

Report - Evaluation of Women Weaving their Dreams (Phase I activities), a program of the Montreal City Mission

Date: May 16, 2018

Prepared by: Andrea Dawes, MPA candidate at San Francisco State University



I. Program Overview

Women Weaving their Dreams (WWD) is a new program of the Montreal City Mission (MCM). It targets newly arrived, Arabic-speaking, female refugees living in Montreal. All participants in the first cohort were from Syria. The main activities are a series of linguistically and culturally appropriate workshops aimed at addressing participants' social and economic integration needs and challenges. Phase I workshops are largely focused on helping participants process feelings of grief, loss, and trauma stemming from the refugee experience, connect with community resources, and identify personal and professional development goals. Participants and their families are also invited to attend social outings to provide an additional opportunity for building support networks and breaking isolation.

II. Evaluation Overview

The aim of this evaluation was to determine participants' perspectives on the accessibility and quality of, and their satisfaction with, the WWD program in order to help MCM improve its implementation. The evaluation was non-experimental and gathered information through standardized, open-ended interviews. The questionnaire-style script comprised a combination of Likert scale, binary (e.g. Yes/No), and open-ended questions. A volunteer conducted the interviews in Arabic, the participants' mother tongue, in May 2018. Six participants from the program's first cohort, who attended Phase I from October to December 2017, participated in the evaluation.

III. Findings

Perceptions of program impact

... On emotional well-being

- Two-thirds of the participants* reported experiencing emotional problems (defined as persistent feelings of loneliness or sadness) since arriving in Canada.
- All of them felt that **participating in the program has benefited their emotional well-being**. In particular, participants mentioned support from facilitators and fellow group members, as well as the opportunity to share concerns and experiences in a group setting, as particularly beneficial aspects.

... On access to social support

- All of the participants felt that the program had helped them **make new friends**.
- All but one felt that the program had helped them **increase the number of people they can turn to for support** (one was unsure).

The facilitators gave us emotional support, hope and reassurance that things will get better, that we will be able to stand on our own two feet.

I would go to the meetings feeling depressed and sad, but talking to (the facilitators) would help relieve these feelings of sadness and defeat. It made us feel like we're not forgotten.

... On confidence, independence, and outlook for the future

- All but one of the participants felt that participating in the program has made them more **confident**.
- All but one of the participants felt that participating in the program has made them more **independent**.
- All but one of the participants felt that participating in the program has made them more **optimistic** about their future in Canada (one was unsure).

N.B. In this section, "participants" refers to the WWD participants that participated in the evaluation process.

Workshop environment

All of the participants felt that **the facilitators created a comfortable environment for sharing personal experiences.**

They noted that this was done in a variety of ways:

- The facilitators' willingness to listen and their creation of a supportive, family-like, non-hierarchical environment.
- The workshop activities and the group Code of Conduct.
- The facilitators helping participants solve some of their problems.

Half of the group felt extremely comfortable sharing personal experiences with the group from day one. Among the other participants, two-thirds became more comfortable sharing personal experiences over the course of the program. By the program's end, two-thirds felt extremely comfortable sharing their personal experiences.

We were all emotionally exhausted and carrying a heavy burden, but they always helped make us feel better by being there for us.

(Despite being from a different culture than the facilitators), we felt like (we) share the same background and heart.

We learned to overcome everything that comes in our way and to not stop working towards achieving our dreams.

Goal-setting

Two-thirds of the participants felt that **the program had motivated them to identify and work towards achieving their goals.** All of these individuals mentioned that they had set a collective goal: to open a Syrian restaurant. They noted concrete steps being taken towards achieving this goal, including learning French, as well as the importance of supporting one another and working hard to overcome obstacles.

Integration into the community

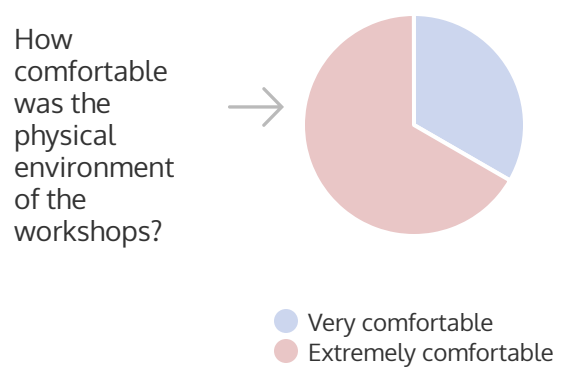
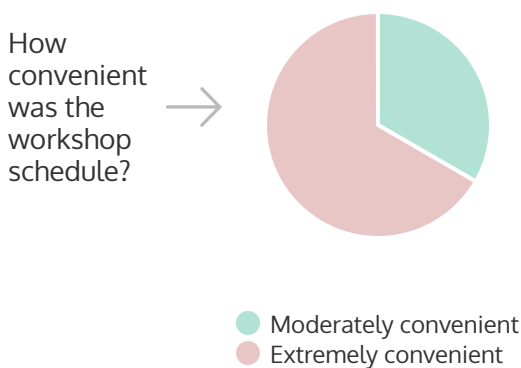
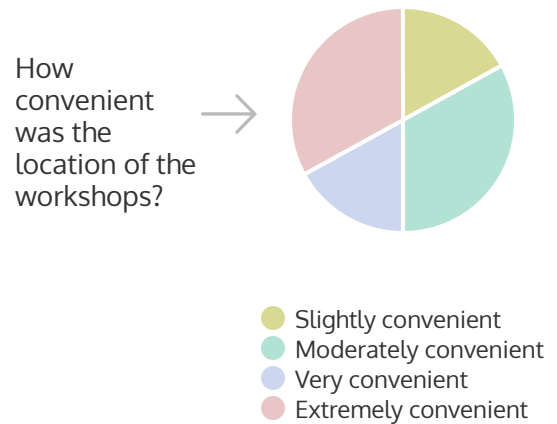
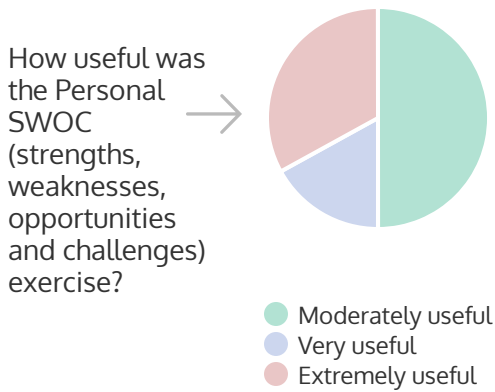
Community resources

- All but one of the participants felt that **the program had helped them become more familiar with resources and job and volunteer opportunities in their community.** (One was unsure.)
- All of the participants felt that **the program helped motivate them to use community resources.**
- All of the participants that mentioned specific resources noted French language courses as being the most helpful one. One of these participants noted that French skills are fundamental to finding work and integrating into their new community.

New experiences

- Two-thirds of the participants mentioned that **participating in the program had motivated them to try interacting with non-Syrian individuals,** including neighbours. One participant mentioned that sharing frustrations with neighbours helped relieve stress, and two participants mentioned that interacting with French-speaking neighbours helped them practice their French. One participant mentioned the difficulty of interacting with non-Arabic-speaking individuals while living in a mostly Arabic-speaking neighbourhood.
- One-third of the participants mentioned that **participating in the program had motivated them to take public transportation for the first time,** which has allowed them to navigate the city more easily and visit new places.

Workshop activities, time, place, and physical environment



Family outings

- All but one of the participants attended the family social outings; the remaining participant did not as the timing was not convenient.
- The most popular activity was **apple picking**, followed by the Montréal en Lumière festival. One participant also mentioned the Biodôme.
- Though it was not a family outing and occurred after the Phase I activities, two participants mentioned how much they enjoyed the group trip to Parliament Hill.

Suggestions for improving the program

- Half of the participants suggested that **transportation to and from the workshops** should be provided to increase their accessibility; several barriers to attendance were noted including distance from home, winter weather, and lack of French knowledge.
- Two participants wished the program had more capacity so more individuals could benefit from it.
- One participant felt the program could be "more calculated, detailed, and organized"; one participant wished it was more "developed".
- One participant felt a similar program should be offered for men who are in a similar situation.



IV. Conclusion and recommendations

1 - Progress towards achieving outcomes

While it is too early to objectively measure progress towards achieving WWD's intended short-term outcomes, the participant views gathered in this evaluation provide some helpful preliminary information. Two of these outcomes are for participants to gain access to 1) social support and 2) informational support, for example by learning about relevant community resources. The evaluation results suggest that the program is successfully helping participants access social support and community resources.

Other intended outcomes are 1) for participants to gain opportunities to share and process experiences of grief, loss, and trauma and 2) for participants in need of individual counseling to gain access to this service. All participants felt that the facilitators created a comfortable environment for sharing personal experiences, and those that have experienced emotional problems feel the program has helped them deal with these challenges. However, by the end of the program, one-third of the participants still felt only slightly or moderately comfortable sharing personal experiences; this suggests that some individuals may not feel comfortable discussing emotional or other types of challenges in a group setting.

Recommendation: Inform participants about the option of being referred to individual counseling and accompany those in need throughout the referral process. The number of referrals (required and completed) should be recorded in the program's monitoring database.

2 - Planning for the program's future

Recommendation: Several participants raised concerns about the difficulties of traveling to the program's location in winter weather. To help ensure high attendance rates, program staff should remain mindful of this potential accessibility challenge and, whenever possible, design location-based cohorts or otherwise seek to ensure workshop locations are in close proximity to the majority of participants' homes.

Recommendation: As WWD transitions from a pilot project to an established MCM program, the team should conduct both informal and formal (as in the case of this evaluation) assessments of participants' perspectives; evaluation questions should be based on the content of the program theory (e.g. Theory of change). This feedback can help the team understand the nature of participants' needs and which activities are most effective in addressing them.

Recommendation: Several participants wished that other individuals (both male and female) could benefit from WWD's distinctive approach to providing integration support. The team should consider conducting a formal needs assessment, or a less resource-intensive process of surveying organizations working with the target population, to formally document the uniqueness of, and need for, this type of program. Combining this information with evaluation results would help bolster future funding proposals.

V. Limitations

- There is an inherent risk of bias in interview research. For example, the motivation to give 'socially desirable' answers or the potential need for clarifying the meaning of open-ended questions may result in inaccurate response data. Data accuracy may also be affected by the fact that, due to resource constraints, the interviewer had to write down participant responses during the interviews rather than record and transcribe them later. Various steps were taken to reduce the possibility of bias in the interview process, including ensuring the interviewer was not involved with the WWD program and verifying the interview script's clarity with relevant stakeholders.
- At the time of the evaluation, only six of the participants from WWD's first cohort were available to participate. The interview results reflect only their opinions and do not necessarily represent the experiences of all members of the first cohort.

