeth Hellmich, founder of the Safe Project, who was present as a neighbourhood watch representative. "Asian and white women felt frightened to go out. They were scared of reprisals. Their quality of life plummeted. "They were also really upset by the negative image Bradford received because of a small minority. They felt something had to be done to improve people's sense of safety and to bring the community together."

The project, which began in April last year, has held courses in five schools and several social centres - venues deemed a safe environment where women feel able to talk freely. Translator and creche support is provided. The sessions aim to address women's fears and help put them in perspective. Women learn

practical safety tips for the home and for when they are outside. They are also encouraged to become the eyes and ears of their community by reporting anything suspicious, using a list of telephone contacts.

"It's the basic principles of neighbourhood watch," says Hellmich. "Watch, report and keep yourself safe in the process." Harper adds: "Some women have seen things happening, but fear retribution. But we talk about how they can contact agencies anonymously - and point out that it's no use blaming the police or the council for not tackling problems if they ignore them too."

The sessions include safety talks from the police, fire service, city council and a drugs education group. Behaviour management of children and teenagers is discussed, as are issues of domestic violence, prejudice and racism. Women from a refuge attended one of the courses. One young woman had left a promising career in Pakistan for an arranged marriage in Bradford. Her husband had grown violent and she was not allowed out. To compound her sense of isolation, she spoke no English. "During the session, she was saying through an interpreter that she felt she would have to leave the refuge and return to this man because it was her destiny," Harper recalls. "We were able to discuss the fact she had choices and she did not have to return to violence."

The project seems to be having a positive impact. In feedback forms, women have said they feel safer and less stressed as a result. Project leaders now plan to extend the programme across the city if they can secure funding for another year. "It's helping to break down barriers. Both Asian and white women have realised they face the same problems," says Shaziya Younas, a former youth worker in Manningham who is now an outreach worker for West Yorkshire Fire Service and gives talks on fire safety during the course. "Even with translators, the women ended up laughing at the same jokes."

Harper adds: "One Asian women shared her experience of being robbed in her own home. The white women in the group appeared surprised when she explained the criminal was Asian. The point I make during the sessions is that people committing street robberies, burglary and car theft in our district are not working through the mindset of being white, black or Asian culture, and their activities are not being carried out in the name of Christianity or Islam. Their culture is crime."

Other concerns that have been aired include drug-dealing, fireworks being thrown on the street, children being a nuisance and throwing stones, a lack of play areas for younger children and noisy neighbours. Samira Robinson, a housewife who attended the project last year, says: "The sessions allowed people to get things off their chest. Even though we were fasting for Ramadan, we still had the energy for a good old natter. One woman, whose children were causing problems for a neighbour at the same session, admitted her children were out of control and she didn't know how to discipline them. They were able to

talk about it."

To put women's fears in perspective, the course dispels some common myths. For example, Harper discusses crime statistics, pointing out that people are more likely to be attacked in their own home - and by someone they know - than by strangers. She also explains that young people, especially men, are more likely to be crime victims than women and older people.

Back at Westbourne primary, Taswar Bi, a 34-year-old housewife, admits that she found these statistics reassuring. "I just wanted to know all I could about keeping myself and my children safe," she says. "It's been really helpful. I do feel more confident. Perhaps if I come for all six sessions," she says, "I won't feel scared at all."

Azra Ahmed runs a newsagent's. "Our shop was hit by ramraiders last year and we've had windows smashed," she says. "I wanted to learn more about safety and security for myself and my children. It's very good having this at school because the Asian ladies who can't speak English can learn about these things too."

One 46-year-old Asian mother, a driving instructor who prefers not be named, has lived in Bradford since she was nine. She does not live in Manningham but heard about the project through friends. "I used to be a stressed person," she confides. "I felt unsafe and isolated in my community, which is mainly white, even though I haven't witnessed a lot of crime.

"After September 11, I felt very uncomfortable. People said horrible things to my son, that he would become a terrorist. I warned my children to be careful of what they said in public. It got to the point where I felt scared to go out - and I was thinking of giving up my job. But during the course, I felt better for talking about these things. I feel there are people to turn to now. It has given me a lot more confidence and helped put my fears into perspective."

The Safe Project received £11,500 neighbourhood renewal funding through Bradford Vision, a local strategic partnership. The grant expires in March and no decisions have been made yet on future funding. Sharmila Gandhi, Bradford Vision's chief executive, says: "The Safe Project is an excellent initiative that is empowering people to take more control of their personal safety and their environment, and is promoting race relations between women from different backgrounds. We are really keen to ensure its survival and we would like to see it implemented across the city. We are currently looking at how this might be achieved. One possible idea is training existing neighbourhood watch coordinators in some capacity."