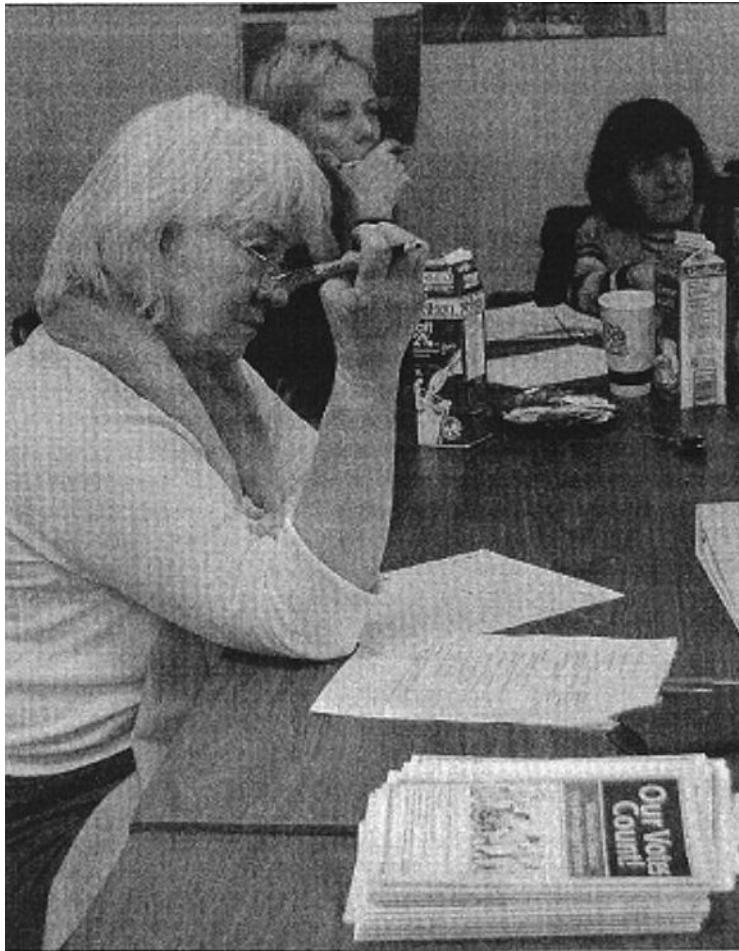


Group helps immigrant women gain political awareness

By Lisa Xing



Melissa Mancini, Centretown Nev

The City for All Women Initiative is helping immigrant women vocalize their problems in integrating into Canadian society by training them to speak up to Ottawa's decision-makers.

Suzanne Doerge, co-ordinator of the initiative, says it's hard for women to get involved in the community. "Since there's often a language barrier, many of these women's concerns are overlooked by politicians," she says.

Fantu Melesse, a co-ordinator for the project, emigrated from Ethiopia six years ago and was one of these women who face integration issues. "Nobody considered me for an interview. It was like they didn't consider previous experience as experience," she says.

Even though she has a PhD and worked as a professor back home, she says it was hard to use those skills to find employment.

Melesse began volunteering and

through this found part-time jobs. The initiative helped her transition from Ethiopia to Canada and gave her a sense of belonging, she says. She now does research for the initiative at the University of Ottawa and helps women like herself get their problems recognized.

The collaboration between the City of Ottawa and community organizations was formed in 2004 in response to the Women's Access to Municipal Services study which looked at budget cuts made in the 1990s.

The results found women who faced difficulties, like minorities and those living in poverty, had limited access to city services, says Doerge.

These organizations, including the Immigrant Women Service of Ottawa and Women's Initiatives for Safer Environments, select their own women to participate in the nine-month program to train them to influence the local government.

Each woman participates in all-day workshops and does outreach in the city to promote their cause. For example, they attended a mayoral debate on Oct. 3 and posed questions to candidates

in the upcoming municipal election.

Khadra Ali, a Somali member of the initiative's steering committee says it emphasizes the importance of civic participation. "We encourage women to vote and we help them choose which candidate will address their specific concerns."

Melesse says this training empowers women and makes a difference in their lives. "If we know the system and how it works, we are able to present our needs and concerns to the politicians who make decisions concerning our life. Having knowledge is power."

Doerge agrees. "They then take [the knowledge from their training] back to their organizations and into the community."

She outlines four key issues affecting women of minorities the most: safe and affordable housing, access to employment, safety for women and their families, and more French services. Ali says a second way the partnership reaches women by distributing brochures about municipal budgeting and the electoral process.

The initiative soon hopes to publish them in more and more languages. They are currently available in six languages including Somali, English and French.

Women are also learning about social services, says Doerge. For example, if someone feels their usual bus stop is unsafe at night, they can request to get off between stops. Without the initiative they might not know about these programs.

Melesse explains integrating the Gender Equality Guide in the City of Ottawa into city planning is another target of the partnership. It was piloted last February and is now being evaluated.

"It helps anyone who does city planning [in fields like development and research] to consider these women when making decisions or changes," says Doerge.

Melesse says changes to these problems are slow and gradual because so many of the issues immigrant women face haven't been addressed until recently.