

Women's Economic Forum – The Hague
Plenary on “Political Participation of Women”
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By Angela Babb

I am Angela, a mum of seven kids and I live in east London. Political participation for women like me can be hard because of poverty. People in poverty are made to feel bad about themselves and also have their time filled with challenges.

The word “poverty” didn't mean much to me before. It's a big word that makes people think of Africa. But in fact we have poverty here in Europe too. Poverty is when others think you must be a scrounger because you need to rely on benefits sometimes. Poverty is when you get stigmatised. Using food banks can leave you feeling humiliated — but you have no choice if a food bank is the only way to provide for your family. Some people think that if you are on benefits you must be a work-shy scrounger. People think ‘oh look at her, why can't she get a job, why can't she do better?’ Why do people on benefits get so stigmatised? When you feel humiliated, it becomes even harder to stand up in public and participate in politics.

Participation can also be hard because of all the energy you need to protect your family. In the papers, you never read a good story about our neighbourhood. The news is always about a teenager who got stabbed, or about guns, or shootings. You know, young people get bored in our neighbourhood. Half the community centres are closed, and there are no jobs for them. There is nothing for them to do. So some kids think the only way forward is the path of destruction.

You see your kids get bullied at school for not having the right trainers. You can even have your door kicked in by bullies. And if that happens on a Friday, the council won't send anyone to fix it until Monday. So where will your children be safe for the weekend? It's not safe to sleep at home, but if you take them somewhere else, you're leaving your flat unlocked, and you might not find anything left. Being bullied can make a child completely afraid to go outside or even afraid to sleep—but even teachers refuse to recognise it and they don't give the child any support. For mothers raising children in a low-income area, all these day-to-day challenges make it very hard for us to participate in politics.

Another challenge is racism. You can get your confidence knocked right off. Once on a crowded bus, a gentleman shouted at me, my baby, and my 27-year-old daughter: “There shouldn't be no chocolate people on the bus!” The gentleman didn't stop there: he gave my daughter a full-blown punch in the mouth.

I was gobsmacked. I asked the bus driver to call the police. But not a single other passenger would speak up to the police about what they saw.

It is important to have a voice in the political process. Everybody has a right to be heard. But sometimes, you try to express yourself clearly, but the right words just won't come out. To have a voice, you need to have the opportunity to meet other people who respect you.

I wouldn't have been able to do this a couple of years ago. I wasn't confident enough to stand up and speak in front of a crowd. But being respected has given me the confidence to speak out in front of people and in public. In 2014, I spoke at the Houses of Parliament. Speaking out is my chance to explain what life is like for me and for other people. Each life tells a different story; we're people, we're not just a number. We need to make sure that all

women can meet people who respect them. This can give more of us a chance to begin speaking out to politicians.