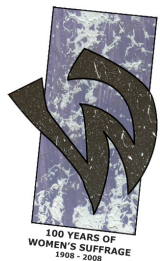


*Elleni Bereded-Samuel*



100  
YEARS OF WOMEN'S  
SUFFRAGE  
1908-2008



*Reflection and Celebration*





*Elleni Bereded-Samual*



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RMIT University Students from School of Architecture and Design  
& School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning

Lecturer/Project Manager: Fern Smith

Facilitation: Liam Fennessy and Soumitri Varadarajan

Project Partners: Women's Electoral Lobby and League of Women Voters Victoria

Adjunct Professor Judith Smart background material on women's suffrage in Victoria

Shawn Callahan of anecdote for opening question techniques

Meg Minos for background material on bookbinding

Jackie Ralph for transcribing

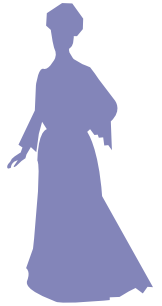
Interviewee: Elleni Bereded-Samual

Interviewed by: Emma Brelsford and Diana White

Interview of Elleni Bereded-Samual edited by Diana White

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*I would like to dedicate this to all women fighting for equality*

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Sarah Costanzo



# Introduction

The 24th of November 1908 marks the day when the Legislative Council passed a suffrage bill enabling women for the first time to vote in state elections of Victoria, Australia. For the centenary celebration Liam Fennessy and Soumitri Varadarajan, RMIT Industrial Design Program, Kerry Lovering Women's Electoral Lobby, Sheila Byard Victoria League of Women Voters Victoria and artist Fern Smith worked in partnership; facilitating RMIT students to produce handmade limited edition books of twelve significant women in Victoria.

Four students Emma Brelsford, Sarah Costanzo, Cara Jeffery and Diana White conducted twelve two hour interviews with Gracia Baylor, Elleni Bereded-Samuel, Ellen Chandler, Angela Clarke, Ursula Dutkiewicz, Beatrice Faust, Pat Goble, Professor Patricia Grimshaw, Mary Owen, Marian Quartly, Associate Professor Jenny Strauss and Eleanor Sumner.

The students had never interviewed, edited nor produced handmade books it is a fantastic achievement with in a twelve-week semester. Their background work informed from in-kind assistance of historian Adjunct Professor Judith Smart; expert in narrative techniques and director of Anecdote, Shawn Callahan; writer, artist and bookbinder Meg Minos.

For all of us who have participated in the project it has given us time to reflect on the achievements and persistent struggle toward gender equality in Victoria. What shines through these twelve wonderful interviews is the strength, persuasive insistence for equality within our community and their huge generous hearts.

Fern Smith 2007

*Elleni Bereded-Samual*



Victoria is a great place and I love the west of Melbourne and its people. This is where I live now. It's where I feel at home and have a real sense of place. Through my work with Victoria University, as Community Engagement Coordinator, also as a Commissioner of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, and with SBS Television, I've had the opportunity to mix with and know many, many communities. You name it : Maltese, African, Vietnamese, Greek, Italian. I'll walk into a function and say: 'Hi, hi... hi.' I really feel that I belong. That my family belongs, as members of our community. People have to feel they belong to be able to contribute and to feel at home, that's most important. If people don't feel they belong, they don't get involved. They ask: 'What for?'

Before we came here, in 1991, my husband, Terefe Aborete, got a scholarship to study his masters in irrigation engineering in Belgium for two years. I followed him and I studied French and Dutch language and computing. Back home, in Ethiopia, the country was in turmoil, so we decided to stay another two years. After four years, the situation in Ethiopia got worse and worse. And worse. We came to the point of thinking that it's not a good idea to go back to Ethiopia. This time it was my turn to contribute more. I helped my husband to study his masters and I always had a dream of being a child psychologist. I was already a teacher and a journalist. Instead of doing further education roles, I said I would study psychology. We put in



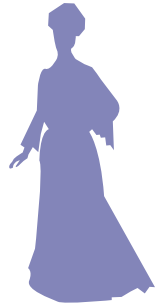
*Elleni Bereded-Samual*

our migration applications for Australia, Canada and America. Australia accepted me for a three-year scholarship.

We came together, and travelled straight from Melbourne Airport to Ballarat. It was February and minus 1 or 2 C in Belgium. When we arrived here, it was about 32°C. We arrived at Ballarat University. They gave us a house to live in, a big three -bedroom house, a weatherboard. It was beautiful; it was lovely but we were the only Africans living in Ballarat. The people were very welcoming, lovely, lovely people. My husband stayed home looking after our baby while I studied. I would leave in the morning and come back in the evening. If I missed my bus, I would have to take a taxi, very expensive.

But life became very difficult for a while. When we had to take our son for the first time to a childcare centre. A little boy bashed him, you know; he was playing with something. My boy was only seven months old, and had a big swollen head. I was in tears and I cried: 'This is horrible, I don't want to stay here!' We decided to keep him at home with my husband and stayed in Ballarat for another semester. It was very difficult. So we came to Melbourne. We stayed in Footscray. When we came to Melbourne they said that Melbourne would be the best place for us to live. It's a city with public transport and everything, and there were many other Ethiopians who lived in the flats

*Elleni Bereded-Samual*



at Footscray. We were on an international student scholarship. Life was very difficult. Once we knew that we couldn't go back, we applied for asylum.

We had our interview, and we were very fortunate that we had a good lawyer. Our lawyer looked at the lady who was interviewing us at immigration, and said to us: 'God, why on earth did we get this person?' The immigration lady interviewed us separately and was very strict, like she did not believe us. What we said was: 'you know we have a lot better life back home. We have a good position, we have got well-to-do families, we are not here for a piece of bread. If she doesn't believe that we are not genuine, she can send us both back home and we can be killed or arrested.' It was difficult.

At the time I was eight- months pregnant and had my little baby with me, crying, but the immigration lady didn't even care. As a woman you would think she would be caring and sympathetic. Having your belly out here and a baby. I felt very humiliated. We were sitting there being interrogated. I said: 'This is their country and they have to make sure who ever comes here is genuine'. I understand that. She's doing her job. She wants to get the right answers; but at that time, I didn't think that way. I told her: 'This is a true story, whether you like it or not, this is what happened'. One person can decide on someone's life. That is what I look back on and ask: 'God, how many people have to go through that?' One person can change your life. After six months,



*Elleni Bereded-Samual*

we were accepted. We were very happy. In Belgium, if you see a Nigerian across the street you say 'hi'. You exchange your telephone number. You have a coffee, if you have time. But what's going on here? I was trying to talk to people, say hello to them. They would look at us and turn their back. They don't say hello to us. We ask people: 'Why don't people say hello to us?' They say: 'Oh, they might think you are Eritrean or Somali, or Oromo'. I said: 'What does it matter?'

### **'Have a baby back home and you'll be treated like a princess.'**

Have a baby back home and you'll be treated like a princess. Here? It was really hard. Hospital was hard, staying at home was hard. You have to make your own living. Your husband has to work as a taxi driver. He has never done that before. You think: 'Is that my life?' Driving a taxi, always he comes home and says this is terrible. The life we come from, if you are middle class, you can afford to have someone to clean the house, someone to cook, someone to look after you. So it was really hard at the beginning but we were lucky that we could speak English. We were able to communicate with other people and learn to navigate our way in the system.

We started attending a local church. We got to know people so we have some networks: a group of people we meet every month from the church. We organised lunch-



*Elleni Bereded-Samual*



es, about four families with their kids. We end up being friends and the kids call them auntie and uncle. We still have that connection. That gave us an opportunity to get into the wider community. There were people in that community who don't want you to be there but there are some people who really embrace us. One of the ladies from the church told me about an administration position. I applied for it and was accepted: my first job in Australia. While I was doing that job, I saw an advertisement for a story-telling project that was funded by African Council and Maribyrnong City Council. Because of my background in journalism I was interested in doing it. I went for the interview. The project was for all of Africa. I was surprised. How do you put all Africa in one basket? It's like putting Europe in one basket. I said to them: 'If you allow me to work on this, you have to allow me to change some of the stuff to make it manageable. I'll be more than happy to do the Horn of Africa, which is Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia.' They rang and said we are going to be guided by you on this project. I got the job. My husband said: 'Are you sure that you want to do this?' I said: 'I'll give it a go because I'm really, really upset about the community not talking to each other without knowing who you are.' I developed the project. Then I contacted the leader of an existing Eritrean women's group. She used to be a fighter back home against the Ethiopians, but I didn't know that. I rang her and said: 'I would like to meet with you because I'm working on this story telling project and this is a good opportunity for us to work together.' She was not sure what I was talking about. She asked: 'Why



*Elleeni Bereded-Samual*

are you doing this? Why do you want to work with Eritreans?' I explained to her. I said: 'Don't try to trust me now. We'll get to know each other and then you make your own decision. This is a job for me, and for you to make my job easy I need help. For you to get a job, you need me, so let's work on this.' I door-knocked to get women involved.

At the first session, the Eritrean was sitting here and the Ethiopian there and I was sitting in the middle. What am I going to do? I speak a little bit of their language, the Eritrean language. I'd say hello to them. They were welcoming, lovely people but still they've got that reservation. At first the groups started arguing about what stories to tell. It took three sessions to agree. I tried to explain to them that we live far away from home. We've got kids and we'll have grandkids. Do you want to pass hatred to your children and grand children? Does it help them? We already have a name that we are refugees, illiterate and poor. All the wider community know about us is that we come from a very poor country. Why don't we show them the other side of our community? Our kids in class will get up and say: 'I have a story to tell. I am someone. I am from this background but I am Australian. This is my story.' So they can share that and be proud. A gorgeous, gorgeous lady got up and gave me a big hug and said: 'Young lady, you are right. We are going to do that.' And they follow her.

*Elleni Bereded-Samual*



We started the project - adulthood stories, marriage stories, arranged marriage and childhood stories, what games you played as a child. We found even the two Australian ladies - an artist and the centre manager - shared a childhood game, jacks. We do ring, ring a rosy but in different languages. There is a lot of commonality as women we share. As a child we share; as a human being we share. It is fantastic because people want to stay there and chat. At the completion of the project we invited dignitaries to the launch of our story-telling project in Sunshine. We were so proud that we had a printed story. At the launch, the Victoria University Community Studies co-ordinator approached me and said she was very impressed at how I managed to bring the community together. We had about 27 women aged 22 to 65. She asked: 'What's your plan for the younger women? Would they be happy to go to TAFE?' I said: 'If there is any opportunity, why not?' She said: we've got money and we'd like to fund your program. I was so excited. So I put the submission together.

**'The only way to make a difference in society is by educating people. If you educate the women you educate the society'**

I taught the women communication and computing. I had a couple of meetings with the teachers to see what they expect and how they communicate with the women. I was their cultural support worker. We sent them to a placement for two weeks, dif-



*Elleni Bereded-Samual*

ferent areas, in the community services area. When I send them to a placement, I'll look at whether they'll get any opportunity to work there. Victoria University looked at this as a model. They employed me and used this as a model with other communities. They created a community partnership officer position for me and I was the first African employed at the university. I also got a part time job offer at Centacare, for two hours a week as a Community Development Worker. So I accepted, and became the first African worker at Centacare too. Now that organisation has eight workers to work with the refugee and humanitarian entrants. I still do Marriage Education work on Monday evenings with mainstream community.

The only way to make a difference in society is by educating people. If you educate the women, you educate the society. That's the way I believe it works. If she can look after their family, she can look after herself; she can look after her community and her society and be a good contributor. These women who participated in the program have been fabulous, very outspoken, very intelligent women. They were able to encourage their husbands to go back to school, to study. My engineer husband couldn't get a job, so I encouraged him to study. He did a postgraduate in Education, a Diploma in Secondary Teaching.

My position as a community partnerships officer was, of course, to give course advice.

*Elleni Bereded-Samual*



I have to keep up with changes in the university and get to know about TAFE and higher education courses and pathways. One thing I was really struck with was when people come to you; they don't come with just educational issues. They bring a lot of baggage with them. They get to know you. They trust you; and open up about what bothers them in life. I'll go home and worry a lot about that person. The only way to be able to handle this is to have a counselling skill. I went back to school to do a postgraduate in counselling. Things were happening in the community because of the refugee history. People lost their status, people lost their profession, and people lost their belongings and the roles change. The women work and the men stay at home. It's hard. I was the first African in Victoria who did counselling, but as a woman men don't feel comfortable to come to me. So my poor husband decided to study counselling, too, which he is still practising. We did that because there is a need in the community.

### **'Things were happening in the community because of the refugee history'**

The Horn of Africa Communities Network we started together has grown now. Victoria University gave us a house and we've got different programs. We have a youth group. The new youth centre was set up. We work in partnership with different organisations.



*Elleeni Bereded-Samual*

We build up the profile of the community and the way we work is 'from the bottom up' - grass roots, service providers and government. We get them around the table, and talk about the issues through networks. We set up a mediation group, where people in conflict could go for help to settle issues. That way the people in the mediation would be able to sort it out before it gets too far. Culturally, it's only men who do mediation. So we did research at Victoria University about Horn of Africa women's voice in mediation. It was really fantastic. The women could be paid for the research they were doing - be acknowledged for the work they were doing. The women still meet, see each other every so often.

The Federal Government has to work on education issues, especially with the refugee community, when people come to Australia. You can imagine someone was born in refugee camp, grew up in a refugee camp and comes to Australia. They do a six-month course in English language and, then fit in Year 10. It's too much to ask of a young person. They go into the class but they can't fit in. The other kids are talking in a different language. They don't understand. They get frustrated, walk out and end up on the street. We have got a lot of issues, a lot of kids in juvenile justice. There should be a policy. They should do something about this because it's really important. Otherwise, for the coming generation who have been here for the last three or four years it will be a big, big burden in ten years time.

*Elleni Bereded-Samual*



I want to see a difference in women's lives – women's issues, women's equality, for them to have a fair go in work places. There are some work places that don't employ women because they are going to have babies. They don't have to tell you that. You apply and they ignore you. If we don't advocate for ourselves, for others, we won't be able to achieve anything. It's not like I'm favouring one over the other. You know, as women it doesn't matter where we come from. We always have got some bias that we share. I have learnt that there are a lot of barriers, not just from western culture, but also from your own community. You come as a refugee, a woman. You need to feed your family but also you have to work three or four times harder just to be seen as equal.

Childcare is an issue; housing is another issue, proper housing and aged care. The community is aging. For most communities including the Africans, there's no ethnic based aged-care service. The problem is, when they get older, they lose the language, and the English they learnt. They go back to their original language. Two years ago, I developed a program for the Spanish community to train aged-care workers who speak Spanish so that they would be able to work in the aged-care services. Racism is another issue. Sometimes we try to play down the signs, but when you look at it, its racism.



*Elleeni Bereded-Samual*

Politics. That's where you can make a difference; get a voice, in this country. Political engagement depends on the individual and the background the people come from. It's hard for refugees from the countryside who have never been to school. Apart from saving their life and having bread on the table, it's hard for them to think about participating in politics and other things. But those who are educated, if they get the opportunity, they are more than happy to participate. But nothing encourages them to participate. We have to learn the language so that we can be active participants of a society. It's not only for the country; it's for them, too. To be able to vote, to work, participate – to be able to voice the issues – they need the language.

My university is a leading member of a growing and diverse community, encompassing a broad range of cultures and people, including a large migrant and refugee population. I give advice on engagement with communities generally and especially with CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) communities, to ensure the university is as well placed as possible to support them and to broaden its own capacities and capabilities in relation to community engagement. I work in collaboration with others across the university in initiating, framing and implementing strategic engagement projects. Victoria University takes its community leadership role seriously, and has already completed a number of successful initiatives involving communities from diverse backgrounds.



*Elleni Bereded-Samual*



In my work as community engagement coordinator at the university, where people come from countries where there is no trust of authorities, it's hard for them to build that trust. Community engagement and the way I deal with communities is really hard. The trust doesn't build overnight. But once they trust you, you've got a mutual partnership with them. You are able to build on that partnership, sometimes through their leaders, sometimes through the women's groups.

**'I love the work I do! I love the people who work with me too!'**



# Final Notes

Elleni is the Co- founder and Committee of Management member of The Horn of African Communities Network. She managed to bring Ethiopian, Eritrean, Somali and Sudanese communities together which are traditional enemies. Elleni was appointed as a Commissioner for Victorian Multicultural Commission. In 2006 Elleni was appointed as Board of Director of Royal Women's Hospital, and 2007 appointed as a Chair of SBS Community Advisory Committee. Elleni was one of the recipients of the Victoria University Vice-Chancellor's Citations and Award for Outstanding Engagement with CALD communities in Australia. She also received Victoria's Premier Awards for Excellence in Multicultural Affairs –Education and Prime Minister International Year of Volunteers Award. Elleni's name has been included on the Victorian Honour Roll of Women also on 2006/07 "Who is Who Australian Women" among 6000 remarkable women in Australia. Elleni works at Centacare Catholic Family Services as Marriage Councillor and she also completed her study at Victoria University Master's in Education. Elleni is married with two children, Gabriel, 13 and Rediete, 11.

Photo taken from website <http://www.virwc.org.au/about/committee/index.php> with the permission of Elleni Bereded-Samual



