

A MODEL OF PRACTICE

For the empowerment of Muslim women

*AN ISLAMIC WOMEN'S WELFARE COUNCIL OF
VICTORIA PROGRAM*

Published by: Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria
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ISBN: 0 9758204 1 9

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1. FOREWORD

The SILC – *Self-esteem, Identity, Leadership and Community* project evolved from our deeply held conviction that Muslim women have much to contribute to Australia as a nation, and yet as a nation we are yet to recognise the full potential of Muslim women. Therefore, we designed SILC as an empowerment programme to address the various barriers women experience in the process of developing as leaders within the various communities to which they belong and to contribute significantly to Australia, their new home. SILC aimed to support women as they reclaimed a sense of purposeful power in their lives and the capacity to use it meaningfully within their families and communities. In many ways, the uniqueness of SILC is to be found in the manner in which the concept of empowerment is placed at the centre of our exchange with women, as opposed to treating empowerment as a desired benefit of the programme. Leadership, rights and empowerment of women then become a matter of a conscious collective engagement and pursuit.

This programme has been documented in part to invite organisations in the community welfare sector within Australia to undertake similar projects. Unfortunately such programs are rare; despite the fact that many immigrant communities are very much in need of them and need to address the question of their integration into Australian society.

This model of practice outlines the development of the project and issues which need to be addressed in development of empowerment programs for minority immigrant women; it is not a manual and should not be treated as such. Ideally, we recommend this model of practice to be used as a foundation from which other empowerment programs for different communities will be developed.

While this programme relies heavily on feminist and development theory and practices, there are no such models currently operating nationally or internationally. This program is unique in and to Australia because it relies on the unique experience of the Australian Muslim women.

As an organisation of women, we are driven by the belief that purposeful and meaningful power enacted for the good of the collective has always been the domain and quest of women's leadership. The collective good describes both the process by which women have exercised leadership and the desired outcome of their leadership. This capacity is an invaluable resource that we must as a society recognise; it not only benefits Australia as a whole but also, the individual woman who is given her basic right to engage in a conscious, reflective, responsible and humane manner in the society which provides the context to her life and how she is to live. We owe women their inclusion as much as they owe us their participation.

Joumanah El Matrah
Manager

2. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people we are deeply indebted to, most especially Nilufer Yaman for her role in the creative development of the project; the genesis of SILC resides in the numerous conversations we have had about the forces which compel women to migrate. Once women voluntarily or involuntarily migrate, their lives are forever changed and the losses and gains of migration can never be sufficiently spoken about. We also give special thanks to Clelia Aragona, Tasneem Chopra (Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria), Angela Taft (Centre for the Study of Mothers' and Children's Health, La Trobe University) and Adele Murdolo (Working Women's Health) for their assistance in methodologising SILC into a comprehensible programme of ideas.

We are very grateful to all our Reference Group members, especially Adele Murdolo (Working Women's Health), Amal El Khoury (Australian Lebanese Welfare Inc.), Angela Taft, Gabby Fakhri (VICSEG), Diana Orlando (Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service) and Abdullah Saeed (University of Melbourne) for their continued input into the project at both a practical and conceptual level and for their constant encouragement. We are equally grateful to our bi-lingual group facilitators - Amal El Khoury, Sultan Cinar and Khadra Omar - who co-facilitated a number of our workshops. Again, many thanks to Nilufer Yaman for evaluation of our modules and her general feedback and support.

In addition, we'd like to acknowledge the invaluable practical support of Carlton Primary School, Asylum Seekers Resource Centre Thornbury, Deep Creek Uniting Church, Alevi Community Centre, Nicholson St. Neighbourhood House, Women's Health West, Moonee Valley Council Family Services, Cutting Edge Shepparton, Islamic Cultural Women's Group, Melbourne University Islamic Society, the Women's Committee of the Palestinian Charitable Association of Victoria (PCA), Broadmeadows Women's Community House Anglicare and NMIT Collingwood TAFE in organising groups and providing venues for groups to meet. The SILC brochures were designed and produced by Saskia Ericson (Hatch Creative) which we sincerely appreciate.

We acknowledge the contribution of the Federal Department of Family and Community Services and thank them not only for their financial and advisory support over the last 3 years, but also for their foresight in recognising the importance of community capacity building and the importance of women to the overall health and resilience of their community.

The immense success of SILC would not have been possible without the commitment, motivation and hard work of all the women who participated in the SILC consultations, workshops, radio programmes, SILC network and Community Speaks sessions. We are very proud to have known and worked with all of them and hope that they will continue to become stronger and carry forward the wonderful work that they have begun. We hope we have inspired them as much as they have inspired us!

3. INTRODUCTION

3.1. About the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria

Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria (The Council) is a non-religious, community based organisation established and managed by Muslim women for Muslim women. Established in 1991, as a non-religious organisation reflecting the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and sectarian diversity of Muslim women, the Council was developed from the belief that meaningful change in the status of Muslim women could only be achieved through improving the situation of individual women and improving their capacity collectively. To this end, we have remained committed operating as a grass roots organisation, with Committee of Management and staff comprising solely of Muslim women. The Council aims to facilitate Muslim women's full participation in the Australian society by:

- developing and delivering programs and services to meet the needs of Muslim women in a manner consistent with their values and that of their community,
- empowering Muslim women through information, skill development, support and advocacy,
- promoting social justice, access and equity in the provision of services to Muslim women,
- contributing to the development of knowledge about Muslims at all levels of government, amongst professionals and within the general community,
- promoting the complexity and diversity of Muslim women's identities, and building an interconnectedness between women through increased awareness of their common and diverse challenges,
- promoting women's right to equality, justice, and self determination,
- working to eliminate discrimination against Muslim women both within their community and in the broader social, economic and political spheres of Australia.

The Council's work has been well recognised by various levels of government, the service system and the community. Current work priorities of the Council include:

- settlement of newly arrived women into Victoria,
- poverty and housing issues,
- violence against Muslim women,
- capacity building and leadership development,
- education and training,
- economic and social participation.

The Council works toward these priorities by

- providing a housing and generalist support service,
- undertaking a community education campaign on citizenship and Australian law,
- providing parenting education sessions,
- leadership development of Muslim women (3 year community education campaign),
- identity development and communication skill development among young women,
- research into racial and sexual violence against Muslim women,
- research into school retention rates among Arab and Muslim young women,
- working against racial, religious and gender based crimes and vilification against Muslim women,
- lobbying and advocacy on behalf of Muslim women.

Eligibility for the Council's services

All Muslim women living in Victoria are entitled to access all services and programs of the Council. Current services include:

- information and referral,
- individual casework support and counselling,
- a range of skill development group work and community education sessions,
- recreation and support groups,
- individual mentoring programs,
- volunteer and -student -placements,
- access to the Council's publications and library.

For community groups, government and non-government organisations and academic institutions:

- cross cultural training and training on Islam,
- secondary consultation,
- research,
- project partnerships,
- student/volunteer placements,
- publications.

3.2. About the SILC Model of Practice

What is SILC?

The SILC project commenced in 2002 as a direct response to the individual and collective situation of Muslim women living in Victoria. SILC stands for self-esteem, identity, leadership and community, and was a group work-based project aimed at increasing Muslim women's community participation. The 3-year project aimed to facilitate women's self-awareness and recognition of their rights and support them to engage with their rights and responsibilities as human beings, women, Muslims and citizens of Australia. The overall SILC goal was to work towards a sustainable process of Muslim women's empowerment, self-agency and well-being, through their increased participation in the development of their own communities and in the larger Australian society.

Four workshop streams were offered to Muslim women: General Leadership Skills, Leadership in Education and Skills, Leadership in Parenting and Leadership against Domestic Violence. The workshop methodology used was highly interactive and participatory. On completing one or more of the workshops, women were encouraged to act as resource persons, mentors or leaders to the community. Workshops were developed to increase participants' capacity to support other Muslim women seeking information, support or guidance. Towards the end of the project, many women also participated in radio interviews and spoke at various forums and seminars on women's issues.

Evaluations carried out both during and after the project established the programme's success in meeting its aims and demonstrably increasing women's participation and involvement in their immediate communities and more broadly in the Australian society. More than 200 Muslim women participated in SILC, and out of these 162 completed the various leadership development workshops. The women belonged primarily to Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, Horn of Africa communities, but some women from South and South East Asia also participated.

SILC Model of Practice

The SILC Model of Practice is based on our experience of developing and implementing the SILC Project. It aims to share our learning from the project by conveying the core ideas, concepts and principles guiding the development and implementation of the project. The model is intended for workers and organisations working with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, particularly women, and seeks to establish a standard in working with disadvantaged women in facilitating their empowerment and community participation. It is hoped that the model will successfully highlight the importance of incorporating the group work concepts that define SILC. We hope that it is clear from this document that the SILC model and learning applies to women on three levels, as Muslim women, CALD women and disadvantaged women in general.

The model outlines the rationale behind SILC and the theoretical concepts that are embedded within it, our experience of developing and implementing the project; and the processes of its various stages. It also provides a number of selected examples of the kind of group activities that were employed by the project, and discusses their overall outcomes.

We emphasise that the model has not been conceived as a manual for the implementation of the SILC program but rather as a guide to the development of programs for disadvantaged women for the purpose of empowerment. To this end, we included some experience-grounded guidance that may be helpful with the development of such projects.

4. SILC PROJECT OVERVIEW

4.1 Objectives

SILC is based on the premise that Muslim women living in Victoria must participate in local and global Muslim women's struggles for their rights in order for sustainable personal and socio-political change to occur. The long-term vision of the SILC project is to work towards a sustainable process of Muslim women's empowerment and well-being so that their capacity to respond to various forms of disadvantage in their communities is strengthened. The project is based on a key assumption that the opportunity and space to explore various levels of their identities, develop self-esteem, learn new skills and expand their social awareness will facilitate the process of women's self-development, agency and empowerment and will allow them to participate meaningfully in their own communities and in the larger Australian society.

The broad objectives of the project were to:

- develop leadership capacity that enhanced the community and strengthened the skills of existing women leaders in the community,
- develop leadership capacity that targets the issues that undermine community cohesion and well being,
- build the capacity of the Muslim communities by building the capacity of Muslim women,
- develop Muslim women's individual and collective self-confidence and self-esteem,
- develop Muslim women's level of personal and social awareness,
- provide Muslim women with information on frameworks and services of relevance to them,
- develop Muslim women's leadership and communication skills that builds the internal capacity of their community,
- develop Muslim women's capacity to support other women in their own community,
- facilitate attitudinal changes within the Muslim community and Australian society towards Muslim women.

SILC 's specific objectives were to:

- enhance Muslim women's self-awareness and self-esteem as individuals, women, Muslims, migrants/refugees and members of their cultural group and Australian community,
- facilitate Muslim women's participation in their individual and community's representative, social and economic development,
- encourage women to explore issues of safety with physical, psychological and social integrity,
- support women in parenting their children in a manner consistent with their needs and lifestyle choices,
- support Muslim women in locating human rights, gender justice, race, Islamic, historical, cultural, leadership and psychological perspectives within the context of their experiences,

- facilitate Muslim women's access to resources, opportunities, skills and knowledge necessary to mediate the structural inequalities and other issues which hinder their empowerment,
- contribute to the capacity building of Muslim women in empowering and mentoring other women in their communities.

4.2. Target Population

SILC's general target group is all Muslim women living in Victoria. However, since improving Muslim women's situation is the primary aim of the project, we focused on the following disadvantaged groups:

- young women not adequately participating in the education sector,
- women who are mothers, particularly young mothers,
- women who are newly arrived in Australia,
- geographically and socially isolated women,
- women with little or no English skills,
- women with unrecognised skills,
- women who may be vulnerable to family breakdown.

In addition to these groups we focused on women with potential leadership capacity who may act as mentors and support other women in their community.

Primarily we concentrated on recruiting Muslim women from the Horn of Africa and from Turkish and Arabic language groups, because these groups are highly represented amongst the service users of crisis services and therefore, considered to be most in need. In addition, despite the level of diversity among Australian Muslims, most Muslim women in Victoria come from these ethnic and/or language backgrounds.

4.3. Implementation Structure

SILC was implemented in four phases:

Phase 1: Setting the foundation

This phase spread over 6 months, included formalising and extending the reference group, consulting Muslim women, conducting research on existing data, developing the workshop modules and promoting the project.

Phase 2: Implementing the modules

The second phase, spread over 18 months involved the recruitment of workshop participants and conducting the workshops.

Phase 3: Community delivery and community integration

The third phase spread over six months and focussed on the establishment of a Muslim women's network and a range of community education activities for and by Muslim women. This provided an opportunity for women to become active in their own right and to engage with their community and Australian society broadly on issues of concern for the women themselves.

Phase 4: Project evaluation

The fourth phase of SILC involved evaluating the overall project and its general effectiveness.

Phase 5: Model of practice

The final phase involved the development of a model of practice to share the knowledge generated by the project.

5. BACKGROUND

5.1. Gathering Knowledge

Developing an understanding of Muslim women's needs

The impetus for the project evolved from our experience in working with Muslim women intensively for more than a decade. In the course of this work we held purposeful conversations with them individually and in groups about how they understand their migration to Australia, and the various barriers they face in finding a meaningful place for themselves in their new home. These conversations were held in order to represent Muslim women effectively, but they were also great source of information for project development.

To fully comprehend Muslim women in the Australian context there is also a need to understand Muslim women as a historical and global community of women. This is important because many issues of leadership and questions of identity rest with historical notions of Islam and women's activism. It is our view and fundamental to all the work we do, that it is not possible to understand now without understanding who Muslim women have been historically and globally.

Islam and women

The religion of Islam emerged at a time when women in Arabia occupied a highly marginalised position in society. Originally, Qur'anic teachings were considered to have been a source of political and religious support for the liberation and equality of women. It has been suggested by many scholars that the Qur'an is the first of the monotheistic founding texts to treat men and women as spiritual equals before God and to speak to men and women simultaneously. In addition to this recognition of women, the notion of set rights was established; the right to life, good treatment, safety, dignity, ownership of property, inheritance, education, earning, vote, marriage by choice, were all rights clearly established or reinforced to safeguard the integrity of women.

Unfortunately, over time, these rights greatly diminished and the history of Muslim women has become the history of their struggle to reassert the basic rights initially awarded to them and to redevelop those rights in the context of a modern society. In the process of reclaiming their rights, Muslim women have provided us with many historical examples of leadership and pursuing the cause of justice, both for themselves and their community; the struggle to vote, the struggle to have a public voice and participate in the decision making of their community all reside in the heritage of Muslim women today.

The role of Islam and the rights awarded to women in Islam, the potential of Islam to act as a force for liberation continues to be a persuasive force in women's lives and their struggle for equality. Irrespective of Muslim women's background and level of religious adherence, the question of rights is a question of where Islam sits in respect of those rights.

Contemporary Muslim women's leadership

To further complicate the picture of Muslim women's history, the majority of Muslim women reside in over 67 countries across the world and there are over 15 major Muslim sects with several sub-sects. The diversity of Muslims and the practice of Islam globally is staggering. Muslim women are not and have never been a homogenous community of women. It is our view that Muslim women have three important commonalities; they have shared similar struggles inherent in reclaiming Islam from patriarchal notions of faith and practice, they have been aware of the commonalities and struggles they face as Muslim women and are therefore tied to each other because of this consciousness and finally, like all women across the world they desire a better place for themselves in a society based on justice and meaningful participation.

It is important to note that in the name of Islam, the situation of women has deteriorated or improved, depending upon on the political context in which they live.

Historically and in fact in the present, Muslim women continue to face significant and pervasive forms of discrimination and oppression. Not only do Muslim women continue to face discriminatory laws designed to ensure their second class citizenry, but they have also faced appalling forms of violence; such as honour killings, racial discrimination and violence, and imprisonment and violence arising from misogynistic interpretations of Islam. This is the unambiguous reality of Muslim women which should not be denied or minimised; that as a loosely affiliated group of women; Muslim women are probably one of the most persecuted groups of women in the world. But it is incorrect to view Muslim women solely as persecuted community of women.

Muslim women are not passive bystanders to social and political injustice, they have, individually and through formal organisations, historically and in present times, been active and significant agents in the global women's struggle for human rights and gender justice.

Contemporary Muslim women's activism has been manifested in three main ways: they fought and continue to fight for their rights from a global human rights, social justice and/or an Islamic perspective; they have asserted and continued to assert their right to religious expression without discrimination and they have formed a significant part of many mainstream rights struggles alongside Muslims and non Muslims.

Muslim women have been working on cutting-edge issues, some of which are associated with Muslims specifically, such as polygamy, feminist interpretations of the Qur'an, etc. and others that are part of women's issues globally; access to education and health care, reproductive health rights for women and girls, and increasing literacy levels.

As with the general quest for women's rights globally, the struggle for Muslim women is an uphill battle, and there is still a long way to go; yet Muslim women's work at various levels has and continues to result in sustainable improvements in women's social and legal position. Women's participation has been slowly but consistently increasing – they are becoming ministers, members of parliament, and officials, academics, doctors and business owners. The percentage of Muslim women with formal education has increased and the economic participation of women continues to extend from the traditional involvement in subsistence farming and the informal economy to the formal and modern sector.

Muslim women in Victoria

Thus, Muslim women's pursuit of their rights and meaningful inclusion in their society is not new. This is the heritage of Muslim women today and the context of their migration to Australia. In the process of settling into their new home, the question of rights and meaningful inclusion must continue if they are to become part of their new society.

In Australia and in Victoria; Muslim women are immigrants and daughters of immigrants. Their migration to Australia can be dated back to the Afghani camel herders of the 1860's. The location of Muslim women in Australian society is complex, on one hand their achievements have been substantial and they have integrated successfully into all aspects of Australian society, but they have also experienced considerable disadvantage. The questions and barriers Muslim women face in Victoria are intimately tied to their identity as immigrants and to the consequences of the dispersion of Muslims globally.

Currently there are a complex range of barriers and disadvantage that Muslim women face:

- limited English language proficiency services mean that Muslim women have limited access to critical information on health, legal rights and obligations and the types of services available to them,
- poverty, financial dependency and insecurity,
- homelessness,
- limited educational achievement, limited access to educational pathways,
- high levels of unemployment and generally limited access to the benefits of economic participation,
- race, cultural and gender-based violence and victimisation,
- family and intergenerational breakdown,
- restricted mobility due to limited English language proficiency and/or lack of money and transport,
- post-traumatic stress due to torture and trauma associated with fleeing a conflict situation. Humanitarian entrants to Australia are more likely to have suffered rape, sexual assault and sexually specific torture prior to their arrival than other migrant women,
- isolation, alienation, powerlessness and loss of self esteem associated with the decision to migrate and/or the breakdown of the settlement process,
- anxiety, fear and depression which may also evolve from loss of family, extended network of kin, friends and other supports in their country of origin,
- other emotional and psychological and physical health issues associated with coming from a country in civil strife or a third world country and/or a protracted period of migration.

These pervasive forms of disadvantage are difficult to change because Muslim women are further disadvantaged by their limited access to resources and services which might alleviate the burden of disadvantage. Notably, Muslim women appear estranged from preventative services and institutions such as:

- Mental health services; these are rarely used because of the limited awareness women have of them and cultural stigma associated with mental illness or even mild psychological ill health,
- Legal System; Muslim women have minimal knowledge of their rights and the legal remedies available to them,
- Community Organisations; which undertake preventative programs and

initiatives.

We find however that women are overrepresented in the use of crisis services such as domestic violence or protective services, and this is attributable to lack of information and awareness of options available to them.

Disadvantage is further evidenced by their under-representation in key community representative and advocacy bodies and their general absence from community organisations within their own community. Despite over-representation in media coverage and general public discourse on Islam and Muslims, women themselves are rarely the leaders in the public space in their community and Australia generally.

As a result of this pattern of disadvantage and marginalisation, the participation and influence of Muslim women in both the Muslim community and in Australia is dangerously near to absent. The implications for both their personal and psychological well-being as well as their position in society is profound, not only for Muslim women themselves but for the Muslim community generally. Women not only constitute half of the Muslim population, but they also have the key role of parenting the new generation of Muslims, the Muslim community's well being rests almost entirely on the well being and participation of women.

5.2. Conceptualising the Project

Guiding principles

Based on knowledge we developed from Muslim women's history, the experience of our organisation and our consultations with Muslim women and community workers, the four SILC keys to leadership were developed. These keys were the guiding principles of the project:

- **self-esteem:** as a foundation from which growth is hampered or facilitated. No change is possible for the woman who does not feel herself to be worthy to ask questions, to demand her rights or lead her community. In addition, the situation of immigrant and Muslim women in Australia has always been characterised by varying degrees of disadvantage and discrimination; both are political structural realities but with a very personal impact on the women who experience them.
- **identity:** as the instrument of empowerment and the conduit for change on a collective and individual basis. To speak about change and collective responsibility through the concept of the self is probably the most accessible form of teaching and change for women. Through the self and the identity of being; a woman, a Muslim, an immigrant, of lower socio economic standing, the notion of leadership and what one must lead on become focused and powerful. But identity as a concept has another purpose; it has remarkable explanatory power, the situation of Muslim women today can only be understood because of who they are, for another group of women or men, the matrix of identity would lead to very different issues and perhaps an entirely different program. Through understanding themselves, women come to understand their community and society. To consider their identity as Muslim women they must consider how the label of Muslim woman has existed historically and under different contexts- in short it links them to Muslim women of

other times and places, thereby building a complex matrix of understanding the identities they inherit.

- **Leadership:** as the realisation of an empowered woman; whether the domain is her personal life or her community. It is both the right and responsibility of women. No community can coherently and healthily change without leadership who understand that there is no separation between individual well being and collective community well being. In addition, a historical account of women demonstrates their commitment to change for the purpose of community health and well being.
- **and Community:** as the context for the individual and as an instigator and target of change and further development. Community because Muslim women care deeply and are profoundly connected to the various communities in which they are an integral part. Community because both Muslim community and the Australian community have not recognised the importance of Muslim women nor the contribution they have and continue to make.

From these principles the objectives and structure of the project developed as well as its target group. These are outlined in the introduction section. In addition to this, it is at this point that SILC developed as a capacity building initiative:

The contemporary view of capacity-building goes beyond the conventional perception of top down influence and focuses on enhancing community engagement in their own development. From this perspective, the central concerns for capacity building include people being able to coordinate at the grass roots level, fostering communication at the community level, ensuring information sharing, and enhancing community capacities to embrace and manage change. Thus, capacity building relates to a range of activities by which individuals and groups improve their capacity for their community's development. Capacity in this context includes empowerment through social awareness, knowledge personal development.

One of the key requirements in this regard is to recognise that the social whole is more than the sum of its individual components. People form social systems which provide for a range of needs. Households, communities, locality and neighbourhoods create networks of mutual obligation, care, concern, interest and access to other points of view often referred to as 'social capital'. Social capital can be thought of as the framework that supports the process of learning through interaction, and requires the formation of networking paths that are both horizontal across communities and vertical agencies to communities to individuals.

Developing the modules

Four modules were developed to address the array of issues identified by Muslim women as impacting on their lives and restricting their capacity to become leaders. SILC itself is a preventative and early intervention programme and therefore we divided our programme into two broad approaches; firstly we wanted to build on the existing capacity and strengths of Muslim women and the skills and work they had undertaken to date; these were our **enhancement** modules:

- General and Community Leadership
- Leadership in Education and Training

Our second approach addressed issues which undermined the cohesion and well being of the community and which affected women especially, these were our **reparative** modules:

- Leadership in parenting
- Leadership against domestic violence or family reparation

Partnerships

This stage also saw the establishment of a range of alliances or partnerships with experts who would become advisory reference group members upon the funding of the project.

In order to run a group work-based project of this kind, which incorporates such diverse issues and concepts, it is essential that a range of services and expertise be involved. The Council therefore formed partnerships with a variety of services, institutions and resource persons, particularly those working on migrant issues in general and women specifically, in domestic violence, parenting and training.

Our partnerships with organisations were important in two other respects, firstly the collaboration with fellow community organisations strengthened us as we strengthened them. Secondly, while our partnerships were very important, SILC was clearly a project in which Muslim women (the Council) were working for the empowerment of women. The role of other organisations was clearly to complement our skill base and draw alliances for the common good of women.

6. IMPLEMENTATION

6.1 Phase One: Setting the Foundation

Upon funding, the following process was undertaken:

Double checking our approach

Upon funding we commenced another series of consultations with Muslim women around Victoria in order to gain feedback on the SILC project and its feasibility as well as to gauge women's level of interest. We decided to consult women again as a way of double checking our original findings but also to provide the opportunity for the new SILC facilitators to develop their own perceptions of women's needs and how SILC might be used to address those needs. It also allowed the SILC team to develop their own relationship with the potential participants of the program.

Development of modules

Having identified the specific needs of Muslim women, the next stage involved identifying, collating and documenting available resources and data on Muslim women, human rights, gender justice issues, Islamic perspectives, migration and race issues, existing models of practice or work with Muslim women, existing training modules, etc.

The material collected not only informed the development of the SILC modules, but also constituted a source of training material for use in the workshops themselves. The consultations confirmed that Muslim women face a range of barriers that prevent their meaningful and effective participation in the community, such as limited information on support services, educational and skill development and employment opportunities, inadequate English language skills, isolation, parenting difficulties, racism and migration issues.

In addition, module development involved developing the exercises, activity concepts and material to be used in the workshops. An important aspect of this stage was the identification and development of teaching material to fulfil the key concepts and cross-cutting themes of the project as initially envisioned; such as women's empowerment, gender justice and human rights. These core concepts informed both the material covered in the workshops and the methodological approach and activities that were used. Although the exercises and material continued to evolve throughout the implementation of the project, a core set of these were developed during this stage, based on the key concepts and skills SILC aimed to address.

Theoretical model

SILC is a capacity building initiative which aims to build the capacity of Muslim community by building the capacity of Muslim women. There are many ways to understand capacity building and many ways in which the process of capacity building may be undertaken. Additionally, capacity building has many ingredients, it is not possible to encompass them all in one program. In relation to the women SILC aimed to assist and the issues it sought to address the following concepts and tools of capacity building were incorporated:

The concept of empowerment

The core concept and vision towards which SILC aspires is Muslim women's empowerment at all levels. Empowerment is a broad and multi-dimensional concept and is conceptualised as

...a social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society by acting on issues that they define as important

...the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions, which both build individual and collective assets.... In essence, empowerment speaks to self-determined change. It implies changing the environment within which marginalised people live and helping them build and capitalise on their own attributes.
(World Bank)

Clearly then, empowerment is a **process**, and one that embodies a set of notions, both cognitive and behavioural in nature. The socio-political, cultural, psychological and economic **wellbeing** and **integrity** of marginalised people, in this case Muslim women, is central to this.

This process of empowerment in the context of women's leadership is understood as the act of effecting this process of wellbeing and **meaningful change** at either an individual or a collective level. The Council and therefore SILC does not adhere to a traditional top-down leadership model; rather, a participatory and fundamentally empowering model is embraced where the goal for a positive future for women is envisioned, initiative towards it is taken, power, knowledge, skills and goals are shared, and legal, socio-political, economic and cultural equality and justice are at the core of society.

Women's empowerment is a broad concept which begins with the implementation of empowering strategies, thus initiating a process of personal empowerment (skills, awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence, a struggle for their rights) as well as creating an enabling environment (an improved position legally, politically, socially, economically, as well as within their families). This sets into motion women's increased

independence and agency, thus giving women greater access and control of resources, leading to an improved social position, which is critical to their empowerment.

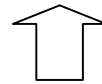
As the following diagram illustrates, SILC contributes to this pathway in a significant way. The process begins at a grassroots level with the SILC workshops, which are a first step strategy, aiming to build their self-esteem, sense of identity, skills and awareness. It is envisaged that this, in turn, will lead to their increased participation in the community, increased independence, greater access to resources and increased leadership capacities, whether in their individual lives or within their communities, thus contributing to a meaningful improvement in their socio-political status and empowerment.

SILC Muslim Women's empowerment model

Muslim women's leadership and increased participation in community life and development



Empowerment of Muslim women



- **Increased self awareness**
- **Increased individual and collective self-confidence**
- **Self-esteem**
- **Increased socio-political awareness and information**
- **Improved communication, analysis and leadership skills**



SILC workshops

The concept of Muslim's empowerment women runs through the methodology and content of the workshops to the leadership initiatives that women became involved in after the workshops. Each of the SILC workshops focuses on 4 key areas:

- self-awareness, identity and self-esteem,
- community identity, self-community exchange,

- information and discussion on gender justice and rights (human rights, women's rights and Islam) issues, frameworks, resources and services,
- personal and community leadership skills and strategies.

Identity, awareness, skills and strategies

The acquisition of knowledge and self awareness is crucial to Muslim women's development and empowerment if sustainable change is to occur. A critical element in attitudinal change is knowledge and information. Information and knowledge about the social environment and community life is referred to here as social awareness. Social awareness allows individuals to develop informed opinions and attitudes about their environment and to develop corresponding strategies to respond to the demands their environments place on them. The process of identifying which skills are needed and how they are to be applied depends on the environment. One of the first steps towards bringing about any social change, therefore, is through a good understanding of one's environment, which includes understanding its various challenges and demands. This allows us to identify the existing limitations, strengths and gaps, and to, therefore, develop visions and plans for change in the future.

The road to well being and purposeful and meaning power, therefore, begins with **awareness**, both of the **self** and of **community issues** and structures. An understanding and awareness of the complex levels of **identity** that Muslim women carry, their implications and women's development and participation, and perhaps most importantly, migration constitute the essence of the SILC belief system. Equally significant for Muslim women's long-term empowerment are the knowledge and understanding of the institutions in their society, its **frameworks** and paradigms, such as its social and legal systems and diverse religious and international perspectives on **human and women's rights**, within which Muslim women exist. Change in the situation of Muslim women's rights involves a shift both in thinking about social justice and in talking about women's lives. It entails examining social justice frameworks through the lens of gender and Diaspora.

Yet information and analysis alone are not sufficient for meaningful change to occur in the lives of women. New knowledge can be gained and understood, and skills can be learnt and practiced, but without changing the underlying attitudes that inhibit women's development, these changes are unlikely to be long-term. SILC therefore, asserts that in addition to enhancing Muslim women's awareness, a focused effort to develop their individual and collective **self-esteem** and confidence and to facilitate **positive attitudinal change** towards their own development is critical to constructive change.

A number of exercises in the module focussed on developing this sense of awareness in the participants. These are discussed in more detail in section 6.2.

Once the envisaged shift in attitudes begins, the process of developing specific empowerment-based leadership **skills**, is likely to be more effective. Fortunately, skills can be learnt and improved. Learning takes place from people, from practice and from an understanding of the concepts behind them. The SILC focus is on enhancing a range of skills that would facilitate Muslim women's self-agency and their meaningful and sustainable participation in Australian society. This includes analytical, team-work, observation, interpersonal communication, presentation and basic project development and planning skills.

Even though self and social awareness and positive attitudes are of intrinsic value and may be perceived as empowering ends in themselves, for the change in Muslim women's lives at a broader level to be sustainable, community change must also occur. For this, individual and/or collective **action** is essential. For SILC, action constitutes thinking about, developing and planning a strategy or set of **strategies** which would allow Muslim women to contribute to play a role in bringing about change in their own and their community's life and in enhancing their general sense of wellbeing and integrity. The level at which this action occurs may involve altering personal, behavioural or communication patterns, volunteering - in community organisations, pursuing further learning, participating in service delivery or social movements. From a SILC perspective, this is seen as women's leadership. The emphasis is not only on facilitating the first step in community leadership, but helping create a process whereby the women **own** the need for Muslim women's leadership and take it as far as they wish, according to their individual needs and at their own pace.

Participatory methodology

Participatory and experiential learning and action-oriented methodologies (Chambers, 1994; Freire, 1972; Lewin, 1951) focus on working with (rather than on or for) the very communities whose lives are to be improved. SILC's participatory approach grows out of the Council's notion of empowerment and its approach to community education generally. Women's active participation in their own process of learning is central to this. The participatory methodological approach of the SILC project is based on the concept of experiential as opposed to purely didactic learning. Drawing from Freire's (1972) principles of community development, SILC envisages that people will believe more in knowledge they have discovered themselves than in knowledge presented by others, such as in a plenary session. Further, learning is considered to be more effective and sustainable when it is active rather than passive. Thus, creating a workshop atmosphere, which is supportive, accepting and interactive, would allow people the space to experiment with new attitudes, behaviour and theories.

In addition to enhancing learning, an important difference between the participatory and the plenary/seminar approach is that the former focuses on posing a problem, issue or concept and discussing it with the group, while the latter focuses on presenting a problem and providing the answers as an expert. This makes participatory approaches even more valuable for disadvantaged and marginalised groups, such as women (particularly those belonging to minority groups, minorities in general, immigrant populations, etc). The focus on grounding development strategies in the needs of the communities they target, allows for far more cultural sensitivity, adaptability and flexibility. Thus, groups with limited literacy skills or those with no formal schooling or classroom experience are much more likely to benefit from such methodologies than from traditional classroom/seminar methods.

Plenary/seminar	Participatory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trainer/teacher seen as possessing all essential information • Participants/students seen as “empty” vessels, needing to be filled with knowledge • Trainer/teacher talks • Participants/students absorb passively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trainer/facilitator provides framework for thinking • Participants actively consider a common problem and find solutions collectively • Trainer/facilitator raises questions • Participants are active, describing, analysing, suggesting and deciding

Adapted from Freire, P. (1972) Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

6.2. Phase Two: Implementing the Modules

Promoting SILC

The SILC workshops were promoted in a number of ways. This included a community project launch and extensive meetings and networking with existing women’s groups and workers working with Muslim women. The launch was attended by about 250 women from diverse backgrounds. A number of prominent migrant women speakers addressed the gathering. By the end of the launch about 70 women had already signed up for the SILC workshop *expression of interest* list. A detailed SILC brochure in English and information flyers for each of the SILC modules in community languages, were also developed and widely distributed at the launch and elsewhere.

It is important to note that consulting with women about a program and its development, is in itself a form of promotion. This ensures that women are stakeholders from the beginning and should be considered a form of leadership development.

Workshops

Twelve set of workshops were to be held primarily with Turkish, Arab and Horn of Africa women. In the end, a total of thirteen set of workshops were completed and 212 women registered for and participated in them. Of these women 162 completed the workshops. Ten of the workshop sets ran for 20 – 24 hours each, while three ran for 16 – 18 hours each. The groups SILC worked with were extremely diverse. Ethnic groups that participated the most were Turkish, Arab (Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian, Omani and Iraqi), Kurdish and Horn of Africa (Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean), but some women with Indonesian, Malaysian, Pakistani, Indian and Australian backgrounds also participated. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 – 69 years and their occupations ranged from home managers and students to professional occupations such as teachers, business consultants, managers, community workers, etc. Educational levels ranged from no schooling at all to post-graduate degrees and diplomas. The participants’ English language skills ranged from little or no English to fluent spoken and written English. The workshops were conducted in English, Arabic, Turkish and Somali.

The workshops were grounded in the needs and contexts of the participants. Therefore, although the overall structure, content and key concepts of every workshop remained

the same, the exercises, tools and material used and the specific issues covered were individually tailored to the needs and level of the participants. For example, a workshop with women who have already been somewhat active in their communities and wish to further develop their skills may focus on specific leadership and communication skills such as public-speaking, organising community or developing projects. For women who have been isolated and had very little or no work experience or academic qualifications, the focus was more on personal development and self-esteem.

In addition to the regular leadership workshops, SILC also ran a facilitation skills workshop in order to train bi-lingual workers to run these workshops in community languages. This workshop aimed at developing an understanding of the SILC programme, methodology, concepts and exercises; the role of the facilitator; improving general facilitation skills and providing an opportunity for potential facilitators to gain experience in participating in an interactive, experiential and participatory workshop setting, focusing on the SILC themes.

All the SILC workshops were generally divided into 3 broad sections: a) Introduction and group development, b) awareness and identity and c) skills and action.

a). Introduction and group development

Every workshop began with an introductory session, where the focus was on:

- increasing the participants' understanding of the aims, structure and style of the workshop
- developing a joint set of expectations and objectives
- developing a set of group guidelines
- starting to get to know each other a little better
- setting the tone for the workshop

This session was designed to be a relaxed, non-threatening session, with small group activities, ice-breakers and brainstorming, aimed at initiating the group process and demonstrating the kind of work that lies ahead. After initial introductions, the participants were encouraged in this session to talk about their reasons for participating, their hopes and their apprehensions. This was followed by a discussion of the workshop objectives, ending with a large group session where the group collectively developed certain guidelines that would help them learn and participate more fully.

The introductory session was typically followed by a session focussing on further developing the group process, the direction it was to take and the key concepts it was based on. This normally involved establishing the rationale for women's leadership through an analysis of Muslim women's situation in Victoria, defining the concept of empowering leadership and outlining the benefits of Muslim women taking on a more active role in their communities and the larger Australian sector.

The participants generally responded well to these sessions. Addressing their expectations and apprehensions right at the beginning of the workshop has proved to be very helpful both in terms of setting the tone of the workshop as well as in creating an atmosphere of safety, trust and comfort in the group. It also allowed the training to become more focussed. The participants typically became highly involved during these sessions as they began to get to know each other, to open up to others and to participation in group work, perhaps for the first time.

Introductory and group development exercise samples

1. Exercise: My name and a little bit about it!

Time:

15 -20 minutes (depending on group size)

Objectives:

To introduce the participants, and to get to know a little bit about each other and each other's cultures and families.

Proposed Method:

1. Ask each participant to tell the group her name and a little bit about its history (e.g. why she was named such, who named her, etc.) what her name means and the significance of the name for herself or family, etc.

2. Exercise: Hopes and Fears

Time:

25 - 30 minutes

Objective:

To explore participants' expectations from the training and understand and clarify their concerns.

Material

Objectives chart, butcher paper, markers and blue tack.

Proposed Method:

1. Divide participants into two to three groups.
2. Ask each group to identify, discuss and write down each member's hopes and fears about the training on butcher paper.
3. Get one person from each group to present their group's responses in two to three minutes.
4. Put up the objective chart, introduce the objectives of the training module and refer back to the hopes and clarify fears

Original exercises

Examples of group norms developed by participants

- Good listening
 - Respect for others and their views, culture and beliefs
 - Start and finish on time
 - Put mobile phones on silent
 - Take breaks when needed
 - Bring up issues/concerns in the group there and then
 - Actively try and improve skills
 - Everyone participates
 - Keep personal information shared private and within the group
 - No whispering or side-talking during the session.
-

Examples of workshop expectations identified by participants

Hopes

- Understand characteristics of a leader
- Understand needs of our community
- Develop communication skills
- Learn how to express our opinions without hurting or getting into trouble
- Learn how to assert ourselves
- Learn how to lead the community in participating in the wider society
- Improve ourselves and learn how to work with Muslim women
- Become empowered with knowledge
- Share opinions with other participants
- Improve self-esteem and gain self-confidence

Fears

- We may not be able to cover all leadership areas
 - It may not be practical enough to apply in our daily lives
 - It may not suit everyone's personality
 - There may be a language problem
 - There are different cultural backgrounds in the group - people may get offended by some things others say
 - It could be a waste of time
-

b). Awareness and identity

As awareness and identity are core concepts on which the SILC workshops are based, the next several exercises focused on increasing women's awareness and developing their individual and collective identities and self-esteem. As both awareness and self-esteem are linked participants' multi-layered identity as women, Muslims, migrants/refugees and human beings, these sessions explored each of these levels. This component combined self-reflection with theoretical and political knowledge to enhance the participants' self and socio-political awareness.

The initial exercises of this component offered women the opportunity to talk about and gain an insight into their individual lives, identities, priorities, personalities, strengths and limitations. Subsequent exercises allowed for more in depth discussions and a range of information, drawing from a variety of perspectives, on:

- the concept of fundamental rights and justice
- gender discrimination
- human rights violations
- the abuse of Islam

The awareness and identity section involved an intensive process for the participants. The self-awareness exercises allowed many different aspects of the participants' lives and personalities to be brought out and the participants talked at some length about how they saw themselves as individuals, their strengths, interests, wishes and issues that were meaningful to them. Some exercises allowed for an even deeper level of self-understanding, analysis and disclosure. It is important to note that the amount and depth of personal information shared was completely in the participant's own control, and the importance of confidentiality was reiterated time and again. The participants generally responded extremely well and a number of personal development and socio-political issues were discussed. Many participants thoroughly enjoyed the awareness exercises and were able to easily relate to others, while others initially found these exercises somewhat difficult. For many this was the first time they had talked about and analysed themselves with others or talked about sensitive social issues, and were unsure of the response they would receive. After the initial few exercises, however, most participants were able to relax, become more open and learn to enjoy and learn from the experience.

The awareness exercises covered a broad range of issues and kept the participants highly involved and interested as they talked about their identities as women, as Muslims and as migrants and what that meant to them. At times, some of these issues provoked heated discussions and intense emotions, all of which ultimately led to a greater understanding of oneself, others and society in general. A high level of critical socio-political analysis took place during some of these sessions. For example, the sessions on gender awareness brought out some of the strong gender stereotypes that exist in society and the effects they have on men and women's lives. Similarly, the sessions on human rights and religion allowed the participants to look at the dynamic of some of the serious abuses of religion and race that take place in society and the damaging effects this has on people, particularly women. The participants reported that some of these exercises had been both fun and emotional for them, that they could relate to many of each other's experiences, stories, emotions and struggles and that the discussions had been a great source of learning for them.

“We noticed that we had forgotten about ourselves; we worry about our husbands and kids. If I give myself a bigger space, that will benefit my family, too. My space is now bigger. This exercise really helped”.

“We have learned that it is ok to have some weaknesses; we have also learnt what our strengths are”.

“I liked it. It forced us to deal with taboos and unthinkable topics.”

“It showed us we need more knowledge about these issues...the SILC sessions taught us how to think about it in a different way.”

“It was a process of discovery”.

“An element of confidence developed”.

“I opened my eyes to see what is going on around me; previously I would only walk past”.

“We looked deep into ourselves and towards the end it was easier to bring it out. We explored ourselves”.

Awareness and Identity exercise samples

1. Exercise: First awareness of identity

Time:

40 minutes

Objective:

To develop an understanding of identity development

Material:

Picture cards

Proposed Method:

1. Ask the participants to take a couple of minutes and think about their first awareness of their sex, ethnic and religious identity. Explain that awareness does not mean knowledge of, but refers to the first time that they became aware of how they were in any way “different” or special because of these aspects of their identity, or when it started to hold a special meaning for them.
2. In a go-around ask the participants to state their responses.
3. Make the point that our identity is made up of many different aspects. These 3 are they key aspects that contribute to our identity here in Australia and this is what we will be discussing today.

Adapted from: The original source of this exercise is not known, however, the exercise has been adapted from an exercise commonly used for developing and understanding of gender identity.

2. Exercise: Picture Cards

Time:

25 minutes

Objective:

To initiate and enhance an awareness of one's identity and personality

Material:

Picture cards

Proposed Method:

1. Display a variety of picture cards on the table.
2. Ask participants to choose three picture cards that they think depict their personality best at this point in time or that say something about their personality at this point in time
3. Divide participants into groups of three.
4. Picture cards – select 3 cards each, groups of 3 and share.
5. Ask each participant to take turns telling people in their group why they have chosen the particular picture cards and what each picture says about her.
6. In the large group ask participants how they felt while doing the exercise, and if there was anything interesting they discovered about themselves or the group.

Adapted from: The original source of this exercise is not known, however, the exercise has been adapted from an exercise commonly used for identity development in groupwork.

3. Exercise: Human rights and women's rights

Objective:

To introduce the concept of human rights and the link between discrimination and specific rights.

Time:

40 - 45 minutes.

Material:

Butcher paper, markers, International Conventions (UDHR, CEDAW, Islam) slides and hand-outs

Proposed Method:

1. Ask participants to brainstorm on what the needs and rights of all people are.
2. Explain practical and strategic needs.
3. Ask the group what the sources of these rights are e.g., family, social rules, personal beliefs, international conventions, religion, etc.
4. Ask the group which rights they think are especially important for women, given the discrimination they face.
5. Introduce the UDHR and CEDAW and explain Australia's position on them. Introduce the Islamic concept of human rights and give out the hand-outs.

Adapted from: Local Action Global Change: Learning About Human Rights of Women and Children

4. Exercise: Gender versus sex

Time:

25 minutes

Objective:

To differentiate between sex (biological) and gender (socio-political) differences between men and women and emphasise the changeability of gender roles and responsibilities.

Material:

Picture cards

Proposed Method:

1. Ask the participants to brainstorm on what men generally do and then repeat for women.
2. Point out role differences between men and women ask the group to indicate which one of these differences were natural and could generally not be changed. Circle these roles.
3. Put up sex and gender chart and differentiate.
4. Explain that gender refers to socially assigned roles and expectations and, is, therefore, changeable by society and individuals. These roles are not written on stone and are often continued only because they are part of tradition and custom and not because they serve any purpose any more. In fact, very often they may actually be harmful to both men and women. Yet because these roles have continued for centuries they are considered almost natural and many people fail to see the difference between gender and sex as though they are the same things. Some people, however, are brave enough to challenge these social roles and be different, which simply proves that they are not natural and can be changed.
5. Ask the group to think of a couple of examples.
6. Explain to the participants that being able to differentiate between gender and sex is very important leadership skill because being in such a position means challenging old and existing attitudes regarding what is considered natural, the done thing. Leaders need to be able to do that for themselves as well as for the other women that they support.
7. Introduce basic gender concepts such as empowerment, gender relations, gender identity, gender roles, gender equality and equity, gender sensitivity, practical and strategic needs, productive and reproductive work, access and control of resources, etc.

Adapted from: The original source of this exercise is not known, however, the exercise has been adapted from an exercise commonly used for gender analysis in groupwork.

Example of responses during exercise on *personal power*

I feel powerless when.....

- I am not heard
- I am misunderstood
- I am unable to do what I want
- My needs are ignored
- I am unable to express myself
- I am pressurised into doing something I don't want to do
- I am unable to help someone I love
- I don't have enough money
- I cannot understand or communicate in the language people around me speak
- I cannot meet people's expectations
- I am very unwell
- I am not considered important
- I am angry
- I cannot manage my time
- When I am tortured
- I cannot meet or help my family overseas
- My culture and religion are misunderstood
- I am discriminated against

I feel powerful when.....

- I communicate effectively with people around me
- I am understood
- I am respected
- I achieve something
- I learn something new
- Someone asks for my help or advice
- I have money
- I express my needs
- I stand up for myself
- Someone praises or acknowledges me
- I am able to make a good difference in someone's life
- I overcome a difficult situation
- I make my own decisions
- I am able to go where I want on my own
- I feel safe
- I am treated the same as others
- I can manage my emotions
- I am healthy
- My community achieves something
- My choices are accepted by people I love.

Example of responses from exercise on gender versus sex

Men's roles

- Breadwinner
- Head of the house
- Decision-maker
- Be physically and emotionally strong and in control
- Protector/guardian
- Knowledgeable
- Taxi driver
- Outside work
- Maintaining the garden and house
- Wash the car
- Pay the bills
- Builder, renovator
- Have rights (human and religious)
- Manager/director
- Brave
- Be mechanical-minded
- Be a dad
- Disciplinarian

Women's roles

- Be a mum
- Be a wife
- Meet community's and family's expectations
- Housework (cook, clean, wash, etc.)
- Doctor, nurse
- Take care of children
- Breast feed
- Give emotional support to others
- Be strong (can't afford to be sick)
- Thinker, doer, organiser
- Donor - always give to others
- Provide sex to men
- Be a hostess
- Teacher
- Office personnel, e.g. secretary
- Customer service
- Cleaner
- Be beautiful

c) Skills and action

The third section of the workshop module focused on the development of specific skills and strategies needed in order to improve women's leadership and was, therefore, highly interactive. The first part allowed women the opportunity to learn and practice useful skills for themselves, such as effective communication. Participants learnt about communication skills at both theoretical and practical levels. This section started with an identification of the components and characteristics of good communication and led into practising communicating one's thoughts, needs and opinions in an effective manner as well as actively listening to others. This section also encouraged participants to increase their awareness of their socio-political surroundings by building their analytical skills.

The second part of this section provided opportunities for participants to think about and develop ways in which these skills can be used by them to improve the status of women in their communities. In this section, participants brainstormed on a range of individual and collective strategies that could be used in the community and identify the skills they would need to develop in order to implement those strategies. This part usually also involved the participants developing an action plan for themselves individually and collectively, consisting of a plan of activities or changes they would like and could realistically implement in the near future.

The main topics typically covered in this section were:

- Good communication
- Active listening
- Assertiveness
- Feedback
- Leadership styles
- Project development
- Leadership strategies – public speaking, organising events, mentoring, material development, etc.

Because of the high level of discussion, interaction and practical participation during these sessions, the participants both enjoyed themselves and learnt a range of skills during these sessions.

“How to be a good listener.”

“Assertive behaviour. It was not easy, but the exercises...made us really understand what that entails. It was brought more to life in that workshop.....I used assertive behaviour the next day with my boss!”

“I have learned to work as a team and to maximise the outcome.”

“I learned to listen to different points of views.”

“It taught us action planning.”

“I got a wonderful overview of how to plan and organise things for our own community.”

“We communicated much better after these 12 weeks.”

“We were pleased to see that leadership starts at home and goes on and on, and we want more.”

“We learnt that there are no boundaries and that we have a goal that we can look forward to.”

“I have learnt not to say, ‘that’s just the way it is and accept it’ - now I know that we can change things.”

Skills and strategies exercise samples

1. Exercise: Active listening

Objective:

To demonstrate and identify common listening barriers to communication

Time:

40 minutes

Proposed Method:

1. Ask the participants what they understand by active listening and note down their responses.
2. Present the active listening material and guidelines as well as common listening barriers to communication.
3. Divide participants into pairs and ask them to take turns and talk about difficult situations that they have faced and how they have dealt with them (4-5 minutes each). Ask participants to listen to their partner keeping in mind the active listening guidelines.
4. When both participants have finished ask them to give each other feedback on their listening skills. Allow 5 minutes for this.
5. In the large group ask participants to discuss what they learnt about their own listening skills, what they found difficult and what their strengths were.

Original exercise

2. Exercise: Identifying Strategies for Community Participation: *Information Collection and Dissemination*

Objective

To help participants identify and conceptualise awareness-raising strategies that they can realistically implement in their own communities

Time:

30 minutes

Proposed Method:

1. Ask the group to think of all the issues that women in their community face (identified in an earlier exercise) and to brainstorm on possible leadership strategies and ways of dealing with these issues at various levels (attitudinal change, systems, local, issues, global, etc).
2. Add to the list if needed ideas such as awareness-raising through information collection and dissemination, material development, media, public speaking, community events, mentoring, networking, community representation in public forums, advocacy, lobbying on specific issues, etc).
3. Record all the responses on butcher paper and discuss the possibilities of their implementation, making the point that strategies can be undertaken at various levels: community, institutional, policy, etc.
4. Make the point that each leader may define for him or herself what areas she's interested in, what her vision or goal is and what strategies she can or wishes to use or which is best-suited to the issue.
5. Discuss the importance of effective information collection and dissemination for awareness-raising.
6. Ask participants to brainstorm on the various ways of information collection and the steps involved.
7. Highlight the uses to which such information can be put such as pro-active awareness-raising or maintaining an information resource base.
8. Ask participants to think about times in their lives when they received new and valuable information on something important to them and identify strategies that were used to impart this information.
9. Through a discussion extract various awareness-raising strategies that may be employed, their advantages and disadvantages, etc.

Original exercise

Cultural and linguistic diversity

This methodology also takes into account the cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds to which Muslim women belong. In this regard, great care has been taken to ensure that the workshops cater to the specific needs and contexts of the women. Thus, the workshops were run in languages the participants were most comfortable in, and the material used was tailored to the participants' cultural contexts. This responsiveness to cultural and linguistic diversity allowed for higher levels of group ownership and relevance and, therefore, greater participation.

Sophisticated awareness of the complexity of cultural, linguistic and sectarian differences cannot be overstated. It is essential that workers have an understanding of not only cross cultural practice but also of the various cultural, religious and ideological views within the Muslim communities to women's leadership.

Required skills and experience for trainers

Above all else, trainers/facilitators must have a commitment to women's leadership and empowerment, the equality of genders and the right of women to equal opportunity. This is not a program for those faint hearted about women rights!

An understanding of socio-political issues and structures, particularly those related to race, gender, and social justice is critical. In addition to this understanding, a commitment to the principles of social and gender justice, human rights and empowerment is essential. The issues being addressed here can be quite thought-provoking and the participants are likely to have strong opinions regarding many of them. The trainer needs to have clear stances on critical issues, yet be careful that the discussions remain healthy and useful and not turn into destructive arguments among the participants or with the trainer herself. An understanding of the link between self-awareness and social change is critical for the trainer. This is particularly likely when addressing sensitive societal issues which may be difficult for some participants to discuss initially or about which participants and/or the trainer may have strong, deeply entrenched opinions.

It is important that facilitators have a high level of self awareness, both of their strengths and limitations, as well as attitudes and biases. It is not possible to facilitate the complicated process of self-awareness in others if one has limited self awareness themselves. It is vital that one is able to meet the same challenges that one sets for the group; if group participants are asked to change and move beyond their boundaries and understanding of the world so too must you as a facilitator.

Workshops based on concepts similar to SILC and with similar populations require a level specific expertise in and commitment to 3 key areas: skills, social awareness and personal awareness.

An experience of facilitating participatory, activity-based workshops, particularly with minority groups, is essential. Therefore, classroom or seminar trainers, trainers with experience in community information provision and group workers are not automatically suited to facilitation of this kind unless they have additional experience or skill. Participatory facilitation also requires a good understanding of group dynamics and a

skill in facilitating a good analysis and critical thinking, yet taking care that the participants are not pushed too far beyond their abilities or comfort zones. This can often be a difficult balance to achieve. In the face of a conflict of opinion between the trainer and the participants, the trainer needs to be able to assertively express his/her own opinions, yet respect the participants' opinions. The trainer also needs to accept that the participants' opinions and attitudes cannot and need not always be altered, even if the trainer perceives them to be harmful.

The table below outlines the key requirements.

Skills	Social awareness	Self-awareness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience in working with women from disadvantaged and CALD communities • Demonstrated ability to facilitate groups using an interactive, experiential and participatory methodology • Demonstrated ability to be flexible and creative • Demonstrated ability to facilitate critical analysis and discuss on complex personal and socio-political issues within a group setting • Excellent interpersonal skills • Assertiveness • An understanding of the principles of personal development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An understanding of and commitment to personal awareness, social and gender justice, human rights, community development and empowerment • A rejection of approaches that undermine the above principles • An understanding of cross-cultural issues and sensitivity to diverse cultures • An understanding and knowledge of the community welfare sector and services in Australia • An understanding of the key frameworks of relevance to the target group (e.g., international conventions, human rights, Islamic principles, etc) • An understanding of the barriers affecting CALD women's socio-political and economic participation • An understanding of the dynamics and complexities of domestic violence (for leadership against domestic violence workshops) • An understanding of safety issues for victims of domestic violence (for leadership against domestic violence workshops) • An understanding of educational and career issues and pathways available to adults in Victoria (for leadership in education and skill development workshops) • An understanding of parenting issues (for leadership in parenting workshops) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic self-understanding • Ability to talk about oneself • An ability to take feedback • An ability to critique oneself • An awareness of one's own strengths and limitations • Respect and sensitivity towards others and their opinions • An awareness of one's own attitudes and biases • Experience of having personally participated in groups/training in general and specifically in at least some of the following: personal growth/support group, human rights, community education and/or gender justice

In order to ensure that these facilitation and conceptual needs were met within the SILC project, SILC ran a 3-day facilitation skills workshop for a range of community workers. The workshops especially aimed to train bi-lingual community workers who could then run workshops in community languages.

6.3. Phase Three: Community Delivery and Integration

Muslim women's network

The implementation phase of the project ended with the establishment of a Muslim women's network. The network consists of women who have participated in the SILC workshops and aims to support women in developing and running a variety of community education and capacity development activities, such as organising events, developing radio programmes, public speaking, developing information packages, etc. The network may meet regularly as a structured group or may meet from time to time as the need arises as an advocacy group to discuss specific issues or projects

Community speaks

As part of Muslim women's on-going community participation, some SILC graduates spoke about a range of Muslim women's issues at a variety of public forums. The speakers selected their own issues based on what was meaningful to them or to the groups they were speaking to, such as education, empowerment, community participation, parenting, violence, human rights, etc.

Community radio

Four radio programmes, focussing on issues of relevance to Muslim women were developed and aired on the radio (SBS and Radio National). These were based on the experiences and outcomes of the SILC workshops women participating in the SILC groups and the structure of the SILC project.

Informal support to Muslim women

Support at an informal level is also offered to the SILC graduates who become involved in various community projects after the SILC workshops. All SILC graduates are welcome to approach the SILC team any time for advice, information or help in work related to the advancement of Muslim women that they may be undertaking. Thus, for example, some women may contact SILC for help in developing a community project; others may need information for a research study, while others may simply want guidance on how to apply for a job.

6.4. Phase 4: Project Evaluation

The fourth phase of the SILC project is the evaluation phase. Although individual workshops are evaluated throughout the implementation phase, the collective findings, impact and implications of the overall project assessed, analysed and documented during this phase.

On-going evaluation

There were three main workshop evaluation and learning assessment strategies that SILC has developed and trialled with its groups during its implementation phase:

Session evaluation form

This is handed out at the end of each session and asks the participants for feedback regarding the effectiveness of the session. This form has been used with all SILC workshops in which the participants were literate in English, and has been a useful way of gauging the general response to each session and to the overall workshops. However, while this form clearly reflects the participants' impressions and response to the workshops, it does not provide an in-depth understanding of the actual learning and impact of the workshops.

Workshop learning forms

This form is handed out at the end of the entire workshop and aims to assess specific areas of learning and their effectiveness. This is an extensive form, available in English, Arabic and Turkish and has only been used with groups that have sufficient time towards the end of the project. The form was used primarily for the initial workshops when the workshop format, content, methodology and activities were being trialled for the first few times in order to assess their effectiveness. This form gave the SILC a good understanding of how useful the participants had found each area covered in the workshops as well as the methodology used, thus consolidating the format of the workshops. However, because it is an extensive form and takes substantial time to complete, its usage after every workshop was found to be unrealistic.

Informal feedback

Feedback has also been routinely sought from the participants at an informal level throughout the workshops. Each workshop session opened with reflections of the last session, including anything the participants had learnt or found interesting, etc.

Final Evaluation

The final SILC project evaluation was carried out against a set of quantitative and qualitative indicators of achievement. A part of the evaluation involved an external facilitator who was brought in to evaluate the effectiveness of the workshops through a focus group discussion with some of the groups. These discussions were conducted in English, Arabic and Turkish. The focus group discussions were conducted without the original workshop facilitators present so that the participants were able to openly and honestly give their feedback. These groups were found to be very effective in assessing the effectiveness of the workshop format, content and methodology, as well as the participants' learning and the impact of the workshops on their lives. Despite their effectiveness, focus groups are not always a readily available evaluation option as they require funds for the hiring of an external consultant, additional time and space for the discussion and an interpreter if necessary.

In addition to the focus groups, the final evaluation process involved:

- a review of all SILC documents and material,
- verbal (focus groups) and written (forms) feedback from workshop participants,
- feedback from project staff, co-facilitators and reference group members,

The quantitative outcomes of the project included 13 leadership workshops ranging from 18 to 24 hours of groupwork, 212 women who registered as participants, of whom 162 completed the workshops. Five radio documentaries and interviews were aired. There were 18 community speak sessions conducted and one network meeting held. The qualitative outcomes ranged from women feeling more confident about themselves; women making changes in their family lives to improve family relationships to women beginning to play a more active role in their communities through organising events, participating in trainings, enrolling in formal courses and undertaking voluntary work.

The evaluation process clearly demonstrated SILC's achievement of the basic outcomes it had set out at its inception, but that it has had a broader impact on Muslim women's lives. At the same time, the evaluation report also outlined key limitations of the project, such as limited time and a lack of resources for translating information into community languages, etc. The capacity of the SILC program to further develop into other forms of training has become apparent throughout its implementation. Family relationship development and labour force training are just some of the key areas SILC has the potential to be applied to, with immense benefits, we believe, to Muslim women, their communities and to the Australian society.

6.5. Phase 5: Model of Practice

Remaining consistent with our commitment to capacity building, the model of practice was developed by reviewing the SILC process from its very beginning. Alongside the evaluation process, this allowed us the opportunity to reflect further on our work and be reflexive about capacity building work in the future.

Interestingly, this document has come to demonstrate our own commitment to capacity building of the community and welfare sector and building the foundation for future Muslim women to extend and redevelop their own programs.

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