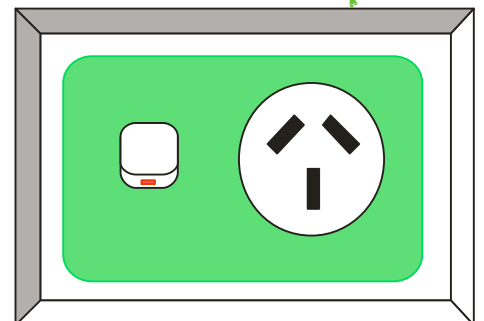


Energy, Environment and Education: Refugee Women's Sewing Groups

Report by
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Victorian
WOMEN'S @ TRUST
making a difference

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Energy, Environment and Education: Refugee Women's Sewing Groups project would not have been possible without the grant from the Victorian Women's Benevolent Trust 2008-09 grants program and the support of the Victorian Women's Trust. We wish to thank them and also acknowledge their support throughout the project.

The Footscray Community Legal Centre and Financial Counselling Service (FCLC) is especially grateful for the support that was given by Anne Paul, the Trust's Grants Program and Fundraising Support Officer.

The FCLC would also like to thank Westgate Baptist Community Centre and New Hope Refugee Resource Centre - Footscray for their assistance and input to the project.

We are also grateful for the support given from City West Water and Brotherhood Green who worked with the centre to develop training and resources for the project.

Behind every project there are often hidden stories. In the Wangaratta district there is a group of special women who meet each week to sew, swap stories and share laughter. Each of those women has experienced problems in her life and their shared friendship has helped each of them survive life's ups and downs. Several years ago one of the women who initially taught some of the group to embroider made the remark when everyone was laughing that the group was in a particular "Feral" mood.



Photo: "Feral Friends", Tina, Pam, Janet and Helen presenting draught stops to Anita Smith, Financial Counsellor - Community Educator, Footscray Community Legal Centre

This name stuck and the group is now called the "Feral Friends."

A special thanks is given to the "Feral Friends," who all produced beautiful draught stops to both demonstrate to the refugee women how to sew them and for these draught stops to then be given out to the women attending the sewing groups.

Also, thanks to their hidden support, friendship and laughter through out the project.

The Footscray Community Legal Centre and Financial Counselling Service

Manager: Denis Nelthorpe

Administrator: Carol McNair

Financial Counsellors: Martin Stevens, Atem Biar and Neng Boi

The Footscray Community Legal Centre Committee of Management

Chairperson: Peter Renwick

Vice-Chair: Liz Ng

Secretary: Kofi Osei

Treasurer: Chelsea Trang

Members: Meseret Abede, Judith Bainbridge and Sarah Strapps

BACKGROUND AND ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PROJECT

The Footscray Community Legal Centre Inc. and Financial Counselling Service identified through their case work and community education program that new settlers from the refugee communities have limited knowledge of the conservation of energy and water. They also have no concept of the type of environmental and climate issues we are facing in Australia. The centre also recognised that there were groups of women from refugee backgrounds who were not receiving support and education because they were often isolated, looking after young children at home.

New Hope Refugee Resource Centre - Footscray and Westgate Baptist Community Centre, Yarraville both established groups to meet those needs. New Hope established Sewing Groups initially for African women which was within the project then was extended so that women from a range of refugee women could attend.

Westgate Baptist Community Centre established two Burmese/Chin Women's Support Groups running on a Wednesday and Friday mornings.

Footscray Community Legal Centre liaised with both these agencies to incorporate the project into their existing programs.

The Burmese/Chin Women's Support Groups then became a joint project between all the agencies.

The centre also employed a Burmese Financial Counsellor, Neng Boi to do Community Education work in July, 2009. Neng Boi has provided valuable input and assistance throughout the project.

NEW HOPE REFUGEE RESOURCE CENTRE - FOOTSCRAY – SEWING GROUP

The project initially worked for several months from November, 2009, with a group of African women from Burundi, who attended for two hours on a Tuesday afternoon. The women were given information session on energy and were taught to sew simple fleecy scarves.

They were also taught more advanced sewing techniques from a volunteer sewing tutor. Both projects overlapped on the day and worked successfully as the sewing tutor had time to spend with the women on an individual basis teaching them more advanced sewing techniques while the remaining women sewed scarves and talked.

Unfortunately, this tutor became ill and was unable to continue with the group.

At the beginning on 2010 a group of Burmese/Chin women classes initially from 4 p.m. until 6 p.m. They were also t teacher.



Photo: Burundi children wearing fleecy scarves.

After several weeks the Burmese/Chin women began attending earlier in the day from approximately 2 p.m. Initially, about three to four women attended. The group now often has up to 15 women who attend on one day.

The women have become most efficient at sewing a range of fleecy garments including scarves, wraps, blankets and ponchos for children. So efficient were they that in five weeks they used more than 25 metres of fleece material.

The success of this group of women is that they have now become self sufficient. Several have become mentors to their own community and now teach others how to sew the fleece garments.

The women have also been sewing draught stops. Brotherhood Green has approached them with the proposal of them sewing draught stops for Brotherhood Green to distribute as part of their energy saving home energy audit project. Negotiations are underway at present.

The success of this section of the project has been that the women now talk about problems they are encountering, especially in regard to energy accounts. They have become aware of the services offered by the legal centre and this has in turn led to members of their communities approaching the centre with a range of financial and legal problems.

WESTGATE BAPTIST COMMUNITY CENTRE - YARRAVILLE

The project began at the Westgate Baptist Community Centre in November, 2009.

Initially, the centre attended the support groups on a get to know you basis. In December, an information session was organised on water saving and gardening.

The Footscray Community Legal Centre also participated in their Christmas breakup and the women were given sample bags containing a range of information translated into Burmese, gardening gloves and seeds to encourage them to grow their own herbs and vegetables.



Photo: Westgate Baptist Community Centre – Burmese/Chin Women’s Christmas Party

Westgate Baptist Community Centre has land allocated to establish a future community garden.

In January, FCLC worked with City West Water to develop a water awareness program which was initially tested with the women in February. This was very successful and FCLC would like to thank Jane Tunnecliffe, from City West Water for her contribution. The feedback from this session was that the women had a greater understanding of how plumbing worked i.e. the two flush sections on toilets.

The women were given a range of water saving items including shower heads and shower timers on the day to encourage them to conserve water.

During March, several sewing days were held and the women were taught to make no-sew fleecy scarves and information was given on how they could make things to save energy in the home. For example they were given sheets on how to sew fleecy blankets to use to keep warm while watching television. They were also given draught stops and shown how these could be used to stop draughts in the home. They were also given visual information on how to turn heaters on and off. Thermometers were given out and they were shown how to use them to check appliances, heating and hot water heaters.

Also, in March the women from both the Wednesday and Friday groups attended Footscray Community Legal Centre. They were given a tour of the building and the opportunity to meet with the staff of the centre and a morning tea was held where staff members talked to the women explaining their roles and how they could assist them with legal problems.



Photo: Courtesy of Victorian Women's Trust with photos by Ponch Hawkes of Ponch Hawkes Photography – Jane Tunnecliffe, City West Water and Neng Boi, Footscray Community Legal Centre

In April, two “Bring your Bill” days were held. The women were encouraged to bring their accounts especially utility accounts.

Brotherhood Green also attended on these days and provided an information session on energy saving. They also offered the women their retrofit facility where a representative from Brotherhood Green would come directly to people’s homes and provide energy saving products such as energy saving light globes, shower heads and other energy saving ideas. Fifteen retrofits were organised. The women since have all noticed a decrease in their energy accounts and now have a better understanding of energy usage in their homes.



Photo: Footscray Community Centre’s Financial Counselling Service at “Bring your Bills” day.

The Financial Counselling Service from FCLC attended these days. More than 30 women were seen during these two days. The women were also given folders and were taught how to file their accounts into sections.

At the beginning of May a Cooking Day was held to show the women how a microwave could be used to cook a meal as an energy saving exercise. Thanks to Diana Harrington (Anita Smith’s daughter) for her assistance on the day. A chicken and rice soup was made for 15 women and children. The costing for the soup was less than \$40.

Later in May, a Sewing Day was held at New Hope Refugee Support Centre - Footscray. Nineteen women and children attended this day. More than 25 fleecy scarves were sewn that day.

In June, July and August the women requested more “Bring your Bill” days. In July again more than 30 women were seen over two days.

The success of the program at Westgate Baptist Community Centre has been that the women have become aware of both the services offered by the centre. They also now bring accounts and other paperwork for the service to explain to them.

BRAYBROOK COMMUNITY CENTRE

FCLC attended two celebration days in March on 12 which was Women's Celebration Day and 19 March, which was Harmony Week.

The centre set up an Energy Stall providing a range of information and also a demonstration of fabric painting on material showing women how to decorate draught stops and how to use them to save energy.

More than 50 women were given information on those days and painted draught stops.

The centre had spoken with the centre about establishing the Energy and Sewing groups on a Monday morning at the centre.

Unfortunately, after attending several Monday mornings no participants attended.

Although, the sewing groups were not successful, FCLC was able to hand out information to people attending the centre about their services. These information sessions have now been included as part of any groups being run by the centre and have resulted in a higher profile of FCLC in the Braybrook area.

RIVER NILE LEARNING CENTRE

The River Nile Learning Centre Inc was founded in Melbourne, Australia, in 2006 as a response to the educational difficulties faced by young refugees from the Horn of Africa whose education had been severely disrupted. Over the period since then, the focus of their services has moved to young refugee women, especially those who are pregnant or have small children.

The Financial Counselling Service has been working with the centre teaching the students about money, credit and debt problems over the past months. Several training sessions have been conducted showing the participant's energy and conservation methods.

A craft day is planned later in the year to show the participants how to sew scarves and how to make draught stops.



Photo: Priyanka Shetty, Michelle Chumbley and Ha Lee from Footscray Community Legal Centre

CONCLUSION:

The project showed that sharing, laughter and companionship can bring women together on a mutually understandable level and that language is not a barrier.

FCLC shared not just a formal relationship with the women in the groups but an informal relationship as well. We can now “Whiggly Who” dance with the Burmese/Chin women. We can play Burmese/Chin games and play Burrundi hand games with the children.

The project has been a success on several levels.

- It has allowed access to the legal Centre to refugee communities who would not have had the knowledge or the courage to approach the centre.
- It has seen an increase of clients attending the centre from the Burmese community with a range of both financial and legal problems. In 2009 FCLC saw 16 Burmese clients. In the six months of 2010, 35 Burmese clients were seen—18 for Financial Counselling and 17 with legal problems.
- It has seen clients bringing documentation to the “Bring your Bills” days which has allowed the centre to recognise systemic issues such as clients not receiving their Department of Human Service Concessions on utility accounts.
- It has recognised the need for the refugee community to have regular access to other government departments. Centrelink has now agreed to attend the Westgate Baptist Community Centre on a regular basis to assist the Burmese community.
- It has allowed for other problems seen on these days to be addressed. Several Taxation Information sessions are being planned in the future.
- The Tax Help Service run in the City of Maribyrnong by Nicola Roxon’s office has agreed to assist people from the Burmese community to file their taxation returns.
- People are now aware of where to go to access services.
- Brotherhood Green is working with FCLC to provide energy audits for people in the Western Melbourne area.
- It has seen an increase in the refugee communities knowledge of energy saving in particular water saving.
- Overall the project has shown that women’s networks can overcome isolation and bring companionship whilst imparting knowledge to assist with everyday living.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The project has highlighted the need to have services which are approachable for people from refugee backgrounds. Often people's lack of English creates more than just a language barrier but a physical barrier for them also.

The project illustrated that having staff and volunteers attend centres on a regular basis where they become a known figure rather than an anonymous person on the end of the phone presents benefits for both the consumer and the service agency.

Perhaps one of the main recommendations of the project is that more informal skills projects need to be funded to encourage people to develop skills such as sewing or gardening which can benefit them both financially and socially rather than courses aimed just at knowledge or work based skills. Skills based programs also assist participants to understand knowledge based programs in a more stimulating environment by comparison with classroom type lessons.

The project demonstrated that with encouragement people often emerge within a community who are able to demonstrate leadership skills. There is a need to be able to identify these leaders, capture their skills and train them to work with their communities.

The project highlighted the need for refugees to be given more information on a range of financial and legal issues so that they have a better understanding of the processes and requirements of private service providers, and local, state and federal government agencies.

The project showed the need for people to be given more assistance in understanding paperwork that is sent to them in English by both the private sector and government agencies.

It also highlighted the need for refugees to be given more information on arrival on how appliances in the home work and how to conserve energy and water in the home.