

Program helping poor, unemployed women deserves city funding: Porter

Women Speak Out boot camp has produced 65 well-spoken advocates in four years, but will cease to exist if the city doesn't step in.



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The last class from Working for Change's Women Speak Out program celebrate after their graduation ceremony in St. Paul's Church. Far left is Aminta Vidi, and far right is Rana Khan. City Ombudsman Fiona Crean, in red, smiles from behind.

By: [Catherine Porter](#) Columnist, Published on Mon Dec 08 2014 , Toronto Star

The final Women Speak Out graduation was last week.

Thirteen women delivered speeches about their rekindled lives before a crowd gathered at St. Paul's Bloor Street Church.

I forgot Kleenex. My wrist was quickly blotted with mascara stains.

“Living with cerebral palsy is definitely challenging,” said Catherine Girard, from her wheelchair, “but unfortunately it is not the most difficult obstacle which I have been handed.”

At 14, her mom and main caregiver died. At 19, she was cut off from government-funded physiotherapy and respite care. Now, at 29, she has a diploma in social service and a life skills coaching certificate and absolutely no job prospects.

“My hope is that in the near future someone persuasive and powerful will see past my physical limitations and recognize that I have so much to offer,” she said.

Women Speak Out is an advocacy boot camp run by the small west-end charity Working For Change. Participants are all women with “lived experience” — meaning they’ve hit rock bottom and are searching for climbing ropes.

Over 12 weeks, they learn about feminism, conflict resolution, the loopy footpath of policy through Queen’s Park and how to make a deputation at city hall. They get media training and legal seminars. But the most powerful lessons they glean come from one another. “If she survived that, and I respect her, shouldn’t I respect myself,” and “that happened to her too, and her also, well then, maybe it’s not my fault. It’s a system’s problem.”

As one graduate said, “Now I see my suffering as a positive. You need to move from ‘I’ to ‘we’ and become a leader.”

In their graduation speeches, the women told stories of mental illness, addiction, homelessness, physical abuse, disease, loneliness. The unifying themes, though, were poverty and unemployment. They are all desperately poor. But not one wants a handout. They want what Aminta Vidi called “good jobs.”

“At Working For Change, they say everyone needs a home, a friend and a job. Well, I have a friend. I live with my parents so I don’t really have a home of my own, and I definitely don’t have a job,” she said.

Vidi is 42. She has never had a full-time job, despite an MA in environmental studies. She also has a mental illness, managed with expensive drugs. That offers more barriers than stigma.

“Presently (Ontario Disability Support Program) covers my medication. . . I would not be able to pay for the medications myself,” she said. “So, if I were to have a job, I would also need medication coverage.”

I am regularly invited to speak to each class about the media in this town. I always leave feeling [I’ve received more than I’ve given](#). This time was no different.

But it will be the last. The program was created in 2011 with Status of Women Canada funding. That money is almost gone. What a shame!

On the bright side: Before their speeches, the women met with city bureaucrats to consult on Toronto’s budding poverty-reduction plan. That got me to thinking — why doesn’t the city fund Women Speak Out? In four years, it has created 65 well-spoken advocates across the city. At \$100,000 a year, it’s a bargain [compared to KPMG consultants](#).

Four of the graduates were newcomers to Canada. One was Rana Khan. She immigrated here with her husband and two children from Abu Dhabi six years ago. She hasn’t been able to find a job since, despite the equivalent of an MA in history, years of experience teaching, and a long list of volunteer gigs in this country. Her husband grew so frustrated, he accepted a job in Saudi Arabia.

“Why invite us in, if you don’t recognize our credentials?” Khan said.

“Toronto is slowly becoming a city of haves and have nots . . . we need jobs. Not just any jobs, good jobs.”

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