



**ethnic
communities'
council of
victoria**

Real Jobs: Employment for Migrants and Refugees in Australia

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FOREWORD

My passion for addressing the barriers to meaningful employment and employment discrimination experienced by migrants and refugees in Australia stems partly from my own personal experience some twenty years ago. Like many others, I faced great difficulties entering the Australian labour market at a level commensurate with my skills and experience, despite having tertiary qualifications and international work experience.

While there have been positive government, business and community initiatives to address these issues, it is an unfortunate reality that the issues I experienced first hand some twenty years ago continue to prevail across Australia.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to initiate a broad discussion of how the barriers to meaningful employment for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in Australia can be reduced. It is also intended to serve as a platform for further policy development, recommendations and advocacy.

This discussion paper will be complimented by a forum in March where interested parties will be given the opportunity to share their views and visions for the future. I invite feedback and comments on the discussion paper and particularly the draft policy recommendations located at the end of the paper.

I look forward to discussing these issues with government, business and my peers in the community sector, as we strive to achieve meaningful results in employment for the significant migrant and refugee population of Australia.

Sam Afra JP
Chairperson
Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria



CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

There are compelling social and economic reasons to invest in increasing the education, training and employment opportunities for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia. In the social context, employment and economic self-sufficiency are recognised as important components of effective settlement for many migrant and refugee communities.¹ Meaningful employment is linked to a positive self identity, financial independence and aids the process of establishing a sense of home in a new country. Commenting on the importance of economic self sufficiency, the United Nations international handbook on refugee resettlement states:

*"Economic self-sufficiency is one of the most important factors in successful integration, with earning capacity influencing the ability to 'purchase' many of the other resources required to rebuild life in a new country, among them, housing, health care and education."*²

Successful labour market integration can be defined as secure employment which is appropriate to the individual's level of qualifications, skills and experience.³ Given that international literature emphasises the importance of economic participation and employment for good settlement, a strong argument can be made for increased government efforts to combat discrimination and facilitate meaningful employment outcomes for migrant and refugee communities in Australia.⁴ Tony Nicholson, Executive Director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, addresses the importance of bridging barriers in saying:

*"... the best way to help the disadvantaged is not just provide them with a monetary safety net, but to build their capacities to participate in the mainstream economic and social life of the nation."*⁵

Exclusion from meaningful employment increases the risks of social and economic marginalisation from society. Issues associated with exclusion from meaningful employment may include depression, low self-confidence, stress and intergenerational unemployment. A comprehensive report by VicHealth recently found that there was a strong relationship between exposure to discrimination and poor mental health, especially instances of depression.⁶ International literature has increasingly recognised that discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and race can have health, social and economic implications for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.⁷ Amongst people from non-English speaking backgrounds, almost two in every five persons studied reported having been verbally

¹ Kyle, L., Macdonald, F., Doughney, J. and Pyke, J., *Refugees in the labour market: Looking for cost-effective models of assistance*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, September 2004, retrieved 15 January 2008, <http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/refugees_in_labour_market.pdf>, p. i.

² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2002, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook to Guide Reception and Integration - Chapter 2.9 Building Bridges to Economic Self-sufficiency*, 2002, retrieved 21 January 2008, <<http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3d9861584.pdf>>, p. 21.

³ Colic-Peisker V., and Tilbury, F., *Refugees and Employment: the effect of visible difference discrimination*, Centre for Social and Community Research, Murdoch University, 2007, retrieved 24 January 2008, <http://www.cscr.murdoch.edu.au/refugees_and_employment.pdf>, p. 3.

⁴ This recommendation must not be mistaken for the view that all refugees should be directed into employment immediately on arrival in Australia. Given that issues of persecution, torture and trauma tend to be part of the refugee trajectory it is not appropriate to expect refugees and humanitarian entrants to commence employment immediately. Opportunities for meaningful employment, education and training should be part of the settlement program but facilitated in a way which is sensitive and culturally competent.

⁵ Nicholson, T., *A New Australian Model of Social Inclusion and Employment Services*, Address to 'The Social and Economic Imperative: Tapping the Potential of Disadvantaged Australians' [Conference], Melbourne, 27 September 2007, retrieved 15 January 2008, <http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/Nicholson_new_Austn_model_of_social_inclusion_and_employment_services.pdf>.

⁶ Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth), *More than tolerance: Embracing Diversity for Health: Discrimination affecting migrant and refugee communities in Victoria, its health consequences, community attitudes and solutions - A Summary Report*, VicHealth, Melbourne, 2007, p. 11.

⁷ *ibid.*



discriminated against on the basis of ethnicity. Significantly, the highest instances of discrimination were reported as occurring in educational and workplace settings.⁸

Acute skills shortages in a range of industries and record low unemployment are dominant characteristics of the Australian labour market today. Skills shortages have seen the Australian Government steadily increase the annual quota of skilled migrants, with an extra 6,000 places allocated this financial year bringing the expected total intake of skilled persons to 108,500.⁹ Other employment policies have focused on retaining older workers and encouraging flexibility in employment to retain women with family commitments. It seems, however, that the education, skills and expertise of culturally and linguistically diverse Australians have been overlooked in public policy responses aimed at addressing skills shortages.

The Federal Government has recognised the brevity of skills shortages across Australia and that it cannot afford to exclude potential workers who are willing to work from the labour force.¹⁰ However, in terms of removing the barriers to meaningful employment and combating the discrimination which many migrant and refugee communities face, there has been a notable lack of policy attention. Considerable education, skills, expertise and willingness to work can be found amongst this diverse group who are already located within Australia. Aside from compelling social reasons, a clear economic impetus exists for increasing the employment and training opportunities afforded to immigrant and refugee populations. Continuing to underutilise the vast skills, qualifications and experiences of this group does not reflect good public policy. ECCV calls on state and federal Australian governments to invest in education, training and employment opportunities that combat employment discrimination and other barriers to meaningful employment for migrant and refugee communities in Australia.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Colebatch, Tim, 'Migrant quota rises to tackle labour shortages', *The Age*, 18 February 2008, retrieved 18 February 2008, <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/migrant-quota-rises-to-tackle-labour-shortage/2008/02/17/1203190653115.html>>.

¹⁰ Australian Labor Party (ALP), *An Australian Social Inclusion Agenda*, Election 2007 Policy Document, 2007, retrieved 11 February 2008, <http://www.alp.org.au/download/now/071122_social_inclusion.pdf>, p. 3.



KEY ISSUES

Overview

Broadly speaking, there are two key areas in which migrant and refugee communities contend with barriers to meaningful employment. In the first instance, structural barriers to meaningful employment impede access to the labour market. These barriers are well documented and include overseas qualification processes, a lack of local work experience, the failure of mainstream employment services to deliver culturally competent employment assistance and industry specific language. The second area in which these communities are disadvantaged relates to employment discrimination on the basis of race or religion. Employment discrimination on the basis of race or religion and structural barriers to the labour market intersect and culminate in the unsatisfactory employment that is often experienced by people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia.

There are three main forms of unsatisfactory employment experienced by migrants and refugees in Australia.¹¹ Unemployment occurs when a person does not receive any income in exchange for their labour. Underemployment is when a person is employed but the hours may be casual or insufficient to meet one's living costs. Occupational downgrading is when a person is employed in an area that is below their level of skill and/or experience. In all cases, but particularly that of occupational downgrading, it is often the case that the longer a person works outside their area of expertise and experience the harder it becomes to enter the workforce at an appropriate level. Each form of unsatisfactory employment has implications for the settlement and wellbeing of migrant and refugee communities in Australia.

Barriers to Employment

Overseas Qualifications

The process of having overseas qualifications recognised within Australia is often a lengthy and costly experience. As such, many overseas qualified professionals end up working in areas outside of their profession or at a disproportionately low level. The period spent working outside an area of expertise, often in low skill employment, does not assist in building a strong professional base and networks in Australian industries. A decline in confidence and sense of disillusionment are commonly reported by migrants and refugees who have spent long periods working in jobs that are below their level of skill and qualification. The well known stereotype of highly educated, articulate and skilled taxi drivers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is unfortunately often a reality, and the difficulties associated with navigating the overseas credential recognition process were reiterated by participants in ECCV research conducted in late 2007.¹² Certain industries are reported to make the process of recognising overseas qualifications particularly difficult and the costs associated with this are also prohibitive. In addition to the above concerns, many refugee and humanitarian entrants to Australia do not have the supporting documentation required to prove qualifications gained in their country of birth.

Local Work Experience

The emphasis placed on local work experience by many Australian employers has negative implications for jobseekers from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Many new arrivals come to Australia with high level qualifications, skills and experience only to find that employers are unwilling to recognise the value of international experience. Significant scope exists for both public and private sector employers to create greater opportunities for migrants and refugees to develop local work experience. Reflecting on the experiences of refugees, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees recognised that the workplace environment is where language skills, socialisation and national workplace culture are

¹¹ Colic-Peisker V., and Tilbury, F., loc.cit.

¹² Bardiqi-Yassin, M., *Skilled Migrants: Negotiating the Industry Maze, Employment Qualifications and Challenges*, Victoria University, [unpublished], November 2007, pp. 1-34.



learned.¹³ Migrant and refugee communities do not have the extensive networks of someone who gained their education, training and work experience in Australia and are therefore disadvantaged when seeking to enter the Australian labour market. Similarly, a recent study of regional skills shortages conducted by the Victorian State Government and Federal Department of Employment and Workplace Relations found that many employers seek to fill vacancies through word of mouth.¹⁴

Mainstream Employment Services

Reports that the federally funded Job Network does not sufficiently meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse clients are consistently received by ECCV. It is significant that other research and submissions have also supported this claim.¹⁵ The experience of many people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is that federally funded employment services aim to place them quickly into a generic job rather than a suitable job that reflects the individual's experience, qualifications and preference. Some of the systemic problems in the federally funded Job Network identified by the Brotherhood of St Laurence include:

- the burdening of providers with increasing regulatory and contractual obligation;
- programs which are fragmented and complex;
- compliance obligations and penalties impacting on most disadvantaged clients; and
- Clients with the most need receive a falling proportion of the Network's resources.¹⁶

English Language Skills in the Workplace

Levels of English language proficiency vary amongst migrant and refugee populations in Australia. Some recent arrivals are able to communicate fluently in English, however, find jargon, acronyms, slang and other 'insider' language prohibitive. Variations in 'Australian English' compared to 'British English' can also prove problematic for people for whom English is not a first language. Within 'Australian English' accents vary considerably and can pose a challenge for someone from a non-English speaking background to understand.

In terms of employment, scope exists for governments to invest in industry specific English language programs to strengthen the employment prospects of skilled migrant and refugee communities. Systematic and industry focused English language programs for migrants and refugees with higher levels of qualification and education would ultimately assist these communities enter the labour market at an appropriate level earlier in the settlement trajectory. Additionally, further work around improving English language proficiency in the workplace in unskilled areas of labour would also be of benefit to individuals and communities.

Employment Discrimination

Although equal opportunity is enshrined in Australian legislation job seekers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds continue to contend with racism and discrimination in employment. The principle of equal opportunity is enshrined in Australian state and federal legislation and prohibits discrimination on the basis of characteristics including race, gender, disability, religion and age. The reality, however, is that people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds continue to face discrimination in the area of employment. VicHealth recommends that workplaces are made a priority area for the prevention of discrimination 'given evidence that these are settings in which discrimination

¹³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *ibid*, p. 173.

¹⁴ State Government of Victoria and Commonwealth Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2006, *Regional Skills Shortage Survey Victoria: Summary*, 2006, retrieved 20 February 2008, <<http://www.business.vic.gov.au/busvicwr/assets/main/lib60018/regionalsummaryreport.pdf>>, p. 8.

¹⁵ Colic-Peisker, V., and Tilbury, F., *ibid*; Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), *Submission to the General Review of Employment Services*, 2008, retrieved 20 February 2008, <<http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/docs/resources/submissions/RCOA%20submission%20re%20employment%20services%20&%20the%20job%20network%20080214.pdf>>.

¹⁶ Nicholson, T., *loc. cit.*



is particularly likely to occur and the importance of employment and education to both current and future wellbeing'.¹⁷

Racist employer attitudes in the workplace have been identified as a problem by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC).¹⁸ Consultations undertaken by VEOHRC across Victoria found that anti-Muslim discrimination was particularly prevalent amongst employers.¹⁹ Additionally, VEOHRC found that women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds were particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment in the workplace.²⁰ Further highlighting the prevalence of discrimination in employment for culturally and linguistically diverse communities is the fact that over 50 percent of the racial and religious discrimination complaints lodged at VEOHRC in 2005-06 pertained to employment.²¹

Many large employer groups in Australia fail to fully recognise and utilise the skills of the nation's culturally and linguistically diverse workforce. A perception exists amongst some employers and recruiters that it is simply too difficult to accommodate culturally and linguistically diverse staff in the workplace. In discussing employment discrimination it is important to recognise that employment discrimination has very real and negative consequences for those who are subjected to it. A recent report, *Refugees and Employment: The effect of visible difference on discrimination*, found that racially and culturally visible workers were more likely to work in unattractive jobs regardless of their level of skills.²² As well as discrimination on the basis of race and religion impacting on employment outcomes, discrimination in the labour market was found to negatively impact overall life satisfaction to a greater level than 'everyday street racism'.²³

On arriving in Australia many migrant and refugee communities are unaware of their employment rights in relation to a safe, fair and discrimination free workplace. Instances of employers deliberately targeting migrant workers who are unaware of their rights to work in dangerous jobs with inappropriate safety standards have been raised by ECCV member organisations. Acceptable employment conditions and norms overseas can vary markedly from Australian standards and in particular, minimum wages, hours and occupational health and safety standards in developing countries are generally less stringent than that of Australia. As a result, many new arrivals are not fully aware of their rights in the workplace and therefore unable to exercise these fundamental rights. For those working in the informal sector, speaking up about poor or exploitative employment conditions may be perceived as jeopardising one's visa and subsequent opportunity to obtain permanent residency in Australia. Limited English language skills can also inhibit ability and confidence to voice concern over employment conditions. None of these factors, however, impede the rights of migrant and refugee communities to work in a safe, fair and discrimination free environment.²⁴

¹⁷ VicHealth, op. cit., 14.

¹⁸ Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC), *Commission's Community discussions show discrimination in employment remains widespread*, 30 April 2007, [media release], retrieved 25 January 2008, <<http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/News%20and%20Events/Media%20Releases/20070430.asp>>.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Colic-Peisker, V., and Tilbury, F., op. cit, p 1-2.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Measures to minimise occupational health and safety risks for workers who are not proficient in English can include delivering occupational health and safety material in community languages and translating important notices.



SPECIFIC MIGRANT AND REFUGEE COMMUNITIES

Given the diversity found within migrant and refugee communities in Australia, it is appropriate to consider the specific needs and issues facing certain groups. ECCV recognises that the groups outlined below will not reflect all people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and that some people's experiences will be reflected in more than one category outlined below.

New and Emerging Communities

Unemployment is a particular challenge experienced by new and emerging communities in Australia. In part this is explained by the relatively recent arrival of new and emerging communities to Australia as compared with other groups in Australian society. Definitions of new and emerging communities can vary considerably; however, there is a general consensus that many are from the Horn of Africa, Middle East and South East Asia. A broad definition is to say new and emerging communities are those which are small in number and have complex settlement needs. Many people from new and emerging communities, though not all, are refugee and humanitarian entrants to Australia and therefore have particular and associated employment needs. As mentioned previously, recognition of overseas training and qualifications presents a challenge for refugee job seekers as the required evidence of qualification is generally subsumed by more immediate concerns for one's personal safety.

ECCV is particularly concerned regarding reports that some students from new and emerging communities are completing tertiary qualifications at Australian institutions and still unable to enter the labour market at an appropriate level. Many immigrant and refugee communities settle in Australia with high hopes for their children realising educational and employment opportunities that they themselves may not be able to access.

Commenting on barriers to employment for African refugees, Saeed Saeed comments:

*"African refugees possess qualities and professional expertise that are much sought-after in our knowledge-based economy. Yet, they remain obstructed by short-sighted employment programs which fail to recognise participants' strengths and potential, and which only offer pathways to jobs that are neither stable nor likely to facilitate realistic career advancement."*²⁵

Women

Women from migrant and refugee backgrounds require a tailored approach to education, employment and training. Many women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds can be limited by factors including English language proficiency, caring responsibilities and access to transport in terms of the employment they are able to gain. As a result, such women are vulnerable to working in the informal economy where employment conditions, remuneration and occupational health and safety are poor.

The visible distinction of women of Islamic faith who wear the hijab or headscarf has been met with discriminatory attitudes amongst some Australian employers. Several women reported to ECCV difficult experiences negotiating culturally appropriate clothing in the workplace when employers were clearly uncomfortable with visual indicators of a Muslim identity. Similarly, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has revealed that in general Muslim and Arab Australians have reported experiencing higher levels of prejudice in the period following the extremist terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.²⁶

²⁵ Saeed, S., 'African refugees are willing and able to contribute' *Courier Mail*, retrieved 4 February 2008, <<http://www.news.com.au/couriermail/story/0,23739,22858169-27197,00.html>>.

²⁶ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), *Unlocking Doors Project: a report on dialogue between Muslim communities, HREOC and Police in NSW and Victoria*, 2007, retrieved 24 January 2008, <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/racial_discrimination/unlocking_doors/index.html>.



The Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition (VIRWC) has identified in detail many of the challenges facing women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds entering the labour market in Australia.²⁷ In particular, the job network was identified as failing to adequately meet the needs of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds.²⁸ The attitudes of some employers were raised as a concern in terms of treating such women as a flexible and inexpensive source of labour. It was also noted that experiences of financial stress led many women from migrant and refugee backgrounds to assume employment in extremely poor conditions.²⁹

Asylum Seekers

Asylum seekers are amongst the most disadvantaged populations within Australia. Unlike refugees who are directly resettled from overseas, the refugee status of asylum seekers is determined on arrival in Australia. Asylum seekers are denied many of the rights accorded to refugees resettled through the offshore humanitarian program and are subject to mandatory detention. Stringent legislative changes introduced by the Federal Government in 1997 meant that asylum seekers were denied the right to work, access Medicare and income support.³⁰ While the recently elected Federal Government has shown much promise in improving the treatment of asylum seekers, there is still significant scope for further policy change, with employment representing just one arena.

At present there are three main situations in which asylum seekers are denied the right to work. In the first situation, when an asylum seeker does not lodge an application for refugee protection within 45 days of arrival in Australia they lose the right to work. Additionally, if a person appeals to the Minister for Immigration on Humanitarian grounds they lose any work rights formerly held. Thirdly, persons who are released from a detention centre on a Bridging Visa E are not eligible for work rights.³¹ Although the Federal Government has committed to end the discriminatory 45 day rule,³² asylum seekers should be granted work rights though out the entire protection application process. Put simply, all asylum seekers within Australia who are in the process of having their refugee claims assessed should be given the right to work.

Granting asylum seekers the right to work in Australia would provide them with the opportunity to earn a living and experience the dignity associated with employment and economic self-sufficiency.³³ As well as the immense social benefit of affording asylum seekers work rights, there are strong economic considerations that support the policy change. A 2005 survey of the skills pool of asylum seekers found that 71% had skills or qualifications listed on the Skilled Occupation List for the General Skilled Migration Stream.³⁴ In addition to granting asylum seekers with work rights, ECCV believes that this marginalised group should also receive targeted assistance in employment, education and training as they are likely to encounter many of the other barriers to employment outlined throughout this paper.

²⁷ Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition (VIRWC), *2007 Federal Election Policy*, retrieved 16 January 2008, <<http://www.virwc.org.au/campaigns/policy/2007election.php>>.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Right to Work Campaign, *Asylum Seekers Seeking Safety not Charity*, [flyer], 2008, accessed 17 January 2008, <<http://safetynotcharity.victas.uca.org.au/>>.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Australian Labor Party (ALP), *ALP National Platform and Constitution 2007*, 2007, retrieved 18 January 2008, reference 155, <http://www.alp.org.au/platform/chapter_13.php>.

³³ However, this measure should not be seen as forcing asylum seekers into employment as a cost shifting exercise. It is the position of ECCV that asylum seekers should be eligible for targeted employment assistance that is delivered in a culturally competent manner, with exemptions and suitable social security provided to those for whom it is not appropriate to work.

³⁴ Croucher, Gwilyn, *A Chance to Contribute: Forgone Gains to the Australian Economy of Disallowing Asylum Seekers the Right to Work*, 2006, retrieved 17 January 2008, <<http://safetynotcharity.victas.uca.org.au/downloads/ACHanceToContribute-Feb06.pdf>>.



International Students

The work rights afforded to international students are limited by their visa class, with most students generally restricted to working a maximum of twenty hours per week. As a result of the visa restriction and pressures of living and supporting oneself in Australia, it is not uncommon for students in work in the informal economy to support themselves. As stated previously, the employment conditions around pay, hours and safety are often poor in the informal sector. International students working extra hours for 'cash in hand' are often unaware of their rights at work, and are reluctant to risk reporting bad employment conditions as this is perceived as potentially jeopardising their visa.

The requirement for permanent residency when applying for many local jobs and the lengthy process involved in gaining permanent residency effectively rule international students out of many local employment opportunities in Australia. Compounding the difficulty is the fact that many employers that take on interns also require them to have permanent residency in Australia.

One ECCV interviewee commented:

"This is a vicious cycle where students cannot find work experience when they are studying, and hence cannot experience Australian work culture, therefore when they graduate, they do not have the appropriate skills to find work in Australia."

Even with Australian qualifications, some international students who go on to become permanent residents still face barriers to entering employment at an appropriate level once they have graduated. A lack of local work experience, employer attitudes and proficiency in English are commonly identified as barriers to employment for this group. Amongst the main employment related issues experienced by international students in Australia in a comprehensive study were labour market and work place discrimination as well as inadequate finances and income.³⁵

Skilled Migrants

The Australian context of skills shortages means that Federal and State Governments have pursued the provision of temporary overseas visas as a policy solution. Temporary visas for skilled migrants are a viable short-term solution to skills shortages, particularly in regional areas of Australia. Interviews undertaken by ECCV indicate that many skilled migrants entering Australia expected higher levels of settlement support and assistance finding employment and were frustrated by barriers to gaining sustainable and appropriate employment.³⁶ Temporary overseas skilled workers have been the subject of much controversy in Australia, particularly in light of several well known and much publicised instances of employee exploitation and unsafe working conditions leading to severe injury. ECCV believes that skilled migrants should be able to access the same standards of employment conditions generally afforded to their Australian born counterparts and should be eligible for greater support gaining employment.

³⁵ Deumert A., Marginson, S., Nyland, C., Ramia, G. and Sawir, E., "Global Migration and Social Protection Rights: The Social and Economic Security of Cross-Border Students in Australia", in *Global Social Policy*, SAGE publications, London, 2005, p. 330.

³⁶ Bardiqi-Yassin, M., loc. cit.



PROMISING LOCAL PROGRAMS

Intensive, culturally competent employment services for migrant and refugee communities are needed to bridge the barriers to gaining sustainable and meaningful employment. Programs such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence's 'Given the Chance', the Victorian State Government's 'Workforce Participation Partnerships' as well as the Adult Multicultural Education Service's 'Sorghum Sisters' community enterprise have all provided intensive support to migrant and refugee communities and increased the confidence and employment prospects of participants. Mentoring and work experience programs are recognised as good strategies to bridge employment barriers for culturally and linguistically diverse clientele.³⁷ The inherent value of mentoring programs is that they develop networks, confidence and ability of the mentees, improving their chances on entering the labour market at a level appropriate to their skill level. Work experience programs allow participants to gain crucial 'local work experience' in Australia. The details of each program are briefly described below.

Workforce Participation Partnerships

An initiative of the State Government of Victoria, the Workforce Participation Partnerships (WPP) program has been a successful program in terms of concrete employment outcomes for migrant and refugee communities, as well as other disadvantaged jobseekers. The WPP program was launched in November 2005 and funded 98 projects to assist over 2,040 jobseekers across Victoria secure ongoing employment. The funding of migrant resource centres and ethno-specific organisations to deliver tailored employment services to migrants and refugees has been a promising aspect of this program. For example, the New Hope Foundation has successfully assisted dozens of young African men secure employment in the meat industry in the regional area of Castlemaine. Additionally, Victorian Arabic Social Services assisted over 160 young people from Arabic speaking backgrounds develop employment skills and enter the labour market.³⁸

Given the Chance

The Brotherhood of St Laurence recognised that many refugees want to work in Australia but tend to experience very high levels of unemployment and accordingly developed the Given the Chance program. The program linked refugees in Victoria with mentors from business, community and government and also offered work experience opportunities and job seeking training specific to the individual. Given the Chance worked to build understanding of the Australian labour market, workplace culture, develop professional networks, work experience and qualifications amongst its refugee participants. Supporters and funders of Given the Chance 2005-2007 included the Victorian State Government, Melbourne City Council, Victorian Women's Trust and Invergowrie Foundation.³⁹

Sorghum Sisters

The Sorghum Sisters is a community enterprise established by the Adult Multicultural Education Services in partnership with the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Carlton Primary School, the Department for Planning and Community Development, and the Horn of Africa Communities Network. The Sorghum Sisters are a catering enterprise that provide traditional foods from the countries in the Horn of Africa and also supply healthy lunch options to the students of Carlton Primary School. Sorghum Sisters builds the skills and work experience of participants of the enterprise, comprising of women who are residents of the Carlton Public Housing Estate.⁴⁰

³⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *ibid*, p. 180.

³⁸ Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, "ECCV 2008-09 State Budget Submission: Maintaining a Multicultural Victoria," ECCV, 2007, retrieved 20 February 2008, <<http://eccv.org.au/doc/ECCV200809StateBudgetSubmissionfinal.pdf>>, p 4.

³⁹ Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Given the Chance*, 2007, retrieved 15 January 2008, <<http://www.bsl.org.au/main.asp?PageId=565&iMenuPageId=565>>.

⁴⁰ Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES), *AMES Community Catering Enterprises*, 'Sorghum Sisters', retrieved 11 February 2008, <<http://www.ames.net.au/catering>>.



MIGRANT AND REFUGEE VOICES

The inclusion of the refugee and migrant voices within this discussion paper is intended to illustrate the fact that the issues raised are not simply abstract in nature, rather, barriers to employment and employment discrimination have very real and negative implications on a significant component of the Australian population.

*"The biggest problem is that our/my work experience was not taken into consideration by employers at all. The fact that I had offered documents of qualification that are recognised did not mean anything to them. Interviewers told me, 'We are not interested in what you were doing before; we want to know about your work experience in Australia'."*⁴¹ Croatian refugee in Australia

*"Employment procedure, criteria and standard is too inflexible to allow new arrivals to enter job market. The disregard for overseas qualification and experience leads to the feeling of exclusion and in extreme cases the sense of racial discrimination."*⁴² Ethiopian refugee in Australia

*"... the hardest thing is that they say that everything is okay on your resume but you do not have the local experience in Australia ... This is a very harsh requirement because there is nobody to give us a chance to gain local experience, all we ask is [for] that chance even if it is unpaid or low pay just so we can show and prove ourselves ... so without this it is very difficult."*⁴³ Skilled migrant in Australia

*"My wife and I are skilled workers. I am trained in the IT industry and my wife was a kindergarten teacher in Sri Lanka. We are willing to work to support ourselves but unfortunately because of our visa situation we are not permitted."*⁴⁴ Sri Lankan asylum seeker in Australia

*"Both my husband and I are qualified I am still looking for work after six months and my husband was doing cleaning jobs at night so we can support ourselves, because of hard conditions we had to take our child back to our country because where we have no means of supporting her here ... I have ten years of experience on IT in my country and I never thought things are so hard here to find a job."*⁴⁵ Skilled migrant in Australia

*"I'm doing my masters in banking and finance. After my studies I intend to go back to my country, when the visa expires. But when I try to get an internship, which adds a lot to your degree - real hands on experience in banking and finance - they simply say that it is not open for people who have no permanent residence ... this means I'm not getting with my degree what other people are getting ... I have no opportunities at all to do an internship. All the places that I applied to, said they are looking for people with PR or citizenship."*⁴⁶ Indian masters student in Australia

⁴¹ Colic-Peisker, V., and Tilbury, F., op.cit, p. 16.

⁴² ibid.

⁴³ Bardiqi-Yassin, M., loc. cit.

⁴⁴ Right to Work Campaign, op. cit.

⁴⁵ Bardiqi-Yassin, M., loc. cit.

⁴⁶ Deumert A., et. al, p. 342.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

While the issues outlined in this discussion paper are by no means new issues, barriers to sustainable and meaningful employment for migrant and refugee communities continue to prevail. Given the overview of employment issues facing migrant and refugee communities in this discussion paper ECCV is interested to hear feedback on the below draft recommendations:

Federal Recommendations

That as part of the Australian Social Inclusion Agenda, the Federal Government commit to the development of a *National Employment Participation Strategy for Migrant and Refugee Communities*. This strategy would compliment the Federal Labor Government's commitment to a national strategy for mental health in disability within the Australian Social Inclusion Agenda.

A National Employment Participation Strategy for Migrant and Refugee Communities should:

- (a) Target intensive assistance to job seekers with high levels of disadvantage from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with particular emphasis on
 - New and Emerging Communities;
 - Women; and
 - Asylum Seekers;
- (b) Include provisions so that the Job Network providers are given incentives to cater to each of the above groups.
- (c) Appropriately fund migrant resource centres, ethno-specific organisations and other community organisations with the cultural expertise to deliver flexible employment, education and training programs that aim to secure meaningful employment within local contexts.
- (d) Facilitate and support the development of small business and community enterprise opportunities amongst migrant and refugee communities.
- (e) Include systematic and industry focused English language programs for migrants and refugees with higher levels of qualification and education to allow skilled persons to transition into their area of expertise.
- (f) Implement a national diversity strategy which highlights the multicultural nature of Australian society and the social, economic and political gains that diversity brings to the nation.

State Recommendations

1. That the Victorian State Government implement a work experience program for migrant and refugee communities across all departments of the public service, facilitating local work experience, an understanding of Australian workplace culture and developing networks within the participants area of qualification.
2. That the Victorian Government commit funding for the Workplace Participation Partnerships Program beyond 2008, recognising the importance of the program in securing employment outcomes for migrant and refugee communities.⁴⁷
3. That the Victorian State Government conduct extensive skills awareness programs targeting employers and industries and encouraging them to employ staff from diverse backgrounds.

⁴⁷ ECCV continues to advocate for the extension of the WPP program beyond November 2008 when funding is due to cease.



Are there further recommendations that you would like to see reflected in ECCV policies and advocacy?



STAKEHOLDER QUESTIONS

Employment Discrimination

1. Do you consider discrimination on the basis of race and religion a significant issue for migrant and refugee communities? Please explain.
2. How can Governments, business and community organisations address issues of employment discrimination and employer attitudes?
3. What are some strategies that might be effective in ensuring that Australian workplaces are safe, fair and culturally inclusive?
4. Are migrant and refugee communities suitably aware of anti-discrimination laws in Australia? Please explain.

Barriers to Employment

1. What do you consider the key barriers to employment for migrant and refugee communities?
2. What measures would help make overseas qualification recognition processes easier?
3. Are there ways that local work experience can be better facilitated for migrant and refugee communities?
4. How could mainstream employment services better respond to migrant and refugee communities?
5. How could English language training be strengthened and delivered in work environments?
6. How could issues of underemployment, unemployment and occupational downgrading be addressed?

Feedback, comments and further recommendations are most welcome.
Please direct feedback to ECCV on 9349 4122 or email eccv@eccv.org.au



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