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Assistant Minister to the Treasurer

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

Supplementary 2020-21 Pre-Budget Submission: Measures required to ensure migrant and refugee women's inclusion in COVID-19 response and recovery

Introduction

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. The Harmony Alliance membership comprises over 135 organisations and individuals representing and/or working for the advancement and inclusion of migrant and refugee women.

Harmony Alliance: Migrant and Refugee Women for Change welcomes the opportunity to make a second submission to the 2020-21 pre-budget consultation. Further to our earlier [submission](#), this document provides additional recommendations with a particular view to improving experiences and outcomes for migrant and refugee women in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that there are over 3 million overseas-born women in Australia, making migrant and refugee women a significant and growing proportion of the Australian population¹. COVID-19 pandemic—and the ensuing economic crisis—has disproportionately impacted migrant and refugee women's economic security, access to safety, health, justice, and education.

This submission outlines a range of proposed measures to ensure women from migrant and refugee backgrounds are adequately included in COVID-19 response and recovery initiatives in 2020-2021 financial year.

Proposed measures

1. Economic security

Provide enhanced and culturally responsive employment services, skills development, and income support to ensure economic security of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds

Migrant and refugee women already had additional barriers to workforce participation resulting in higher unemployment rates² and lower income levels³ as compared to both women born in Australia and men from migrant and refugee backgrounds. 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. In general, more women were affected by income loss than men and will experience greater long-term

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. Census of Population and Housing. ABS; 2016.

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

³ AMES Australia, *Hidden assets: partner-migration, skilled women and the Australian workforce*, (Australia, 2016), p 15-16.

economic impacts⁴. Migrant and refugee women who were already in lower paid and insecure jobs were amongst the first to lose their income and are likely to be out of work much longer.

It is crucial to provide additional support to migrant and refugee women to ensure their economic recovery and financial independence in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, measures should be taken to ensure they have access to income support while they need it, culturally responsive and tailored employment services are provided to women from migrant and refugee backgrounds looking for work, and resources are allocated to upskilling and reskilling of those who have lost work opportunities in their previous employment sectors. It is also important to ensure sustained funding and adequate economic stimulus packages are provided to sectors where migrant and refugee women are overrepresented in workforce. As mentioned earlier, migrant and refugee women form a significant proportion of Australian population and their needs should be addressed in any measures taken to help Australians survive and recover from the economic crisis.

2. Access to safety

Expand specialist family, domestic and sexual violence services at the juncture of gender and cultural expertise to enable women from migrant and refugee backgrounds affected by higher rates of violence during the pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, economic insecurity and income loss—compounded by factors such as social-isolation and increased time at home with their abusers—led to a rise in reports of family and domestic violence⁵. There have been reports of a significant increase in family and domestic violence experienced by women on temporary visas during the Covid-19 lockdown⁶. The rise of racist attacks in the wake of the pandemic was also gendered and led to incidents of racially motivated physical and sexual violence against migrant and refugee women.

Specialist services for women experiencing gender-based violence are a critical part of Australia's response to family, domestic, and sexual violence. These organisations provide client-centred women's safety services through their established referral pathways and sometimes through in-house legal, casework, and multilingual teams. Many of Harmony Alliance's members provide dedicated specialist services for culturally and linguistically diverse women experiencing violence and have seen an increase in calls for support during the COVID-19 pandemic. While these services are critical to ensuring migrant and refugee women's safety, they are under-resourced and at capacity. Additional funding for these services is necessary to ensure access to safety for migrant and refugee women experiencing violence.

3. Healthcare and wellbeing

Improve access to culturally appropriate and gender-responsive health services, particularly sexual and reproductive health, and mental health services, in the context of transition to telehealth and higher levels of physical and mental distress due to the pandemic

⁴ "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>)

⁵ "Issues paper: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on inTouch clients" (<https://intouch.org.au/issues-paper-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-intouch-clients/>)

⁶ "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>)

Women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, like everyone else, have been experiencing higher levels of physical and mental distress due to COVID-19 and associated public health measures. Moreover, as provision of regular healthcare has been disrupted by the pandemic and many services have moved online, there are additional barriers to migrant and refugee women's access to healthcare.

Migrant and refugee women already had poorer health outcomes as compared to women born in Australia and are now at an increased risk of falling through the cracks due to lack of safe spaces to attend telehealth appointments, language barriers, and access to technological devices. These issues are of particular concern when it comes to accessing sexual and reproductive health and mental health services. In order to ensure safe access to healthcare, cultural and gender responsiveness should be embedded within online health service provision. Availability of interpreters through Free Interpreters Service (FIS) should also be expanded to all telehealth services including mental health.

4. Access to justice

Support and resource courts to embed cultural responsiveness and effectively engage interpreters in the provision of online services to migrant and refugee women, particularly in matters of family law, discrimination, family, domestic, and sexual violence

Similar to healthcare, many judicial services have also moved online due to the pandemic, posing additional barriers for migrant and refugee women, particularly those experiencing violence or dealing with matters of family law. Our earlier recommendation to implement *National Framework to improve accessibility to Australian courts for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and migrant and refugee women* developed by the Judicial Council on Cultural Diversity and authorised by the Council of Chief Justices, should be extended to include online courts in the context of pandemic. Access to interpreters should also be ensured in access to justice through online media.

5. Education and learning

Provide accessible and equitable access to resources including interpreters, translation services, and technology required for home schooling and online learning for migrant and refugee women and their children

Migrant and refugee women have been disproportionately impacted in their ability to access education and learning (for themselves and their children) due to language barriers and limited access to technological devices. With more and more education and learning activities—including English language, vocational training, and professional development programs—moving to online modes of delivery, it is indispensable to address inequities that prevent migrant and refugee women from full participation in these activities. Ensuring migrant and refugee women's access to education and learning is also key to enhancing their economic participation and financial independence in the long run.

6. Government communication and messaging

Ensure that government communication including public health and safety messaging is appropriate and accessible to culturally and linguistically diverse communities, particularly women from migrant and refugee background

Appropriate and accessible communication and messaging for culturally and linguistically diverse communities has emerged as a key issue during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. Going forward, sufficient resources should be allocated to ensure appropriate and accessible

in-language public health messaging, communication regarding economic measures, changes in administrative rules and regulations, and other relevant issues as they emerge during the recovery process.

Conclusion

In view of the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the particular vulnerability experienced by migrant and refugee women, Harmony Alliance urges the government to ensure migrant and refugee women's safety, well-being, and equal participation to achieve equitable outcomes. In addition to the recommendations proposed in this submission, we would like to stress the importance of maintaining sustainable funding for existing networks—including the National Women's Alliances—to ensure that Australian women in all their diversity can inform and be adequately included in the pandemic response and recovery plans.

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