



HARMONY ALLIANCE

MIGRANT & REFUGEE WOMEN FOR CHANGE

Care and Support Economy Taskforce
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Submission in response to the Draft National Strategy for the Care and Support Economy

Harmony Alliance welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Care and Support Economy Taskforce on the Draft National Strategy for the Care and Support Economy (the Strategy). The Strategy brings an opportunity to build a responsive care and support economy for all Australians.

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 on 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, and to enable opportunities for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds and recognise the inherent value of each person, of all backgrounds, genders, ages, abilities, social standings, sexual orientations, or religions. We promote the principles of dignity, equality, autonomy, non-discrimination, and mutual respect.

Key recommendations

- Embed a gender and intersectional lens in the Strategy to ensure more equitable outcomes for migrant and refugee women.
- Develop culturally responsive services that reflect and respond to Australia's diversity.
- Develop additional policies that protect migrant workers and address risks of exploitation in the Aged Care Industry Labour Agreement.
- Ensure a diverse and inclusive workforce that meets the unique needs of migrant and refugee communities.



Migrant and refugee women in the care economy

Australia's care and support economy has been recognised as the most rapidly growing economy in terms of demand and workforce.¹ It does however face structural and longstanding issues that compromise its future capability and the security of its workforce.

It is envisaged that one of the future key issues of the care and support economy will be that demand can outgrow the provision of services if labour shortages and retention are not resolved.²

The care and support economy is a feminised sector with lower wages than male-dominated sectors. Lower wages are explained because women's work, such as care, has been traditionally undervalued.³ Other characteristics make this economy less attractive to workers, such as casualised and insecure work, poor career pathways and limited professional development.

Migration, and in particular migrant and refugee women, has been a key contributor to the care and support economy and labour shortages in Australia. The Strategy shows that 31% of workers in disability and other care, 35% of workers in Early Childhood Education and Care, and 53% in Residence and Aged Care, come from migrant backgrounds.

The Strategy also sets migration as one of the solutions to the labour shortages that the care and support economy has long been experiencing. Filling labour shortages through migration has been the preferred alternative in high-income countries to meet their population's care demands.⁴

Although there is a lack of comprehensive data, there is clear evidence that most of the care workers from migrant backgrounds in Australia are women with higher formal qualifications than their Australian counterparts and hold temporary visas.⁵

¹ Australian Government. Draft National Care and Support Economy Strategy 2023. Care and Support Economy Taskforce. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/draft-national-care-and-support-economy-strategy-2023.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ See for example: Workplace Gender Equality Agency. Submission to the Senate inquiry into Gender Segregation in the Workplace and its impact on Women's Economic Equality. March 2017. https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/WGEA-Submission-Inquiry-into-Gender-Segregation-in-the-Workplace_0.pdf

⁴ World Health Organization. Women on the move: migration, care work and health. 2017. <https://culturaldiversityhealth.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Culturally-responsive-clinical-practice-Working-with-people-from-migrant-and-refugee-backgrounds-Jan2019.pdf>

⁵ RMIT University, UNSW Sydney, The University of Sydney, University of Toronto. Markets, Migration & the Work of Care. [Fact sheet] <https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Migrant%20Workers%20in%20Frontline%20Care.pdf>



These characteristics expose the need to address the vulnerability of migrant women working in these occupations and the potential deskilling process they have encountered while migrating to Australia. Deskilling processes are known in the international migration literature, as the situation in which migrant workers occupy jobs that do not correspond with their qualifications and experience and disproportionately affect migrant women.⁶

The Australian Government has announced an Aged Care Industry Labour Agreement, which aims to provide sponsorship options to migrant care workers with an option for permanent residency after two years of work experience. While this seems a good option to address labour shortages, there are potential risks of exploitation and low wages that require the development of further protective policies. Experience shows that temporary visa holders in low-paid and low-skilled jobs or with onerous conditions linked to their visas – such as sponsorship visas – experience higher levels of exploitation.⁷

Migrant and refugee women face different layers of discrimination based on intersecting drivers of inequality that overlap and compound each other. Applying an intersectional and gender lens in migration policies would offer a nuanced understanding of how migration affects individual women, their experiences and outcomes and shape more equitable policies and systems.

Culturally responsive services and workforce

Australia is a multicultural nation. Currently, 29% of people in Australia are born overseas.⁸

Access to essential care and support services such as childcare, aged care or disability care determines individual and family social inclusion. It is known that specific characteristics or attributions, such as gender, ethnicity, migration, disability, race, or economic status, play a key role in access to social inclusion and services.

Despite the diversity of the Australian workforce, migrants and refugees often find it difficult to find culturally responsive services that can respond to their specific needs.⁹ The Strategy necessitates strategies that ensure culturally responsive services in all care and support economy sectors.

⁶ See for example: International Organization for Migration (IOM). Crushed Hopes: Underemployment and deskilling among skilled migrant women. September 2015. <https://publications.iom.int/books/crushed-hopes-underemployment-and-deskilling-among-skilled-migrant-women>

⁷ See for example: Migrant Workers Centre. Lives In Limbo: The Experiences Of Migrant Workers Navigating Australia's Unsettling Migration System. https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/mwc/pages/592/attachments/original/1638857151/20211118_MWC_Conference_Report_FINAL_UPDATED_Dec6.pdf?1638857151

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics. Australia's Population by Country of Birth. 2022.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/australias-population-country-birth/latest-release>

⁹ Migrant and Refugee Women's Health Partnership. Culturally Responsive Clinical Practice: Working with People from Migrant and Refugee Backgrounds. January 2019. <https://culturaldiversityhealth.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Culturally-responsive-clinical-practice-Working-with-people-from-migrant-and-refugee-backgrounds-Jan2019.pdf>



Providing culturally responsive care and support services needs a respectful and sensitive approach to different cultures and specific circumstances. This involves responsiveness and empathy to people's needs, values, migration journeys, languages, and communication preferences.¹⁰

Providing culturally responsive care and support services that are person-centred requires a comprehensive understanding of intersectional factors that shape access to services, such as age, gender, language, or socioeconomic status. These factors will vary for different communities and persons.¹¹

Structural barriers that sustain unequal treatment to certain groups also play a key role in the accessibility of services. Understanding these barriers is key to improving equity, care quality and outcomes. For example, having information about services available only on websites will place a structural barrier to older people who lack digital literacy or people in remote areas who lack internet access. Similarly, having information about services only in English can be a structural barrier to migrants with low English skills or older migrants who have lost their ability to speak English.¹²

Delivering quality care to people from migrant and refugee backgrounds requires workers to adopt culturally responsive practices and use competencies that allow them to work and communicate effectively with them. Utilising a bilingual and bicultural workforce across industries can be a practical option in the care and support economy with a significantly diverse workforce.¹³

Recommendations for a Bilingual and Bicultural Workforce.

- A bilingual and bicultural workforce strategy is developed, recognising the current bilingual and bicultural workers and the need to increase their numbers to meet future demands.
- Data on demographics is collected to support workforce development and updated over time to capture the changing needs of communities. Data collection allows for better planning and tailored approaches.
- Bilingual and bicultural workers are engaged meaningfully in developing strategies to strengthen the impact and recognition of their contributions.
- Strategies recognise potential risks and enable mechanisms to minimise them.
- Bilingual and bicultural roles are meaningfully recognised and supported and are offered career development opportunities.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.