

AFRICAN-BACKGROUND WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN A SEWING ENTERPRISE: Exploring the emerging cross-cultural partnership with Green Collect and identifying the next stages of this collaboration

**REPORT WRITTEN AND SUBMITTED TO GREEN COLLECT, SEPTEMBER 2010
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following report is based on a study 'Sewing seeds; exploring African women's involvement in sewing enterprises' examined the experiences of African-background women who took part in a sewing course run by the not-for-profit organisation, Green Collect between February and June, 2010. The researcher interviewed Green Collect staff and sewing enterprise participants to assess the African-background women's experiences and to gain feedback about Green Collect staff's experiences and goals. This report provides information about the various stake-holders' experiences in order to assist Green Collect to continue this enterprise development in an inclusive, workable and culturally sensitive manner.

PART 1: AIMS AND METHODS

The **aims** of the research were as follows.

- To assess the women's experiences and provide feedback to Green Collect
- To help promote the positive development of the women's emerging partnership with Green Collect and:
- To provide guidelines that will assist Green Collect to continue this enterprise development in an inclusive, workable and culturally sensitive manner.

By discussing these matters, the project makes a contribution to research on refugee women's experiences of socio-economic marginalisation and inclusion.

The method

The study was designed to assess the participation experience and outcomes among the Sudanese, Somali and Ethiopian women who took part in the inaugural sewing course run by Green Collect. The sewing course commenced in February 2010 and ran until June 2010 (however the course has been offered again, from July to December 2010). The four key questions were:

- How have participants experienced the course?
- What do they perceive to be the main advantages and challenges of their involvement?
- What changes need to be made to improve the course for future participants?
- What would the women like to do with the skills they have gained?

The method included

- Gaining ethics approval from the researcher's academic institution (Victoria University) to conduct the research
- Consultation with Green Collect staff responsible for establishing and running the course

- Selected and strategic semi-structured interviews with the three Green Collect staff involved in establishing or running the course.
- Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with the women who participated in the course

The African-background women who took part in the research were asked to indicate whether they would like to be interviewed individually or in groups and whether they consented to the interview being recorded. Of the six African-background women who took part in the course, only one wanted to be interviewed individually (because of time issues) and only she granted permission to record the interview. As such, the remainder of the sewing group participants were interviewed in small groups (one group of two and one of three). The dynamics of the small group size of the focus groups (3-4 including the researcher) worked well and it was possible to generate open and friendly communication between the participants and the facilitator.

The researcher took detailed notes during these focus group discussions. These were subsequently written up as field notes. In the case of the individual (one on one) interviews (three with Green Collect staff and one with a course participant) consent was given to record the interviews. These were then transcribed for the purposes of analysis. The following report on the findings is based on these interviews and focus group discussions. While I have used the real names of Green Collect staff, I have employed pseudonyms for the course participants in order to protect the women's confidentiality (inasmuch as this is possible given there are only six of them). In the following discussion, I weave the participant women's responses with reflections from Green Collect staff. It should be noted, however, that the African-background women's voices are emphasised to ensure their experiences of taking part are conveyed to Green Collect staff.

PART 2: BACKGROUND AND DESCRIPTION OF THE SEWING ENTERPRISE AND PARTNERSHIP WITH GREEN COLLECT

In order to develop a clear understanding of the Green Collect sewing enterprise it is necessary to understand the roots of this partnership and to introduce some of the key stakeholders.

For some years, Centacare (a Catholic organisation with a base in Footscray, that works with refugees in the western region of Melbourne) has been running sewing groups among Somalian, Sudanese, Ethiopian and Burmese women. Volunteers attended the groups in order to teach sewing skills. However, because of the number of women attending the groups and the limited and voluntary nature of the skills training provided, the women in the groups rarely felt they were learning new sewing skills. Also, because the women were usually accompanied by pre-school aged children, it was also difficult for them to focus on mastering new skills. Nevertheless, the Centacare sewing groups provided an important avenue for the development of refugee women's social relationships.

According to Halima Mohamed (who was an employee of Centacare at the time, and now also of Green Collect), while the Centacare groups provided an important forum for women in these communities to meet on a regular basis, some of the women sought the opportunity to develop their sewing skills in order to earn an income. According to Halima the capacity to earn an income is very important in terms of the women's relationships with their husbands

and families and affects their sense of belonging and self-esteem in the 'new context' of Australia. As Halima put it:

Because when you are financially free... you can help your family, you can look after you children and you can deal with your husband. Most problems come from the lack of appreciation for women. They do lots of thing at home. The deal with the children, they cook food, they clean, they go shopping, and it's very hard work but men most of them they do not appreciate that.... So when she is financially free and the man is financially free, and they are all coming together, and they like each other (and) they have children, the house is more stable.

In her role as a community liason officer, Halima met with Janet, an employee of MacKillop Family Services, another community service operating out of Footscray. Janet, who has links with Green Collect (which also has a shop front and office in the nearby suburb of Yarraville) felt there might be an opportunity for such skills to be provided through Green Collect - a not for profit social enterprise that was established in 2002. Because Green Collect has access to donated materials which they seek to recycle as part of the organisation's commitment to waste reduction, it was also thought that this would provide an affordable source of materials for the women.

It is important to note that in their communication with Halima and Janet, the women from the Centacare groups emphasised their desire to learn new skills for the purposes of income generation. This goal was very much supported by Halima. Halima also talked about the changing roles of African women in Australia, commenting that this change was largely driven by economic necessity. When I asked whether African men felt threatened by women working, Halima's response was:

Yes, some of the man can feel that. But that is now ending because they understand if they do not have support from their wives they will not reach [i.e. get] anywhere. When we first come here, men were very, very jealous when women tried to get Jobs. But when they saw the hardship which they were facing when they have only one income in the home, they really, really are opening their eyes that they need their wives' support.

Later, she added, 'some of the ladies who I have worked with before they have really... really... and their life is... sometime I feel very sorry for them. But when they get a job, they [i.e. the husbands] change totally. He is welcoming, he is happy to see his wife getting some money, he is appreciating what she is doing for the home'.

Interestingly, however, Halima also pointed out that all of the women in the current inaugural group 'were very strong mums'. She said: 'They are very strong and they insisted to learn something, so men cannot do anything if they want that. They cannot do anything'. This suggests that those women who participate may be more able to do so because of either personality characteristics, supportive husbands or a combination of these two factors. It is therefore worth reflecting on whether there are women who may experience barriers to taking part and what might be done about supporting these women to do so.

In August 2009, Janet and Halima met with the co-director of Green Collect, Sally Quinn, to discuss the possibility of teaching sewing skills through Green Collect. Sally was enthusiastic about the idea and so, after meeting with some of the interested women, submitted an application to the City of Maribyrnong, for a small community grant to commence the project.

The Maribyrnong City Council awarded the small grant to Green Collect and the sewing course commenced in February 2010 with funding for three months. Later, Green Collect gained a grant from Citipower and were thus able to extend the program until June 2010. Since this time, Green Collect has continued to fund all costs of running the course. As part of this, since November 2009, Green Collect has employed Halima as a Community Liaison worker. In this role with Green Collect, Halima averages 4-5 hours per week. She is employed in an ongoing position.

The Sewing Course

Since February, the women have met on a weekly basis (except during the school holidays) and at times when their children are in child care. There are two meeting times, one on Monday and one on Tuesday – arranged to accommodate the women's needs. Each group has three women in it but as there are only two sewing machines available at any given time, it is necessary for them to take turns using the machines. The training sessions were originally three hours in duration but at the request of the women were extended to four hours.

The sewing lessons are held in the Green Collect office at the rear of the organisation's recycled goods shop in Yarraville. This space (which is not particularly big) is also utilised in other ways – including for storage. The women learn from Erica who has considerable experience in cottage crafts and a degree in international development. Erica was employed by Green Collect specifically to teach the women and through her, they have learned to make items including bags, children's clothes and cushions. As noted above, the products are made using materials provided by Green Collect who source these from the public, via donation bins around Melbourne.

Given the women's emphasis on learning skills for income generation and because they want to pay the women for their time, Green Collect also employs the women to work in the shop. This happens on a rotating basis (i.e. each woman does her hours in the shop one out of every three weeks she is there attending the course). One of the main reasons this was done was because of lack of space and resources for three women to be cutting & sewing at the same time. While this means the women are gaining a small income and valuable retail and communication skills, time spent in the shop does take away from the women's sewing time.

During the year, the women have also earned some money though selling their products at a local craft market. This was encouraged by Erica because she thought it was a good opportunity for the women to interact with the community about their products.

When I met with the women in May 2010, they had been attending the training for four months. As noted above, to protect their confidentiality, I use pseudonyms when referring to the sewing course participants.

PART 3: WHAT THE SEWING COURSE PARTICIPANTS SAY

Why the women participate in the course

The reasons the women participated in the Green Collect sewing course include: the opportunity to learn new skills, the potential to earn a living using these skills, social connection with one another and with non-African Australians and the hope that, in turn, they will be able to teach sewing skills to others in their communities.

The women said they wanted to do the course because they were excited about the chance to learn new skills. Saadia, for example, said 'It's good for me, if I learn more and can make

money' and Luul concurred saying she had 'wanted to become involved [so she] could learn to sew and perhaps make money from it in the future'. Saadia said, 'that the ladies from Centacare sent [her] along like a test and said if it was good and she learned things, they would do it too. They wanted to find out whether [she] learned'. Ayan's response was similar. She said: 'I just wanted to learn, and then in the future I want to make money'.

The women's desire to learn new skills from which they might potentially earn an income existed alongside their appreciation of the opportunity to meet together and talk. Amina for example, said that 'it was good to meet more people and to have socialising opportunities' and Makeda said 'If I didn't join I wouldn't know anyone...'. This was supported by Saadia who said it 'gives me something to do in my life'. Ayan also mentioned the benefits in terms of her personal well-being, saying that it was good to attend because 'we sit there we work together, we talk, we have break, we drink tea and everyone says hi – hi, how is the family? We talk a few minute, very nice we enjoy and we meet there and learn something. Better than sleep, wake and all day, stay home'.

Erica supported the claim that the course was a source of social connection for both staff and participants, saying: 'Through lots of talking and chatting, we've got to know more of each other... That is very much ... one of the great outcomes, the friendships.

Referring to other benefits, Saadia also spoke about her husband's support of her participation in the course saying that he says 'it's good if you can learn'. He sees the value of it, she says and 'we try hard and go through transport difficulties because I can learn' (she catches two trains and a bus to attend the course). Ayan said her husband was 'happy', relating that 'he said "you know how to design, how to cut and in the future you do for you children and maybe you open shop." [He thinks] it's very good'. Ayan also added that her children were very impressed with the things she had made.

The benefits of attending were also made clear by Amina who said that when they went to the Centacare groups they were collected by a bus but that now they came independently by public transport because it was worth the trip and the money they spent on getting there. Amina also mentioned that it was 'encouraging' to be paid a wage for working in the shop and that they could then use this money to facilitate their own attendance at the course. Saadia was also very happy and proud to have earned her own money and related a story about using her first pay packet to buy things for her son. She said 'he was going on camp and this was my first time to earn money and I bought him things he needed. This was my first money and I told him that and he was very happy'. Saadia also said it was good to save money by buying second hand goods at the shop using money she had earned.

That the sewing lessons were important for the women in terms of their relationships with their husbands and families was also made apparent by Sally, the director of Green Collect who said:

what's been told to us is that when women have come home with money or shown this isn't, I'm not just sewing with my friends and sitting around but I'm earning money, it really then heightens the importance of the husbands supporting the women to actually come. [It] kind of elevates the husband's view of the women and her competency or productivity or worth even ... bringing money into the house even changes the dynamic between the husband and wife and that then has a flow on effect to even issues of domestic violence and control of whether the woman can make choices about where she goes and what she does and that this changing of dynamics of the woman having the ability to earn money, to bring money in, to meet the needs of the family really shifts the woman's place in the family. And that's quite a significant outcome.

The women also talked about their desire to teach others in their communities how to sew. This was especially important for Ayan who seemed to have a clear vision about passing on what she had learned. She said her idea for the future development of the course was to ‘teach another group ... because there are a lot of ladies, at Braybrook and Sunshine area. Ethiopian, Somalia, Sudanese - some they have ten children, they can work outside... maybe we’ll teach another group. Because a lot of women are interested.’ Later she discussed this in more detail, saying she would like to work together with Erica and the others who were taking part in the first sewing course, to bring her knowledge to all the interested women in these communities. She felt the African-background women’s participation was vital ‘because we talk same language’ and also that learning these skills was appropriate for women with ‘small children’ because they could work outside the home in ways which would not present too much of a conflict with their roles as caregivers.

The other women also felt that it was very important to transfer and share their knowledge with others, saying they wanted to ‘take information back to their friends at Centacare [sewing groups] and tell them ‘how easy it is to make something’. Halima wholeheartedly supported this goal saying:

And now we want to continue our training till we reach (the point where) these ladies can be instructors to other community and then they will go back to their community. Sudanese will go back to Sudanese, Ethiopian will go back to Ethiopian and Somali will go Somali and then they will give chance to understand more about sewing and how it can help the family.

New from old.

The fact that they were recycling was very important to the women. All of the women discussed their excitement about ‘learning to make new from old. Makeda said, for example, that through her participation she had ‘got the idea of not wasting old things’ – for example, rather than throwing something out, you could make a door snake with it – and that instead of buying something you could make something – rather than throwing things out’. She said now they women don’t throw anything out, but keep old clothes and other materials because they have seen what you can do with it. This was supported by Nadifa who said she loved that, for example, ‘from a pillow case you can make a bag’. Saadia and Luul said they had learned to donate clothes, rather than throw them away and that they too really valued being able to make new things from old, for example, they had used shirts and sheets to make cushions and sheets.

Sally picked up on this saying: ‘the women have really engaged with that aspect of it too, that this is great for the environment and how clever that you can use an old shirt! ... So ... I suppose that adds meaning and depth to the women’s experience as well.’ Halima, too, reflected that working in the shop and seeing a range of people buying second-hand goods had changed the women’s attitudes to doing so. She said the women noticed that even wealthy people bought from the shop and whereas in Africa they thought second hand was ‘no good’, ‘now they understand the reality – if you don’t, if you cannot afford a beautiful dress and you like to go to a wedding ceremony. What do you, where you could go? That place is the best. They understand more. Economically even, they are changing’.

A ‘course of cultural understanding as much as sewing’

The women also valued the chance to meet and talk with non-African Australians because of the opportunities this gave them to practice English and learn cultural mores. They said they had very limited opportunities to meet non-African Australians in the daily lives, with Amina,

for example, saying she ‘met the nurse at the maternal and child health centre’ but not really anyone else. The women gained the opportunity for cross-cultural interaction with non-African Australians in three ways, firstly during morning and afternoon tea times with Erica the sewing teacher and with other Green Collect staff members who come in and out as they are sewing, secondly, through being employed in the shop and communicating with customers and thirdly, through selling their products at the local maker’s market.

With regard to the first two, Nadifa said she likes working in the shop because she had learned good ideas about how to welcome and serve people and it gave her the chance of getting to know more people. This was supported by Amina who eloquently reflected on her sense of empowerment in her country of origin and compared it with her complete uncertainty about cultural mores in the Australian context. She said, ‘everyone feels like a king or queen when they are at home. But here, there is fear and embarrassment, fear of how you’re doing it. Is it wrong?’. She said she lived in fear of being ‘caught out’ and gave examples, saying for instance that ‘cleaning [what most Australians would call picking] your nose is normal in Somalia but here my children tell me it is not normal, people are not supposed to do it. Also, holding hands with ladies and ladies hugging in public is normal but this is not what happens here.’ Amina went on to reflect that she needed more opportunities to ‘work outside (the home) to get to know ways of being’.

Erica also reflected on this saying:

To come and to be part of the group, I’ve got the impression it’s very meaningful. It’s also a big step because with it comes a sense of risk taking, of trying something new, of going and being with people you don’t know in a circumstance that is unknown and different. There’s something in that that they have to take quite a big step but my impression of the women is that they can see what could be and that’s what makes them give it a go.

Part of what the women value about this cross-cultural interaction was being forced to speak English (because it was the only common language among all the women). Indeed, laughing about Erica’s insistence that they speak English during sewing time, Ayan said: ‘now we stop talking Somali and if it’s something difficult we ask Erika “Erika what that in English? What that in English?” Maybe she will teach English and sewing both of them!’.

Similarly, Nadifa said that even though they were very busy sewing there were some chances to talk and to practice English which was good. She said she tended to avoid non-linguistically connected people in her everyday life because of a lack of confidence with her English. This was supported by Makeda who said that practice speaking English with non-African Australians was very important and would help the ‘without doubt to do something in the future. We have a lot of talent and qualifications but have lost confidence’. Makeda added that despite ample work experience in her country of origin she had no confidence and was mortified at the thought of even answering a phone in English, so could not envisage doing many jobs here at this stage. She said she ‘wants to hide and gets hot when someone even talks fast’, because she feels so embarrassed.

In this context, Makeda reflected that when they sold their bags at the craft market they met a lot of people and it was good to have a chance to talk with people and to share their culture. This was supported by Amina who said it was good to meet more people and to have socialising opportunities. She said this gave her increased confidence, adding ‘maybe I can stand somewhere on my own ... I can be my own boss, start to run a business’. Ayan also appreciated the opportunities that working in the shop and selling at the market afforded,

saying: ‘people come to you and talk to you, like “Hi, how are you and how much is this”. We know how to deal with people and business.’

Sally also reflected on the fact that being part of the course opened up the women’s social world, offering them more than the opportunity to sew:

that was one of the things that was identified really early on was that these groups are quite isolated, that there’s not much connection with the broader community in Footscray or with shops or Local Government or cross cultural connection with the wider community, that the groups were quite insular. And within each group there was limited capacity, limited skill but limited resources, so if Green Collect can sort of facilitate ... some of that connection to the wider community with access to resources. And in this situation ... it’s the sewing instruction, it’s the materials, but it’s also the shop environment where a physical place where women can be and connect and engage with customers and our organisation as well.

The following comment also highlights her sense that the course provides opportunities for cross-cultural engagement and transformation:

the important work at this point of the life of the project, the sewing’s also really important but this work in terms of us being on a course, it could be a course of cultural understanding really as much as sewing. So those two things like you say need to travel together and I really hope that we get to the end of this and we have something stronger and more meaningful and have a more African way of doing it, then a Green Collect kind of white way of doing it yeah.

The emphasis on cross-cultural relationship building was echoed by Halima who spoke of the cultural differences between the women in terms of an electrical connection, powered by a positive and a negative charge. She said:

Where there is no contradiction there is no life at all, that what I believe. Because if we do not get positive and negative charge in this life now, we never get this light. But it is constructive contradiction. You said one word and the other person says, “no it is not like that” ... But what I believe is whatever happens it builds our ability to understand more how we can deal with things. And this is starting point and it has started beautiful and smoothly.

In summary, it is fair to say that all the women – whether from the white Australian or African-background ‘side’ of the cultural divide – were enjoying the opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and friendship afforded by the sewing groups.

Cooperative rather than competitive

Another key theme to emerge from the discussions with the African-background women was their preference to work together and support each other when it came to sewing and the possibility of earning an income from sewing. This was represented in several ways, but most importantly (in terms of thinking about where the enterprise development might go from here), it arose in discussions about whether participants would rather form a cooperative or sew and sell individually. Some of the women were passionate and clear about this. They said it was far more important to them to start their selling or a business in a cooperative and not competitive spirit. They seemed to feel that the ‘pressure’ was put on them to work individually – for example in terms of making a high number of things for sale at the market - and they felt very strongly that this was not for them.

They discussed their dissatisfaction and unease with the sense of competition they felt was created around the deadline of having as much as possible ready for market day. Amina said, for example, that the fact that ‘maybe I have one cushion and someone else has 7’ creates a

‘constant pressure to make an increased number of things to sell’. She said ‘you’re being told market day is this Saturday and [you] only have one or two cushions to sell and someone else has eight, it’s meant to be about learning’. This was supported by Nadifa who said ‘it’s supposed to be equal but we’re not the same’. They were very clear about the fact that on market day they want to share money from selling the products so the emphasis is changed to learning. According to Makeda, the pressure to make an increased number of goods for sale ‘stops you helping one another, whereas if I am cutting [the material for a pattern], I want to cut for both people not just myself’. Amina said: ‘I feel like I’m under constant pressure’. Because the pressure to produce goods stops the women from helping one another as much as they would like to, Makeda says she ‘prefers to sell to the shop, not a competition’, which is how they perceived the market day.

This was the case even for Ayan, despite her pride about the number of items she had made and the speed with which she worked. Nevertheless, she too wanted to ‘work together’ with the other women, saying ‘one person cannot do anything’. That the majority of the women preferred the option of working and selling cooperatively is also suggested by Saadia and Luul’s reflections about the differences between African and non-African women in Australia. Saadia said: ‘African women share everything, not like Australian or Egyptian women – who left this behind long ago. If I don’t have something, I can ask Luul, even money and she will give it to me and then when she needs something, she can ask me. Sharing is normal, when money is needed – give it’. Luul, who nodded her head during this exchange appeared to concur with this assessment.

Some difficulties

Some, but not all of the women experienced difficulties because of a lack of clarity. This was in relation to two main things, firstly the roles of people in the organisation and secondly, feeling unclear about the direction and future of the course and their participation in it. While there does appear to have been some lack of clarity about these matters from within Green Collect, this is understandable given that this was a pilot project for the organisation. It is, however, worth reflecting on the women’s reflections and sense of uncertainty in order to ensure the project addresses these matters in the future.

Some of the women reported a lack of clarity (and some associated dissatisfaction) around staff roles. This was particularly apparent in the context of a discussion about a conflict that had occurred between one of the participants and one of the staff members. It is not necessary (and probably more unhelpful than useful) to discuss the details of this conflict here in order to glean insight from it. Rather, it is important to note that the women were not sure who they should go to in order to have this conflict discussed and settled. While they ruminated that there was ‘one [white] woman’ they felt they were meant to be talking to when issues arose, they were not sure of this person’s name, nor how to get in touch with her. The women ultimately suggested that they would like me to communicate to Sally their concerns and desire to have this conflict resolved.

Sally confirmed that there were challenges associated with the resolution of conflict, saying:

Resolving conflict I suppose in a way that feels people are heard and valued and that it’s equal and that they have a voice and that their needs or understanding of the situation are heard and are as important as someone else within the organisation who might ... feel like they’ve got a more established place in the organisation. And is able to be more articulate in English and maybe is seen as having an official position, but how do we hear and respond to women’s concerns in ways that yeah are validating of their experience, understand their experience. So I suppose they’re challenges.

In her role as Community liaison worker at Green Collect, Halima is an obvious resource. She appears clear about her role. Indeed the following excerpt highlights that she sees herself as a mediator between the African-background women and Green Collect staff.

My role is to connect these women to the program we want because ... we are (from) the same culture and I know what, how we see things and I understand more than the ladies from the Green Collect staff ... and if there is conflict, cultural conflict and something happen I will be there, for the two of them.

Also important, however, especially in light of Sally's reflections on the need for the African-background women to 'have a voice', is Halima's sense that she represents the women. Halima said:

If they [the women] are not comfortable something from the Green Collect document or Green Collect and idea and what they believe or something like that, they are uncomfortable; they never tell if I don't discuss with them, so that what I do. I discuss whatever they are not comfortable with and I take their idea to the Green Collect and I explain and if they are happy we come together and we share.

Perhaps Halima's role, like those of other staff, needs to be clarified and clearly communicated to all participants at the outset of the project. It may be, for example, that as a paid staff member, she is perceived by the African-background participants, as unwilling or unable to 'criticise' her Green Collect colleagues.

In relation to the above-mentioned conflict, and seemingly extrapolating from it, some of the women also communicated their desire that staff *not* assume responsibility for matters (for example taking on 'management' roles) that [the women perceived] were beyond their job description. Thus, in summary, the participants' concerns reflected two sides of the same coin: namely staff not assuming responsibilities and staff assuming responsibilities that the women perceived as beyond the scope of their role in the organisation.

Overall, however, it is fair to say that the women are happy and confident about the partnership with Green Collect. This was summed up by Halima who characterised the relationship between the two groups in the following way:

The organisation is learning from the ladies and the ladies are learning form the organisation. And the other thing is we never stop observing what happening there and immediately taking action quickly whatever we see is not suitable for the group or for the place. We take our action so we are learning (from) each other. ...[Green Collect] are learning our culture, they are learning that how; the African women are so strong. And learning that if they get an opportunity they can reach their potential and be productive and the women are learning that Green Collect is doing its best to help the community and how they want to look how this people can come together and to do something together. And something else I like is that Green Collect they never take decision by themselves, whatever we take we take together, we discuss and whatever we decide together we do and that is a good thing because when you feel whatever you think is working you feel, very active part of the project and that is helping women a lot. They feel ownership of the place, whatever they do is belong to them.

Direction and purpose of the course

The other area of uncertainty for the women was the course itself. They wondered for example, about its primary purpose. This was evident in Makeda's reflection: 'I don't know their aim ... not quite clear what they're making this for, is it to learn, for the shop, what is

aim?’ This was echoed by Amina who said: ‘at the beginning we were told we would learn new skills. Then we were told we would sell to shop, then to market, we are not clear what plan is, who we are sewing for’.

While the women in the pilot project’s uncertainty is unfortunate, it precisely illustrates the value of trialling this course while simultaneously allowing time for reflection and feedback of the kind embodied in this report. Green Collect, far from being remiss in this respect, have created opportunities for the women (both participants and staff) to meet outside sewing time in a day of reflection and dreaming about possible future directions for the women and their sewing. This day was facilitated by people outside the organisation. Sally reflects on this in the following passage:

So we’ll do quite a thorough evaluation together, we’ve had one session already that we ran quite deliberately out of sewing time, in a different venue that was really really great. And I suppose seeing the importance of those facilitated times outside of the sewing and so we’ve linked in with Women’s Health West and Sally Camilleri who ran a session for us and also Marjorie Quinn from RMIT developing those relationships with kind of experts, outside of our organisation I think is really important. That we’re getting professional development or we’re getting input from people who are I suppose new to both of us. So Sally is really keen to keep being involved and give her time to helping us grow, so I think the role of people outside of the organisation is important. People who are experts, who are in touch with best practice around cross cultural things, but also around enterprise development. So that’s clearly something that we’ll keep building into the project, so I think time away from sewing is important and that exploring the possibilities of the different ways people could sew for an income, there are a number of different options. So already we’re identifying some of those and it might be different for each woman whether they sew, we’ve helped develop them so that they can, with their resources, so they can sew at home and sell through their own small business to the shop or to other shops or to take it elsewhere. Or whether they want to stay as a group and have the I suppose the support and the identification as an enterprise or whether they want to be Green Collect employees who come in and sew on site and are paid an hourly rate. And so each of those have different advantages but my sort of vision and I think the vision for the women is to be a co-operative in their own right.

In addition, by encouraging and allowing the research for this report to be conducted, Green Collect have built in a useful mechanism for feedback in order to improve the course and determine future directions.

Some women also discussed their uncertainty about how long the course would run, saying they ‘were told it was 6 months’ but had ‘heard some discussion’ among staff suggesting that it was likely to be extended. At the time of interviewing, however, the length of the course and the probable next steps were unclear to participants. This suggests the need for clearer communication between Green Collect staff and the participants. Even if this communication were, by necessity, only to have involved communicating uncertainty (because of a lack of information about ongoing funding etc), this would have been preferable from the women’s perspective.

The above discussion also served to clarify the women’s preference for focusing on the development of their sewing skills (rather than selling their goods or learning about marketing) if the course was of a short duration (such as six months). Makeda said: ‘if course is 6 months, we only want to focus on learning [sewing], not on selling’. If there was more time down the track for further skills development, they would be happy to learn marketing and other business skills once they had developed sufficient confidence as sewers. Saadia and Luul seemed bewildered when I asked what they felt they would need to learn in order to turn their sewing into a business – reflecting only that ‘when finished [they] would know what else

they needed'. This reflects their general satisfaction with the course which was also evident in their sharing that they were happy with the space, the teacher and the hours and could not think of any ways to significantly improve the course for future participants. Ayan was similarly satisfied with the course and the teacher, but added that when they were finished learning sewing skills, it would be good to 'have support learning about running a business'.

More time on mastering each product

It is also worth noting that some of the women found the focus on selling (particularly as this occurred around market day) premature. They said selling was not important for them at this stage and that they wanted the focus to be on learning. In this vein, they discussed their preference for the course to be split into two sections – the first on sewing, and then once they have mastered the necessary sewing skills - on the skills associated with income generation from sewing. They perceived rushing towards the latter as compromising the former focus on learning sewing skills. As such, they wanted the course to be longer in order to feel they were adept in each task before they moved on to the next one (for instance mastering cushion-making before moving on to bag-making). Ayan, Saadia and Luul also felt they would prefer to meet more than once a week in order to have more time for sewing.

Erica also reflected on the need to think about the timing and pace of the course, saying: 'once you sit down and start sewing, three hours can go really fast. We've just extended it to four hours. There's not much chance for the women to do homework or to do any sewing at home so where you were on Monday is where you start off the next Monday'. This was echoed by Ayan who was hungry for more opportunities to sew. She appreciated the extension of time from three to four hours, saying:

Now it better because before we finished one o'clock and straight away we leave at one o'clock. But now sometime we go until one thirty or forty. Or when we finish [i.e. until they are finished sewing]. Because when you are sewing time finishes quickly. When you are interested, when I check the time I say "oh my God already its one o'clock, time is finished".

Unsurprisingly, in response to the question of what might be done to improve the course, Ayan said: 'more time and more machines'.

Some additional concerns about time and place

Some of the women (namely Makeda, Amina and Nadifa) had other minor concerns including a sense that the space in which they worked was too small and used for too many other purposes. This was especially significant in terms of time wasted on preparing the room prior to being able to sew. These women mentioned that when they arrive to attend the sewing lessons, the table is covered with clothes when they come in and they always have to 'clear space and move materials before getting started' and that this takes precious time away from sewing. They also said that there were not enough machines. For example when Halima attends as part of her support role in the organisation, there are only two machines and three women available to sew.

Despite their concerns about the small amount of space the women appreciated the opportunity 'to get out of the house' and had no interest in holding the sessions in their homes. Nor, on the other hand, did they want to relocate to one of the staff member's homes. This seemed to be about a lack of confidence in entering the homes of white Australians with Amina saying 'the shop is better because there are no worries about the rules' regarding how to behave.

As indicated in the above discussion about having the time to master each product, the women also felt that the course needed to be longer if they were to gain confidence in making each item. Nafida said for example, ‘we need to learn more. We have learned cushions and door stops and want to know more things’. This was echoed by Amina and Makeda who said that they feel that they move on too quickly, i.e. before becoming completely confident to sew something alone. For example, they want to become familiar with cushion-making – then be completely confident, then move on to something else. But they move on and do ‘different sewing’. They had cushion making, then school holidays, then the market and this felt a bit ‘on the go’. They also said working in the shop means they miss out on sewing lessons that day and that this meant that ‘someone always misses out a lot and falls behind’ and then ‘Erica has to repeat herself’. Amina said that the feeling of falling behind was awful and contributed to the sense of sewing being a ‘competition’.

The women also said they wanted to learn to sew more complicated things, including for example, ‘adult clothes’ (Saadia). Saadia also explicitly said she would like the course to be longer and Luul mentioned her preference to meet on a twice weekly basis, as did Ayan.

PART 4 RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

On the basis of the above discussion and *in relation to developing the sewing course*, it is recommended that Green Collect:

- clarify the roles of staff, including what each person is *and* is not responsible for;
- clarify the details of the course, including how long it will run and whether it should be divided into several components (for example, sewing, finance and administration skills, marketing skills) OR involve only sewing;
- consult with the women about the possibility of employing them in the shop at times which are separate from their sewing lessons;
- consider extending the sewing lessons to twice a week (in consultation with the women involved);
- resolve the question of whether a new location is necessary. This will be especially relevant if the groups are to involve more than three women at a time and;
- consider purchasing more equipment, including a machine that can be borrowed and taken home on a rotating basis.

In relation to *developing the women’s capacity to earn a living from sewing*, it is recommended that Green Collect:

- engage a third party to consult with the participating women and Halima to determine the women’s goals and preferences for developing their sewing into an enterprise
- once the women’s goals and preferences have been clearly understood, work in consultation with the third party, to determine whether and how Green Collect can facilitate this vision and to what extent (i.e. clarify appropriate role for Green Collect and projected timing of Green Collect involvement)
- assist the development of this process by resourcing women appropriately, whether in direct connection with Green Collect or through the organisation’s contacts in the wider community

Summary of Research Findings

The research shows that the partnership between Green Collect and African-background women from Melbourne’s western suburbs is characterised by a high degree of enthusiasm,

mutual benefit and respect. While there have been some minor conflicts, none of these appear to have derailed the project in any significant or ongoing way. Moreover, where difficulties have occurred, Green Collect staff have shown significant commitment to resolving these for the sake of the project's long-term health. Taking the overall satisfaction levels of the African women as a gauge, there is much to be learned from the way Green Collect has gone about setting up the project in consultation with members of the African community and according to the needs of the women themselves. A high degree of flexibility, openness and willingness to adapt to the women's expressed goals and desires suggests the organisation's commitment to ensuring the development of an enterprise that prioritises the women's needs, rather than its own agenda. On the other hand, this flexible and open-ended approach has contributed to some uncertainty among participants, including about staff roles and the direction and purpose of the enterprise. Nevertheless, given the many positives and the organisation's willingness to incorporate an 'African way of doing things', the outlook for this cross-cultural enterprise is bright.

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