



## **Refresh your approach to increasing the civic and political participation of women of CALD communities.**

Themes emerging from a discussion led by Melba Marginson, Executive Officer Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition (VIRWC) with WPILG Coalition members, women Councillors and organization representatives in March 2009

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### **“We know the pathways start in the women's own communities.” Finding the pathways to leadership for women of CALD communities**

“It's a journey reflected in our personal stories.”

Many mothers aspire for their daughters to participate in political life; they want to see a passing on of the leadership to younger generations.

Women have an interest in Local Government, for example, VIRWC has the names of 25 women interested in future candidacy.

Some of the barriers which women need to climb over

- A need to maintain paid work while organizing and supporting communities,
- Sometimes there is a need to improve written and verbal English.
- Women of CALD communities are often put off by Party politics,

Often women don't know the system here and have ambivalence – they yearn for the home country while also wanting to belong here.

**“Sometimes there is the feeling that Local Government can be like a lions den.”**

### **The culture of local politics**

There can be a fear of politics originating from experiences in our country of origin (especially so for refugees) and also we know that “country of origin” politics can be played out here in communities.

Many of the women we work with have a narrow view of the Councillor role – for example, it can be seen as more ceremonial.

There is room for women Councillors to communicate about the reality of their roles. A warm invitation to meet with women Councillors is strongly welcomed by women of CALD communities in general.

A discussion about the question of “fear” – it seems to diminish when you have knowledge and experience, you may need someone to hold your hand from time to time!

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**“Learning about participation and leadership needs to be concrete and practical, finding out can build confidence.” Supporting others to take the first step.**

Simply learning about opportunities such as standing for School Council resulted in one woman deciding to ring the Principal to make enquires about how she could be involved.

There is a need for different Local Government pathways to be spelt out, e.g. a step by step approach to Local Government such as Advisory Committees, ringing up or meeting with a local Cr, attending a meeting, etc.

It can be simple: letting people know they can participate is a first step.

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**“It’s a 2 way path – Local Government bureaucrats need to be challenged by communities to be more open minded! “Opening the doors to our Local Governments**

Local Governments must step out too- they have a responsibility through Human Rights legislation and the United Nations CEDAW.

The “establishment” needs to challenge itself as well as be challenged – cross cultural training can be one strategy in self challenge.

Each Local Government has its own particular characteristics which need to be negotiated

If Local Governments see themselves as “governments”, they need to look at doing things differently.

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**The final words**

“There’s no such thing as non-political”

The keys to participation seem to be first, knowledge, and secondly, to know that men are not our enemies; they need to be regarded as potential allies of women’s participation. This is especially so in more traditional communities.

“What we need is to see leadership as a step by step journey.”

“We have to be in this work for the long term, it requires a developmental approach – it doesn’t happen overnight.”

## **Background to the Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition (VIRWC)**

- VIRWC represents 50 women's organizations ranging from small memberships of 15 to over 200, some regional, some metropolitan based.
- It aims to increase the visibility of CALD women – their talents, their issues.
- VIRWC provides advocacy and training for empowerment
- It provides consultancy services to Local Government, e.g. cross cultural training, leadership for CALD communities, etc.
- There is no direct service provision except a Family Law Advisory Service and VIRWC has recently identified a gap in service delivery and support to international students and issues of domestic violence
- Its expertise is in designed Women's leadership courses able to be provided for community women in Local Government areas (fee for service)
- It creates and manages projects to achieve its aims.
- A special feature of VIRWC is use of the arts to convey messages and learning – allows better communication for women not fluent in English. It is media savvy including a presence on YouTube.
- VIRWC is trying new models, e.g., its Victorian Women's Link project aims to connect leading women in service organizations with leading women in CALD communities.

**Check out the VIRWC website: [www.virwc.org.au](http://www.virwc.org.au) or T: (03) 9654 1243**

END March 2009

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