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Assistant Minister to the Treasurer

By online submission at: <https://consult.treasury.gov.au>

2019-20 Pre-Budget Submission

Harmony Alliance: Migrant and Refugee Women for Change welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Treasury regarding the 2019-2020 Federal Budget.

The Harmony Alliance is one of six National Women's Alliances funded by the Australian Government to promote the views of all Australian women, to ensure their voices are heard in decision-making processes. The 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.

This submission focusses on two key priorities of the Harmony Alliance, calling on the Government to take action in the 2019-20 Budget on an important area of need within each priority:

- Expand settlement supports for migrant women arriving to Australia through all migration pathways, both humanitarian and non-humanitarian.
- Expand support to enhance migrant women's employment and economic participation outcomes

Strategic Priority 1: Expand settlement supports for migrant women arriving to Australia through all migration pathways, both humanitarian and non-humanitarian.

Recommendations for the 2019-20 Budget

1. Provide information to women migrating to Australia through all migration pathways at multiple and systematic touchpoints, in both English and languages other than English, regarding:

- human rights;
- Australian laws;
- respectful relationships, consent and coercion;
- forms, risks and consequences of family, domestic and sexual violence;
- health systems;
- justice systems;
- available support services.

Suggested touch points for such information provision include:

- visa grant letters;
- health examinations undertaken as part of visa requirements;
- on arrival to Australia, at compulsory information sessions;
- when changing over driver's licence, applying for Medicare, opening a bank account, and accessing primary healthcare services as a new client; and,

- key service providers, such as: migration lawyers, AMEP providers, hospitals, schools, childcare services, universities and associated residential colleges, and community services.

2. Extend timeframes for eligibility to access the Australian Migrant English Program (AMEP).

3. Fund the provision of specialist services at the juncture of multicultural and gender expertise, and support service providers to embed women-centred co-design processes when developing programs and information.

4. Expand eligibility for relevant payments and services to all victims/survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence, irrespective of current visa status, across the purview of all states, territories and federal government.

5. Provide sufficient resourcing for all relevant service providers—including crisis housing, health, legal (advice and assistance regarding both migration and violence issues), domestic, family and sexual violence crisis services, settlement services and community organisations—to offer support to women with no income on temporary visas experiencing violence.

Background

1. Appropriate settlement supports increase women’s independence and inclusion, as well as their ability to actively participate in and contribute to the Australian community and economy. Currently women who arrive through non-humanitarian pathways can be particularly isolated, with few consistent links to systems or services. Unlike humanitarian entrants, who have access to the Humanitarian Settlement Program on arrival, migrant women are offered little formal support beyond the voluntary Australian Migrant English Program (AMEP). In particular, women who move to Australia to follow a partner or a spouse are at risk of isolation; with no guarantee of developing networks through work, family or school, many are left dependent on their partners for assistance to settle in a new country. Through consultations and research, the Harmony Alliance has identified a particular need to develop stronger links between Australian systems and newly arrived migrant women. This stands to improve women’s settlement outcomes, at the same time as reducing their isolation and vulnerability.

2. English proficiency is a critical skill for settling in Australia and, in particular, for gaining employment. Free English lessons, provided by the AMEP, are a key component of Australia’s settlement support system, as well as an important opportunity for migrant women to make contact with Australian networks and systems. The timeframes placed around accessing AMEP, however, pose particular barriers to women. 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. Women, however, may often delay learning English in order to support their partners and children settle into a new country, and thereby miss out on this key opportunity.¹ An extension in timeframes for accessing the AMEP would increase the opportunities for migrant women to participate in this program and, as a result, to be linked to important information and systems.

3. The provision of specialist services at the juncture of multicultural and gender expertise is critical to ensure clients are provided with tailored support that is culturally competent, trauma informed and gender sensitive. Building such skillsets across all service providers is important; however, it cannot adequately fill the role of specialist organisations, with many clients unable or unwilling to attend mainstream organisations due to lack of trust or familiarity. Involving

¹ Joint Standing Committee on Migration. No one teaches you how to become an Australian: report of the inquiry into migrant settlement outcomes, (Canberra, 2017).

relevant communities in design, implementation and evaluation of programs and information campaigns will both improve effectiveness of outputs and build capacity in communities. Many mainstream services and campaigns are presented from an Anglo-centred approach that does not resonate with recently arrived migrants and refugees. It is important that assistance and information is provided in culturally appropriate ways, so that it is listened to, respected and effective. Cultural competency training, although important, is not a sufficient replacement for working directly with communities to co-design programs.

4. Perpetrators may attempt to deter victims from reporting violence by threatening their temporary migration status. To counter this, Family Violence Provisions under the Migration Act 1958 allow many on the path to permanent residency to continue their application after a relationship breakdown if this is due to family violence. However, the list of visa categories currently eligible for this exemption is not broad enough to protect all migrants facing these risks, for example:

- secondary visa holders (family and dependents to the primary holder) remain reliant on their partners for their migration status;
- student visa holders cannot access many forms of emergency accommodation without discontinuing their studies, and thereby violating the terms of their visas;
- women arriving on prospective marriage visas have no grounds to apply for Family Violence Provisions until married, meaning a victim may have to marry a perpetrator in order to escape;
- those arriving on temporary visas in order to submit a partner visa application cannot claim provisions until the application is made, and so may stay in a violent relationship longer as a result.

Furthermore, the definition of family violence under these provisions is narrow, and limited to intimate-partner and parent-child violence, which excludes many other manifestations. Moreover, the indicators used to determine a 'genuine relationship' in order to access these provisions, such as shared financial responsibilities, are often not present in violent relationships, and as such victims could be dismissed or suffer further trauma through the process.

5. Visa status affects eligibility to access state, territory and commonwealth government-funded services and payments, leaving many victims/survivors at risk of financial dependency on a perpetrator (partner or other family member) or with no income. Even in circumstances where women on temporary visas with no income are able to access crisis support services, they have limited pathways to re-establish independence, and often require prolonged assistance from crisis support services. This puts heavy pressures on already limited support services.

Strategic priority 2: Expand support to enhance migrant women's employment and economic participation outcomes.

Recommendations for the 2019-20 Budget:

6. Reform government funded employment services, such as jobactive, to ensure that tailored support is provided for women job seekers from migrant and refugee backgrounds who face particular barriers to workforce participation, **review** the process of qualification and skills recognition, and **support** targeted entrepreneurship programs.

7. Support vocational educational facilities to provide relevant employability skills programs for migrants, in particular for migrant women following a partner or spouse.

8. Address the needs of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds when designing and delivering early childhood education and care policies.

Background

6. The unemployment rate for women who have migrated to Australia sits at 6.3 per cent, compared with 5.4 per cent for all Australian women and migrant men.² Women from migrant and refugee backgrounds are therefore in need of tailored employment services, which provide an understanding of the particular barriers faced and flexibility in assisting the job seeker to balance settlement needs and family commitments. The current jobactive model, however, adopts a one-size-fits-all approach, and is ill equipped to meet these distinct needs.³

Seeking recognition of international qualifications and skills in Australia is a complicated process. Requirements differ across states and industries, adding to confusion. The Harmony Alliance's 2018 Migrant and Refugee Women's Voices Survey found that 23 per cent of respondents described the process as somewhat hard and 40 per cent described it as very hard.⁴ Such difficulties create barriers to entering the workforce and could lead to de-skilling of refugee women. A one-stop-shop to provide user-centred support to navigate the various systems would greatly increase the accessibility of skills and qualification recognition processes.

Entrepreneurship of refugee women should be recognised as an important avenue for enhancing refugee women's economic participation outcomes. Entrepreneurship support programs should be integrated into settlement services and provide a specific focus on women wanting to start their own business or enterprise (e.g. Settlement Services International's Ignite program).

7. Women who arrive through family or skilled pathways do not hold significantly different educational profiles to their male counterparts, and yet earn less and participate in the workforce at a lower rate.⁵ Vocational education providers offer potential pathways for migrant women to boost their employability potential, without needing to requalify completely.⁶ Vocational education facilities should support migrant women to develop a better understanding of Australian labour markets and job-seeking processes, while offering pathways to gain local work experience and build professional networks.

9. It is well recognised that access to affordable childcare is a key facilitator of women's employment, and this is no exception for migrant women.⁷ Without access to childcare, women from migrant and refugee backgrounds often prioritise the settlement needs of children over their own, delaying learning English and seeking employment.^{8,9} On the other hand, childcare stands to accelerate integration of both children and parents, by providing a link into the Australian community. Accessing childcare, however, is likely to come with additional barriers for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, such as negotiating cultural or familial expectations of gender roles in raising children, finding culturally

² ABS 2016 Census for people aged between 20 and 74 years old.

³ Fairfield Multicultural Interagency and Refugee Council of Australia. *Not Working: experiences of refugees and migrants with Jobactive* (2017), available online at: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Jobactive.pdf>

⁴ Harmony Alliance, *Migrant and Refugee Women's Voices: Survey Report* (November 2018) 29.

⁵ AMES Australia, *Hidden assets: partner-migration, skilled women and the Australian workforce*, (Australia, 2016), p 15-16.

⁶ Webb, S, Beale, D & Faine, M. *Skilled migrant women in regional Australia: promoting social inclusion through vocational education and training*, NCVER, (Adelaide, 2013), p. 45

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation*, Australia, July 2012 to June 2013 (Canberra, 2017).

⁸ Joint Standing Committee. *No one teaches you how to become an Australian* (2017), 27.

⁹ DSS, BNLA (2017), 25.

appropriate and nurturing care, and accessing facilities that are suitable in terms of both location and cost. Further research into these barriers is required; engaging women of migrant and refugee background in the development of early childhood education and care policies will help to identify key solutions and incentives for accessing childcare support.

For more information or to discuss the contents of this submission further, please contact:

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