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Submission to the Multicultural Framework Review

Harmony Alliance welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Multicultural Framework Review. The submission addresses key issues within Australian policies and systems from a gender perspective. It proposes solutions with a focus on the impacts on migrant and refugee women's experiences and outcomes in Australia.

About Harmony Alliance

Harmony Alliance: Migrant and Refugee Women for Change is one of the six National Women's Alliances supported by the Australian Government to promote the views of all Australian women and to ensure their voices are heard in decision-making processes.

Harmony Alliance's purpose is to provide a national, inclusive, and informed voice on the multiplicity of issues impacting the experiences and outcomes of migrant and refugee women and to enable opportunities for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds to directly engage in driving positive change.

The Harmony Alliance membership comprises over 180 organisations and individuals representing and/or working for the advancement and inclusion of migrant and refugee women. We acknowledge the diversity of experiences of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds and recognise the inherent value of each person of all backgrounds, genders, ages, social standards, sexual orientations, or religions. We promote the principles of dignity, equality, autonomy, non-discrimination and mutual respect.

COVID-19 Lessons, challenges, opportunities and the way forward

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a significant challenge to health systems all over the world and exacerbated the vulnerabilities faced by migrant and refugee communities. Beyond access to the health system and COVID-19 vaccination, Australia's response to the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the necessity to incorporate the needs, challenges and differences of migrant and refugee communities in public health responses and policy design.



In the context of global crises, many countries, including Australia, decided to provide free COVID-19 vaccine access to migrant and refugee communities. Free access to vaccination, however, did not guarantee its uptake or accessibility. A key challenge for COVID-19 vaccine uptake and over the COVID-19 pandemic – especially in relation to restriction measures – was the mismatch between official messaging and the (mis)information reaching out to migrant and refugee communities and structural barriers to access and be connected into the health system due to the inability of many to access Medicare.

Working closely with migrant and refugee communities and improving engagement through tailored communication strategies was crucial for the success of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout and recovery of the COVID-19 impacts.

The lessons drawn from the COVID-19 pandemic and the COVID-19 vaccine rollout are transferable to other health crises and can potentially set the bases for responsive and flexible systems that ensure access and inclusion for all.

- Tailored and translated messages have the capacity to effectively communicate information to the most vulnerable cohorts of the community and build long-lasting trust and authority.
- Developing tailored and translated messages requires considering the following:
 - Literacy and health literacy levels
 - Particular needs and experiences of the communities
 - Diversity within the communities, including age, gender, socio-economic factors, religion, location, and migration status.
- Digital and non-digital communication strategies and outlets should be balanced to reach community members with different communication needs and ensure inclusion.
- Working with bilingual/bicultural workforce and points of authority within communities to assist public responses through information provision and dispelling misinformation and disinformation, with a view to building trust.¹

Migrant and refugee women in leadership roles

Migrant and refugee women bring highly valuable skills and experience to the Australian workforce. Despite evidence showing that ethnic diversity in executive teams leads to more profitability,² migrant and refugee women in Australia face systemic barriers and structural disadvantages that prevent them from fully participating in the Australian workforce and advancing their careers to reach leadership roles in the public and private sector.

¹ Harmony Alliance, SETSCoP, Migrant and Refugee Health Partnership, Migration Council Australia. (2022) [Supporting COVID-19 Vaccination Program rollout to migrant and refugee communities in Australia](#). January 2022.

² Hunt, V., Prince, S., Dixon-Fyle, S., & Yee, L., Delivering through diversity, (McKinsey & Company, 2015)



Migrant and refugee women are often excluded from leadership roles regardless of their skills or experience. In some cases, this is explained by informal barriers such as gender and cultural biases.

The Australian Public Service Commission released a research note that offers some insights into employees from CALD backgrounds. 59% of employees in the Australian Public Service whose first language is not English are women, but only 2% of senior levels (SES) employees come from a CALD background.³

In the Australian public sector, there is a lack of inclusive and equitable leadership strategies that promote and foster the value of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds in leadership roles.

Racism and discrimination

A multicultural Australia should guarantee human rights such as security, housing, public health, right to work, right to public health, medical care, social security and social services, among others. Australia's policies and systems cannot meet these rights for cohorts such as migrant and refugee communities. For example, the health criteria under the Migration Act 1958 (Cth) make it extremely difficult for someone with a disability and their families to migrate to Australia permanently.⁴

It is clear that racism in Australia is a longstanding issue that affects Australia's capacity to achieve social cohesion. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Harmony Alliance's members have raised an alarming increase in racist attitudes and attacks, especially against Asian Australians and other ethnic and religious communities.⁵

Eliminating racism requires reviewing structures, policies, and practices that contribute to perpetuating racism in Australia and addressing drivers of racism, such as the promotion of negative racial stereotypes in the media or racist attacks in sports.

³ Australian Public Service Commission. (2023) [Understanding our workforce Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in the Australian Public Service](#). January 2023. Research note 13-22.

⁴ See for example: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/30/world/asia/migrant-disability-australia-new-zealand.html>

⁵ Harmony Alliance (2021). [Migrant and Refugee Women in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Impact, resilience and the way forward](#). February 2021.



Inclusive policy and systems design

Achieving inclusion requires a strategic and holistic government response that recognises the importance of including the most vulnerable cohorts in society – including migrant and refugee communities – in policy and systems design. Policy and systems must include mechanisms and be tailored to reflect the needs, concerns, preferred approaches, languages and cultures of multicultural societies. If the objective is to create a multicultural society where vulnerable cohorts are not excluded, we need systems that engage them in decision-making processes. In making more inclusive policies and systems that are able to provide equal opportunities, we ensure a more equal and inclusive society.

This inclusive policy and systems design should consider the following approaches:

- **Intersectionality:** should be incorporated in all spheres of policy and practice. The intersectionality theory recognises that systemic power and privilege cause multiple layers of discrimination and entrenched social inequality.⁶
- **Community-led and co-design:** Change is achieved when communities are actively and equally involved in the issues that affect them. It should be recognised that community members have valuable insights and experiences that will inform and improve policy design and development. By adopting a community-led and co-design approach, we ensure that determined needs are met and that preferred approaches are used, fostering respect and self-determination. The community-led and co-design approach should be embedded from the early stages of policy design to the latest stages and reviewing processes to check that outcomes have been achieved.
- **Strengths-based:** is proven to provide more inclusive outcomes to individuals and communities. This approach should be consistent and in agreement with the communities.

Recommendations

- Sets a vision of a multicultural Australia in close collaboration and inclusive of all communities.
- The Australian Multicultural Framework embeds a human-rights-based approach where Australia's policies and systems respect and work towards inclusive participation in decision-making processes, non-racism and non-discrimination, equality, transparency and access to information and services.
- Embed the principles of intersectionality and gender equality.
- Create an independent body to oversee the framework implementation and advice for a whole government approach.

⁶ Harmony Alliance (2020). [Position Statement on Intersectionality](#).