

## **“Diverse Women Influencing the City of Ottawa” workshop**

*by Suzanne Doerge, Project Coordinator, CAWI/IVTF*

In September 2004, a small part of a big dream was realized in the City of Ottawa. The efforts of the City for all Women Initiative (CAWI); une ville pour toutes les femmes (IVTF), to bring to life the 1999 International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government took an important step forward. Women from diverse backgrounds came together in “Diverse Women Influencing the City of Ottawa” workshop to share and learn new skills on how to influence local government.

For many women, government and the work of politicians seems far-removed from their daily lives. Government can be alienating and difficult to influence. Many women, especially women living in poverty, aboriginal, visible minority and immigrant women, do not see themselves reflected among the leadership of the City and question if those that are elected really understand or represent their interests.

Gender equality is good for women, it’s good for men and it’s good for local government. Increasing the number of diverse women in leadership and decision making of local government keeps the needs of women and families in view, as the city develops policies and services. Women have particular insights to bring in helping city leaders to envision a quality city, because women see what is needed as they care for their families, volunteer in their communities and provide and access services.

It was with this understanding that women took in the nuts-and-bolts of lobbying – learning how City Council works, how to ensure that issues of importance to women, their families and communities are heard, as well as, how to build support among their own networks and the broader community.

At the end of the workshop, women visited the Council Chambers where they sat in the chairs of the Councillors. One by one, 40 turned on the microphone to say boldly in English and French, “My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and my views matter”. The diversity of first-languages, income levels, races and cultures around the Councillor table helped us to envision a time when the city government will reflect the full-diversity of its population.

“It was important because we realized that our views matter and there are ways to make them known”, Jacqueline Nyiramukwende, leader of the Rwandan women’s community.

Read on for more information about this innovative initiative...

# **City for All Women Initiative (CAWI)**

## **Initiative; une ville pour toutes les femmes (IVTF)**

*Promoting an inclusive and women-friendly Ottawa that respects diversity.*

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### **What is the City for All Women Initiative?**

It is a one-year project, funded by Status of Women Canada, that aims to identify ways of ensuring that women and men in Ottawa have equal opportunity to make and influence decisions about our city.

### **How did it come about?**

In October 1999, Ottawa's Regional Council joined with cities around the world to adopt the IULA Declaration of Women in Local Government. This is a commitment to ensuring women and men have equal opportunity to how our city is governed. The Council established a Working Group on Women's Access to Municipal Services. In that project, women from diverse backgrounds worked in partnership with the municipal staff and politicians to identify ways of ensuring women's access to services.

### **Why focus on all women being included?**

In the previous project, the Working Group learned that women, especially women of marginalized groups, are less likely than men to be in positions where they can make and influence decisions. The project discovered examples of City activities that are of interest to women but there was no comprehensive gender lens being applied to City practices. Our city can become a better place to live when the ideas of women representing diverse backgrounds and concerns are taken into account.

### **Why is this important now?**

We live in times in which city governments are being asked to do more with fewer resources. Given that women continue to be the primary caregivers in families today, women have important perspectives to bring to these difficult decisions. Given the rapid change of Ottawa's population, women of ethno-cultural groups will be left behind without specific strategies in place.

### **How will we do this?**

As we renew this partnership between women's organizations and the City, we invite you to become involved in promoting a gender-inclusive city that enables all women to join with men in shaping our city.

- Listen to the experiences and concerns of diverse women across the City.
- Learn from what has worked in other cities in Canada and globally.
- Look at current practices and ways of operating in the city government.
- Identify gender-inclusive strategies and ways of ensuring their implementation.