



Committee Secretary
Department of the Senate
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Submission to Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

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. 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 130 organisations and individuals representing and working for the advancement and inclusion of migrant and refugee women.

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Select Committee on inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Migrant and refugee women have been significantly affected by the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government response to the pandemic has been inadequate in providing reliable support to many migrant and refugee women, particularly those experiencing income loss and/or family and domestic violence while on temporary visas.

There were approximately 1.4-1.5 million people in Australia in March 2020 on a temporary visa without access to welfare (excluding tourists)¹. Despite the government advice, most of these people could not have returned to their home countries due to lack of available travel options, entry bans imposed by their home countries, and family connections in Australia, amongst many other reasons. These are people with working rights and rely mainly on employment for their livelihoods. Without the safety net of social security payments, a proportion of this group is experiencing severe economic insecurity, facing loss of income while supporting dependants and continuing to pay bills. This has significant ramifications for the wellbeing of migrant and refugee women, as the loss of individual or family income and ineligibility for income support payments increases their risk of experiencing poverty, homelessness, mental health issues, as well as family and domestic violence.

Loss of Income and lack of Income Support

As COVID-19 impacted the service industry, job losses across hospitality, retail and tourism sectors where migrant workers are overrepresented, had a significant impact on migrant and refugee women. Data collected by ABC showed that more women were affected by income loss than men and will experience greater long-term economic impacts². Migrant and Refugee women who were already in lower paid and insecure jobs were amongst the worst affected. While the federal and state governments announced various income support packages, most temporary visa holders were systematically excluded from those packages. This led to an increase in homelessness and poverty amongst migrant and refugee women, many of whom

¹ ABS Data

² "Women bear biggest job losses from coronavirus, latest ABS data shows". (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-06/fears-coronavirus-will-destroy-financial-independence-for-women/12217672>)



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had to turn to already overwhelmed charities for support. One-off emergency relief has been the only government support available to these women, which is also provided through non-governmental charitable organisations. Due to the unprecedented nature of the crisis, demand for emergency relief has far exceeded its availability, leaving many vulnerable people without any help. Even when migrant and refugee women who have lost their incomes were able to access some form of emergency relief, it was not equivalent to income support which is needed in a prolonged period of economic crisis. Consequently, migrant and refugee women have been left in a highly vulnerable position due to lack of inadequate income support measures taken by the government in response to Covid-19 pandemic.

Increased risk to Migrant and Refugee Women's Safety

Income loss and economic insecurity—as discussed above—combined with social isolation imposed by public health measures introduced in response to Covid-19 pandemic, led to a greater risk of family and domestic violence for migrant and refugee women. This increased risk was further compounded by the structural and systemic barriers migrant and refugee women face in accessing social security, healthcare, and safe housing. All of these factors contributed to a spike in calls for help by migrant and refugee women to our member organisations providing family and domestic violence services—despite a general decline in reporting due to lack of safe spaces available to women to be able to access support during social isolation. ABC has reported on a significant increase in family and domestic violence experienced by women on temporary visas during the Covid-19 lockdown, including an alleged homicide of a woman on an international student visa by her husband³. While the federal and state governments have announced additional funding to support women and children experiencing family and domestic violence in the wake of Covid-19 pandemic, migrant and refugee women remain ineligible for many critical supports and services including safe housing and crisis payments. The government response, therefore, did not address the plight of women on temporary visas experiencing higher rates of violence during the pandemic.

Recommendations:

- ⇒ Migrant and Refugee women should be included in economic support and recovery packages being provided by the government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, regardless of their visa status.
- ⇒ Access to ongoing income support, crisis payments, healthcare (including mental health), crisis accommodation and safe housing, should be made available to all women experiencing family and domestic violence regardless of their visa status.

Contact Information:

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³ “Domestic violence victims on temporary visas need urgent protections, experts warn” (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-24/women-domestic-violence-temporary-visas-urgent-calls-protection/12276132>)