A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO IMPROVING EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES OF WOMEN FROM MIGRANT AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS IN AUSTRALIA

Promoting meaningful participation in the workforce by women from migrant and refugee backgrounds produces a win-win situation – boosting workforce performance while improving quality of life for individuals.

We know that diversity in the workforce, both in terms of gender and ethnicity, improves organisational performance.

Women from migrant and refugee backgrounds have valuable skills to offer workforces. These include different ways of looking at the world, flexible thinking, access to wider networks, and cultural and linguistic skills.

A study by McKinsey & Company found that companies leading on executive-level gender diversity were 27 per cent more likely to outperform their peers in longer-term value creation. Companies with a strong mix of ethnic diversity in their executive teams were 33 per cent more likely to outperform their peers in terms of profitability. [1] Moving beyond tokenistic appointments and towards a critical mass of diverse representation (approximately 30 per cent), has also been shown to improve companies by boosting divergent thinking.[2]

We know that work is a critical activity in people's lives – shaping identity and increasing engagement in society.

Participating actively in the workforce increases self-confidence and facilitates a sense of belonging. For migrant women, the workplace also provides an opportunity to practise English, develop an understanding of norms and cultural practices in Australia, build local networks, and increase standing in the community. Employment affects financial security. It can help to reduce a woman's isolation and to build independence. This is particularly important, as it can decrease vulnerability to family and domestic violence.

Yet, women from migrant and refugee backgrounds continue to fall behind our peers when it comes to employment outcomes.

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[1] Hunt, V., Prince, S., Dixon-Fyle, S., & Yee, L., *Delivering through Diversity,* (McKinsey & Company, 2015).

[2] Monllor-Tormos, M., & Wiley C., "Board Gender Diversity in the STEM&F Sectors: The Critical Mass Required to Drive Firm Performance", *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies,* Vol 25, Issue 3, pp. 290 – 308.

Whichever way we slice the data, we find that employment outcomes are lower for women from migrant or diverse backgrounds.[3] The unemployment rate for women who have migrated to Australia sits at 6.29 per cent, compared with 5.40 per cent for all Australian women and migrant men. Similarly, the labour force participation rate of women who have migrated to Australia sits at 66.95 per cent, compared to 68.53 per cent of all Australian women and 78.94 per cent of migrant men. These statistics make clear the dual barriers faced by women from migrant and refugee backgrounds over and above our female non-migrant and male migrant peers.
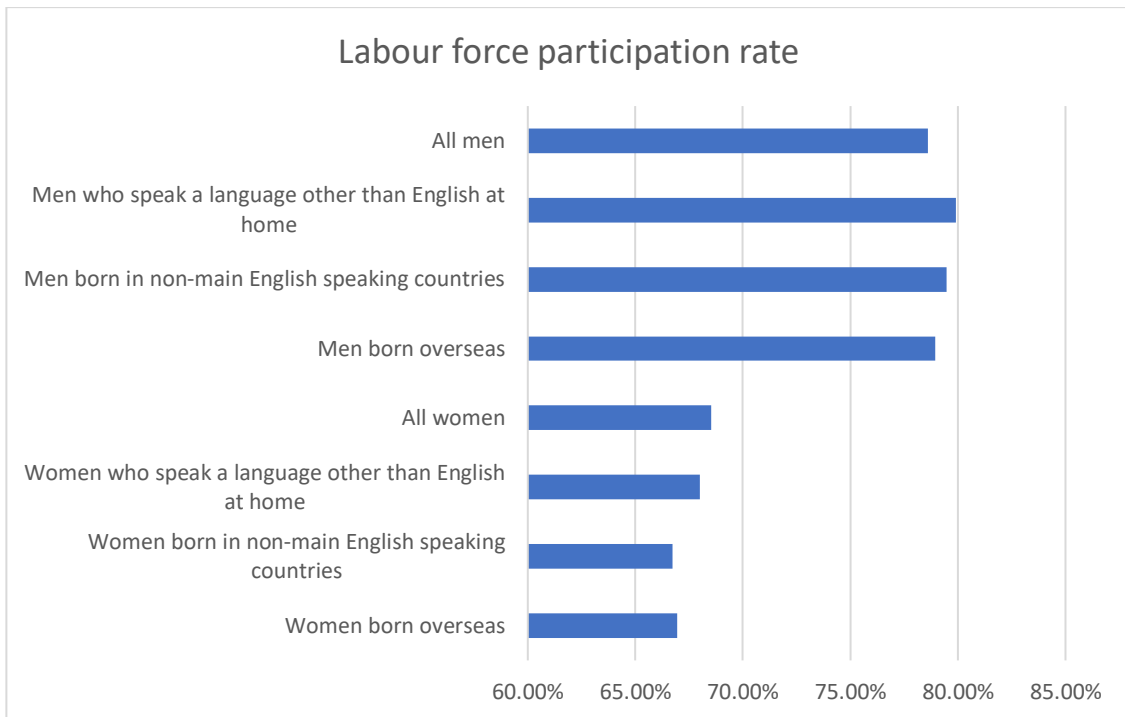
It is clear that there are significant challenges to overcome in order to improve employment outcomes for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds; yet, there are also significant opportunities for employers and for the Australian economy if we succeed. This is where this strategic approach comes in.

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[3] The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) defines the CALD population mainly by country of birth, language spoken at home, English proficiency, or other characteristics (including year of arrival in Australia), parents' country of birth and religious affiliation. This paper has provided data on labour force participation rates and unemployment rates of women born in non-main English speaking countries (Main-English speaking countries are defined as the main countries from which Australia receives, or has received, significant numbers of overseas settlers who are likely to speak English – Australia; Canada; Ireland, Republic of; New Zealand; South Africa; United Kingdom; England; Scotland; Wales; Northern Ireland; and United States of America) and women who speak a language other than English at home. This is designed to give an indication of the experience of CALD women; however, it does not accurately capture the full gamut of Australia's CALD population.

Unemployment rate

Category	Unemployment rate
All men	
Men who speak a language other than English at home	
Men born in non-main English speaking countries	
Men born overseas	
All women	
Women who speak a language other than English at home	
Women born in non-main English speaking countries	
Women born overseas	

Axis values: 4.00%, 4.50%, 5.00%, 5.50%, 6.00%, 6.50%, 7.00%
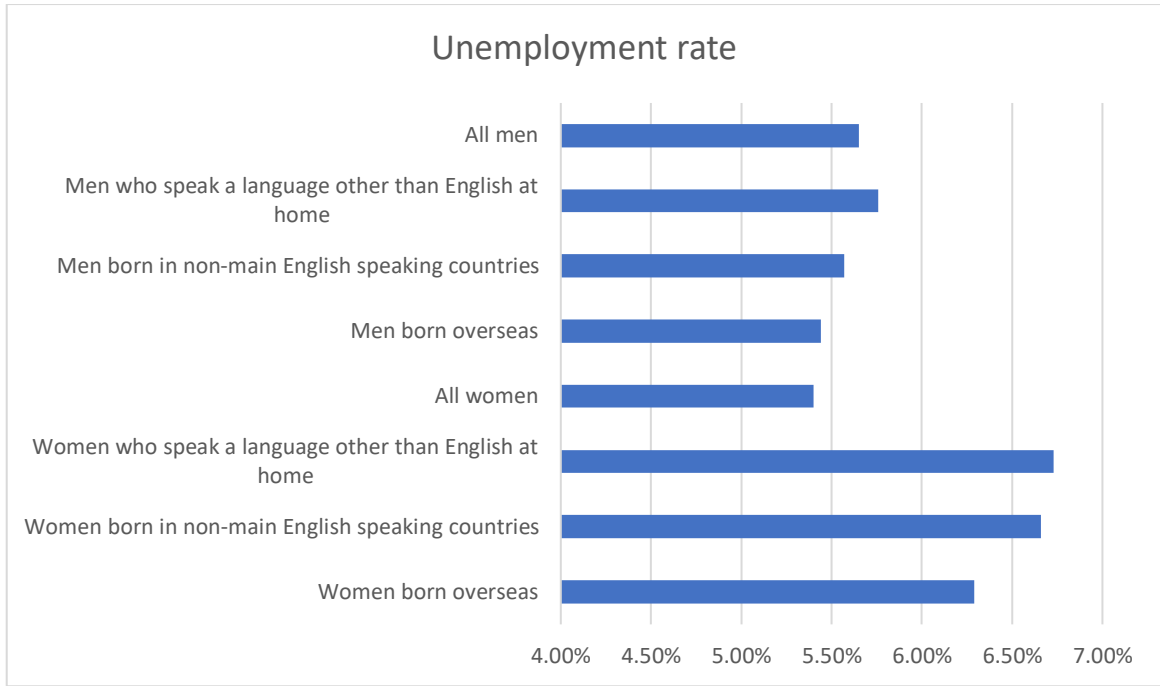
All data taken from ABS 2016 Census for people aged between 20 and 74 years old

This strategic approach seeks to contribute to facilitating better employment outcomes of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. It is intended as a recommended roadmap for what better outcomes would look like, and what steps need to be taken in order to achieve these.

Harmony Alliance: Migrant and Refugee Women for Change is one of six National Women's Alliances funded by the Australian Government to promote the views of all Australian women. We are a member-driven organisation, providing a platform for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds to advocate on issues that matter to us. Our 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.

This strategy considers how to build on work already being undertaken to improve diversity and inclusion in workforces, to ensure the intersection of gender and culture is well understood and addressed.

This approach is informed by national consultations regarding barriers to employment for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds held in partnership with the Friendly Nation Initiative[4] in 2019, with service providers, community representatives, employment experts, policy advocates and researchers.

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[4] The Friendly Nation Initiative is an initiative of Migration Council Australia that mobilises Australian businesses to provide employment, mentoring, internship, and work experience opportunities to refugees.

KEY PRINCIPLES

Harmony Alliance adopts a strength-based approach, in recognition that women from migrant and refugee backgrounds have much to offer to Australian society. Women from migrant and refugee backgrounds bring unique cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, perspectives and connections, which are valuable assets to potential employers, and can play a key role in overcoming structural barriers.

The issue of employment is complex, with interrelated and compounding barriers posed by systems and norms. A comprehensive strategy must consider the diversity of experiences of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and the ways in which different aspects of a person's identity can affect their experience. These aspects can include gender, ethnicity and cultural background, language, socio-economic status, disability, sexual orientation, religion, age, geographic location or visa status. Any proposed solutions must be holistic, and adaptable to individual situations. A national strategy should consider the different situations in individual states and territories, as well as the particular contexts of rural and regional Australia. It is critical to involve men in such a strategy; there cannot be solutions to these challenges without their support as partners, fathers, colleagues and employers.

It is also important to note the key differences in women's employment experiences depending on migration pathways. Humanitarian migrants (including refugee women and women at risk) may require greater assistance to become job ready after arrival to Australia, such as recovering from trauma and building literacy, skill or education levels; however, humanitarian migrants are offered a clear pathway for support on arrival through Australia's Humanitarian Settlement Program. Non-humanitarian migrants (including family, skilled and student pathways) in contrast, are likely to arrive better equipped to enter the workforce, with at least one member of the migrating unit likely to be job-ready or studying, as well as proficient in English. Yet, for non-humanitarian migrants, fewer support services are offered and pathways to assistance are less formalised, particularly for accompanying partners.

In seeking to improve the employment outcomes of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, it is important to note that employment is not always the most important priority for a woman or family, depending on their settlement journey or life. Although gainful employment should be accessible to all women, participating in the workforce should not be assumed to be the best option for a woman or her family.

WHO ARE WOMEN FROM MIGRANT AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS?

In using the term 'women from migrant and refugee backgrounds' the Harmony Alliance is referring to: women who have themselves migrated temporarily or permanently to Australia, both through humanitarian and non-humanitarian pathways; and non-first-generation migrant women who frame their identity to a significant extent within this migration story. Many of those captured by the term 'women from migrant and refugee backgrounds' also fall into a grouping commonly known as 'culturally and linguistically diverse' (CALD), meaning that their cultural or ethnic identity is different to that of Australia's Anglo-'majority culture'; however, Harmony Alliance prefers the term 'migrant and refugee background' to CALD, as we challenge the premise that there is a 'norm', to which everyone else is 'diverse'.[5]

In focussing on 'women', we include transwomen and cis-women of all sexualities; the experiences and discrimination faced by non-binary people, intersex, transmen and gay men do not fall within scope of this paper, although Harmony Alliance welcomes feedback from the wider LGBTIQA+ community as we look to build an inclusive and intersectional strategic approach.

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[5] Australian Human Rights Commission, *Leading for Change: A blueprint for cultural diversity and inclusive leadership,* (Sydney, 2016), p4.

PRIORITY AREAS

1 - IMPROVING JOB SEEKING PROCESSES AND TRANSFORMING WORKPLACE CULTURE

VISION:

JOB SEEKING PROCESSES ENABLE WOMEN-CANDIDATES FROM MIGRANT AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS TO DEMONSTRATE THEIR SKILLS AND ASSIST EMPLOYERS TO SOURCE SUITABLE EMPLOYEES FROM A VARIETY OF NETWORKS

WORKPLACE CULTURES PROMOTE DIVERSE WAYS OF WORKING AND FACILITATE THE INCLUSION OF WOMEN FROM MIGRANT AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS AT ALL LEVELS

Common job-seeking processes in Australia may not be familiar to many migrant women and can prevent the best candidates from being hired. The use of highly-formulaic interviews favours those who are familiar with the system and can train to present well in these scenarios. Developing a well-structured resume, responding to selection criteria and knowing how to answer behavioural questions in interviews are skills that take time and practice to learn, particularly for those for whom English is a second language. External support can help women-recent migrants to build competency in job-seeking skills; however mainstream support services such as jobactive, the government's program to help jobseekers secure employment, do not consistently deliver assistance pitched at those without any knowledge of local practices.[6] Furthermore, the current jobactive program does not include specialist providers for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, which has seen providers inadequately equipped to balance individuals' competing settlement needs and jobactive obligations, leading to particularly low results for humanitarian migrants.[7];[8] It could be advantageous to both employers and potential employees for alternative hiring practices to be tested, which more closely reflect on-the-job skills, such as task-based interviews, paid trials, cadetships and apprenticeships.

Bias and discrimination also play a substantial role in explaining why the unemployment rate for women born in non-main English speaking countries is higher than that of both our male counterparts and of all Australian women.[9] Women from migrant and refugee backgrounds are subject to dual biases – both gender and cultural. These biases can see equally or more qualified candidates

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[6] Fairfield Multicultural Interagency (FMI) & Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), *Not working: experiences of migrants and refugees with Jobactive,* (Sydney, 2017), p 11.
[7] Ibid., p8.
[8] Joint Standing Committee on Migration. *No one teaches you to become an Australian*, (Canberra, 2017), p92.
[9] Unconscious biases are stereotypes or judgements that we hold unknowingly, which are learned implicitly through our experiences and environment, and reinforced through our brains' tendency to recognise patterns and similarity.

overlooked because of unconscious stereotypes held by hirers or managers. These unconscious biases are detrimental to both employer and employee, and work to reduce the overall diversity of organisations. As noted earlier, companies with greater ethnic and gender diversity have been shown to outperform their peers. Unconscious bias training has become a popular method used by companies to try and counter these problems; however, the benefits are not well established, with some studies suggesting that compulsory training may see reluctant participants instead use the new knowledge to excuse bias.[10]

One of the main reasons that women from migrant and refugee backgrounds have been slow to progress in the workplace is because the system wasn't created for us. Australian workplace practices and norms were largely developed at a time when only men from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds were engaged in paid work, and so considerations of embracing diverse and flexible working methods were not embedded in the design. As a result, there is now a clear need for reforming standard working habits and organisational culture.

Recently, significant research has been conducted showing how current workplace practices hamper gender equality, and what steps can be taken to promote women at all levels of the workforce. Some of the recommended steps include: leadership on gender equality from the top; promoting flexible work arrangements for all genders; monitoring workplace attrition and the pipeline of quality women candidates; and ensuring pay equity.[11] Addressing these suggestions will be important to welcoming women employees from migrant and refugee backgrounds; however, more research needs to be conducted to understand how to overcome additional barriers created by cultural and linguistic diversity, and migration pathways.

Anti-discrimination laws are another important pillar in protecting workers of all backgrounds and experiences. Race and sex anti-discrimination laws date back to the 1970s and 80s in Australia, however, their implementation remains a challenge. Discrimination is not always easy to identify and address. Employers may package discriminatory hiring decisions as choosing a 'good fit' for the team, and colleagues may act on assumptions that are never clearly articulated.[12] In turn, employees may

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[10] Lai, C., *What's unconscious bias training, and how does it work?,* (The Conversation, 2018).
[11] See https://www.wgea.gov.au/topics/gender-strategy/diagnose-the-status-of-gender-equality-in-your-organisation for more information and more steps.
[12] Australian Human Rights Commission. *Racial Discrimination,* available at https://www.humanrights.gov.au/employers/good-practice-good-business-factsheets/racial-discrimination, accessed on 27 Jun. 18.

receive few protections from workplaces when pursuing anti-discrimination processes, and too often face repercussions in their careers for speaking out.[13]

WHAT'S NEEDED

- Effective supports for women candidates from migrant and refugee backgrounds to use the hiring processes that exist, in the short term.
- Revolutionised hiring processes to reduce inbuilt biases in recruitment systems, in the long term.
- Employment services support to women from migrant and refugee backgrounds that is reflective of our particular needs.
- Effective data collection and reporting regarding diversity hiring, beyond gender indicators.
- Initiatives that counteract unconscious bias and conscious discrimination.
- Transformation of standard workplace practices and culture to not only promote diversity and inclusion, but to value different ways of thinking and leading.
- Enhanced understanding by workplaces of actions they can take to promote diverse ways of working.
- Reforms to workplace discrimination laws and their implementation, to ensure lodging a complaint does not harm an employee.

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2 - HARNESSING EXPERIENCE, FOSTERING AND LEVERAGING NETWORKS

VISION:

WOMEN-JOB SEEKERS FROM MIGRANT AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS HAVE ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES IN ORDER TO IMPROVE THEIR JOB READINESS

WOMEN FROM MIGRANT AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS HAVE ACCESS TO USEFUL PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS, MENTORS AND SPONSORS

MIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN'S OVERSEAS EXPERIENCE IS VALUED BY EMPLOYERS AND PROCESSES FOR OVERSEAS QUALIFICATION RECOGNITION AND PROFESSIONAL ACCREDITATION ARE STREAMLINED

Women from migrant and refugee backgrounds need opportunities to develop relevant skills and professional experience and to have our overseas-gained experience, skills and qualifications valued.

Developing fluency in spoken and written English is a critical step for gaining employment in Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), migrants are twice as likely to find a job if we speak English well.[14] Women require extended options to learn English, as we often delay

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[13] Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW. *Why don't people complain about* discrimination *and harassment?,* available at http://www.antidiscrimination.justice.nsw.gov.au/Pages/legal-cases/why-people-don't-complain-discrimination-harassment.aspx accessed on 27 Jun. 18.

[14] Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *Data integration Case Study: Migrants,* (Canberra, 2017).

learning English in order to support our partners and children in settling into a new country, and miss out on this key opportunity.[15] Currently the Adult Migration English Program (AMEP), which provides free English lessons to new migrants, poses strict timeframes around accessing this service, and does not adequately take into account competing priorities of students, such as caring responsibilities. Under current rules, migrants have to register for the AMEP within 6 months of arrival, commence studies within a year, and complete classes within five years.

Education level is also an important determinant of job prospects, with the most highly educated enjoying the highest employment rates in OECD countries.[16] Women who came to Australia as humanitarian migrants may be much more likely to have no schooling compared with Australian born women (6.2 per cent compared with 0.1 per cent, in a study of humanitarian entrants who had lived in Australia for five to ten years in 2011), and much less likely to have completed a bachelor's degree or higher (7.1 per cent compared with 25.1 per cent for Australian-born women).[17];[18] Level of education is also significantly associated with literacy in one or more language, which in turn affects the speed with which an individual is likely to acquire English language skills.[19] Supporting women from migrant and refugee backgrounds to catch up on any missed education is therefore foundational to improving employment outcomes.

Employers are more likely to consider employing someone who has local experience and references. This can be because an employer is more familiar with local organisations, and so better appreciates this experience. It can also be due to a lack of understanding of the transferability of working in different and varied contexts. Getting the first opportunity is often the hardest step, however, without it, women from migrant and refugee backgrounds cannot begin to build experience in the local workforce.

Local networks can be critical to gaining employment and for career progression. Many jobs are only advertised through word of mouth and candidate selection often relies heavily on recommendations from existing networks. Mentors or sponsors can provide valuable support for career progression, offering advice regarding career pathways, recommending skills to hone, and providing access to

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[15] Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services [DSS]). *Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA): The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants – Findings from the first three waves,* (Canberra, 2017), P25-28.

[16] OECD, *Education at a Glance Interim Report: How does educational attainment affect participation in the labour market?,* (Paris, 2015), p 19.

[17] Australian Institute of Family Studies. *Empowering migrant and refugee women: supporting women beyond five-year post settlement,* (Canberra, 2017).

[18] Average levels of educational attainment for humanitarian entrants are likely to vary by 'cohort' or 'wave' of arrival.

[19] DSS. *BNLA,* (Canberra, 2017), p21 & 32.

useful networks. However, for newly arrived migrant women without an established network of family, social and professional contacts, it can be hard to break into the employment scene. Moreover, research has found that people are more likely to actively mentor people that they see themselves in, and so with more men from white Anglo-Saxon backgrounds in leadership positions in Australia, it is particularly difficult for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds to find a sponsor in senior leadership.[20] Some men in leadership also claim to be uncomfortable working one-on-one with women due to fears of sexual harassment claims, sparking rumours or upsetting their partners.[21] This creates an additional burden for women in leadership, who are often faced with the impossible expectation that they will mentor all junior women. Ultimately this leaves women from migrant and refugee backgrounds lagging further behind men, who are more likely to find networks willing to support their professional development.

It is therefore crucial to improve employers' understanding of the value of overseas experience to local workplaces. Once in the workplace, unconscious bias can continue to present barriers to gaining experience. For example, managers often unwittingly allocate work that is considered more 'serious' more often to men, thereby providing diverse employees with fewer pathways to develop the experience required to progress in our careers.

In addition, seeking recognition of overseas qualifications and professional accreditation in Australia is a complicated and costly process. This locks valuable skilled employees out of the market and de-skills women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Requirements differ across states and professions. Harmony Alliance's 2018 Migrant and Refugee Women's Voices Survey found that 40 per cent of respondents described the process as very hard and 23 per cent of respondents described it as somewhat hard. Adding to confusion, English language requirements of Australian universities may not match up with industry and professional regulation specifications. Qualifications processes must be aligned to ensure Australia does not miss out on valuable contributions from women from migrant and refugee backgrounds living in our country.

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[20] Farnell, R., *Mentor people who aren't like you,* (Harvard Business Review, 2017).
[21] Elsesser, K., *60% of male managers are uncomfortable in job-related activities with women – here's why,* (Forbes, 2019).

> **WHAT'S NEEDED**
>
> - Greater opportunities for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds to improve English proficiency, access education and gain local workplace experience.
> - Extended timeframes for accessing the AMEP and access to tailored English language learning opportunities to meet industry specifications.
> - Greater opportunities for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds to gain local professional networks.
> - Men and women in employment using their social capital to support women from migrant and refugee backgrounds to enter and advance in the workforce.
> - Greater understanding by employers, and in particular by human resources departments, of the value of overseas work experience.
> - Better alignment between qualification, skills and language requirements of universities, training bodies and industry regulatory bodies.
> - User-centred support to navigate qualifications recognition and professional accreditation processes.
> - Greater promotion of available volunteer work placements and entrepreneurship opportunities.

3 - REMOVING STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

VISION:

WOMEN FROM MIGRANT AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS ARE ABLE TO PURSUE A MEANINGFUL CAREER IN VIEW OF CARING FOR FAMILY MEMBERS

MIGRATION REGULATIONS SUPPORT MIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN TO ENGAGE IN MEANINGFUL WORK AND TO EARN A DIGNIFIED LIVING

WOMEN FROM MIGRANT AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS ARE ABLE TO MAKE OUR OWN CHOICES ABOUT ENGAGING IN THE WORKFORCE WITH CONFIDENCE AND WITHOUT IMPEDIMENT FROM STEREOTYPES OR NORMS

Women continue to perform a disproportionate amount of unpaid caring and domestic duties in Australian families, which reduces our ability to engage in a paid career. When women reduce paid working hours to assume caring responsibilities, we not only miss out on salary earnings and superannuation contributions at the time, but risk future advancements in our careers and salaries. The choice to reduce paid employment in favour of child caring responsibilities is no less valid than choosing to continue a career. What is important, however, is that we must be allowed to make this decision independent of outside pressures or barriers. Division of caring and domestic duties, however, largely continues to reflect gendered roles. According to the 2016 census, women in Australia, on average, do 14.5 hours of unpaid domestic work compared to 8.9 hours on average for

men.[22] Women also provide 58 per cent of unpaid childcare and 60 per cent of unpaid assistance to a person with a disability, with men performing 42 per cent and 40 per cent respectively.[23;24]

In order to counter this gendered allocation of caring responsibilities, workplaces must promote flexible work practices, including: generous parental leave that can be split flexibly between partners; guarantees of ongoing employment on return from parental leave; and remote or part-time work options that do not limit current or future career prospects. Women must also have access to affordable and appropriate care support should they wish to use it, including childcare, aged care and disability care.[25] There is a need for greater research into particular barriers for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds in accessing care support, and in particular childcare, to better understand whether women have access to appropriate supports.

Everyone living in Australia on a medium to long term basis should have the ability to earn their own living. However, our current migration system is becoming increasingly temporary and restrictive, leaving many living in Australia on an ongoing basis without work rights, or on rolling very-temporary visas that deter businesses from employing the visa-holder. Such barriers to securing formal employment can push women from migrant and refugee backgrounds into the casual employment, leaving us with few protections at work.

Cultural and gendered expectations about what constitutes appropriate 'women's work' presents a significant barrier to employment for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Many women experience family and community pressures regarding what industries are 'acceptable' for a woman to work in. Caring or service fields are often favoured, which tend to offer lower salaries, and therefore reduce women's earning potential.

Entrenched gender roles can also mean a working wife is perceived as a threat to the male 'head of the household', which can increase her risk of domestic, family and sexual violence. This acts as a deterrent both for women to start and continue work.

Gendered socialisation of girls leaves many women with insufficient confidence to enter and progress in the workforce. This can hold us back in interviews and deter us from seeking senior roles

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[22] Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *Census 2016*, 'Unpaid Domestic Work: Number of Hours (DOMP)', Sex Profile, viewed 13 June 2018.
[23] ABS, *Census 2016*, 'Unpaid Childcare (CHCAREP)', Sex Profile, viewed 13 June 2018.
[24] ABS, *Census 2016,* 'Unpaid Assistance to a Person with a Disability (UNCAREP)', Sex Profile, viewed 13 June 2018.
[25] AMES Australia. *Hidden Assets: Partner-migration, skilled women and the Australian workforce,* (Australia, 2016), p 41-42.

or promotion. This can be exacerbated for those brought up in societies with fewer freedoms for women.

WHAT'S NEEDED

- Access to affordable and culturally responsive child care, disability care and aged care.
- A culture shift on entrenched gender roles in care and domestic responsibilities.
- Greater understanding by policy makers and workplaces of barriers for accessing care support for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds.
- Enhanced understanding, among policy makers, of the impact of very temporary visas and visas without work rights on individual outcomes and overall productivity.
- Better understanding by workplaces of current rolling temporary visas with work rights.
- Strengthened protections for the casual employment.
- Transformation of gender roles in society.
- Increase in pay for traditionally women-dominated professions.
- Support for women to enter non-traditional roles.
- Support for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds to build confidence.