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Assistant Minister to the Treasurer

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

## **2020-21 Pre-Budget Submission**

### **Introduction**

Harmony Alliance: Migrant and Refugee Women for Change welcomes the opportunity to make a submission with regard to a range of measures to improve experiences and outcomes for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that there are over 3 million overseas-born women in Australia,<sup>1</sup> making migrant and refugee women a significant and growing proportion of the Australian population.

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 120 organisations and individuals representing and/or working for the advancement and inclusion of migrant and refugee women.

Migrant and refugee women face multiple and intersecting structural barriers. By not facilitating equal and substantive inclusion of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, Australia is both missing out on valuable contributions to society, and leaving women and their families vulnerable to short term shocks that could leave them further dependent on assistance in the long-run.

This submission outlines a range of proposed measures that have the potential to promote the full, effective and equal participation of Australian women from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

### **Proposed measures**

#### **1 - Home Affairs Portfolio**

##### **Implement a strong gender focus in settlement to ensure enhanced settlement outcomes for refugee and vulnerable migrant women**

Refugee and vulnerable migrant women, while experiencing a range of disadvantages and complexities, are the game-changers in their families and communities and play a critical role in community development and empowerment. The settlement process is a valuable touch point and opportunity to engage refugee and vulnerable migrant women and provide a focus on the role of women and their leadership in community cohesion.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. Census of Population and Housing. ABS; 2016.

Cultural and gender complexities should be considered when tailoring approaches to meet the needs of refugee and vulnerable migrant women. Women in these cohorts may experience greater vulnerability due to societal stigmatisation or gender dynamics in the community. Including consideration of cultural and linguistic differences will improve settlement outcomes for the community as well as the effectiveness and performance of settlement services more broadly.

In this regard, the strategies employed in settlement—and particularly in the initial stages of the women’s settlement journey—are critical for achieving positive and lasting outcomes for the women, and consequently their families and communities. Refugee and vulnerable migrant women’s leadership capacity can also play a significant role in the empowerment of a broader range of women settling via other migration pathways.

Implementing a strong gender focus in settlement will have positive flow-on effects on settlement experiences and outcomes for women who arrive through all migration pathways, both humanitarian and non-humanitarian. Currently women who arrive through non-humanitarian pathways can be particularly isolated, with few consistent links to systems or services beyond the Australian Migrant English Program (AMEP) and—for some women only—the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) Program. 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.

In particular, settlement strategies should include a women-focused design and delivery of systems literacy. Women’s capacity to independently and confidently navigate systems—including legal, financial and health systems—is a significant barrier, or potential enabler, for recently settled refugee and vulnerable migrant women, and a critical factor in enabling their independence throughout their life.

Further, recognising the significance of English proficiency for settling in Australia and, in particular, for gaining employment, it is critical that women-centred design is applied to AMEP. Harmony Alliance welcomes the Department of Home Affairs trialling, from 1 July 2020, innovative and flexible delivery of English tuition in select regions to provide alternative models to traditional AMEP services particularly for vulnerable cohorts like women who may not be accessing the program. We emphasise, however, the need for AMEP (as well as any other supplementary programs) to factor in women-specific considerations, particularly with regard to extending the timeframes for access and enrolment. Rigid timelines for enrolment and commencement of tuition often disadvantage women who may delay learning English in order to support their families settle into a new country, and thereby miss out on this key opportunity.<sup>2</sup>

## **2 - Social services portfolio**

### **Expand specialist family, domestic and sexual violence services at the juncture of gender and cultural expertise to enable women from migrant and refugee backgrounds at risk of, or affected by, violence and requiring a cultural response to seek and receive help**

The provision of specialist family, domestic and sexual violence services at the juncture of gender and cultural expertise across Australia is lacking despite its critical capacity to ensure that migrant and refugee women are provided with services and supports that are culturally responsive, trauma informed and gender sensitive. Building such skillsets across all service

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<sup>2</sup> Joint Standing Committee on Migration. No one teaches you how to become an Australian: report of the inquiry into migrant settlement outcomes, (Canberra, 2017).

providers is important; however, it cannot adequately fill the role of specialist organisations, with many women unable or unwilling to seek help from mainstream services due to the services' inability to provide the necessary cultural response or to address the complexity. Investing in expanding the services at the juncture of gender and cultural expertise also stands to better equip the service system and communities to respond to the complexity of migrant and refugee women's experiences of violence.

**Expand eligibility to access services for women in precarious visa situations who are at risk of, or affected by, family, domestic and sexual violence**

Visa status affects eligibility to access state, territory and commonwealth government-funded services in situations of domestic, family and sexual violence, and leaves many migrant and refugee women in precarious visa situations who are victims/survivors of violence with no capacity to seek and receive help. In particular, inability to access income support, crisis payments, or government housing leaves women with limited pathways to seek safety.

While some women in precarious visa situations may sometimes be able to access crisis accommodation, they are unable to regain independence due to lack of income support, burdening the already stretched out services. Crisis support services are regularly forced to choose between turning away women in precarious visa situations with no income, who have no other options, or providing them with prolonged assistance subsequently reducing the service's capacity to provide assistance to others seeking help.

It is critical to develop and implement mechanisms—such as special benefits payments, income support payments, crisis payments, or flexible support packages—to be made available to women in precarious visa situations and their children experiencing violence.

The complex visa circumstances involving dependency on their visa sponsors/perpetrators, and the lack of service and support access to empower them to seek safety, leave these women and their children in situations of perpetual precarity.

### **3 - Attorney-General's portfolio**

**Support and resource courts to implement the *National Framework to improve accessibility to Australian courts for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and migrant and refugee women with a view to enhancing access to justice for migrant and refugee women, and particularly for those who are victims/survivors of family, domestic and sexual violence***

Courts are particularly alienating and intimidating environments for migrant and refugee women, who often have little familiarity with the court system and may have traumatic backgrounds. Training in cultural and gender responsiveness, family violence considerations and working with interpreters is essential to ensure judicial officers and court staff respond appropriately to the needs and situations of migrant and refugee women.

The *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 aims to improve access to justice for, inter alia, migrant and refugee women, particularly in the context of family violence and family breakdown.

Supporting and resourcing the courts to implement the Framework will particularly address such critical gaps as training in cultural competency, family violence and working with interpreters for all judicial officers and court staff; employment of Cultural Court Liaison Officers; and the development of information and resources on court proceedings and

processes. Further, this will enhance migrant and refugee women's capacity to navigate and better understand the court system, reducing their feelings of stress and improving their experience.

#### **4 - Health portfolio and Home Affairs portfolio**

##### **Expand the Free Interpreting Service to fund interpreting for allied health practitioners working with migrant and refugee women with low English proficiency to improve their health and mental health access, experiences and outcomes**

Women of migrant and refugee background are at increased risk of poor health across pregnancy (e.g. perinatal mortality, pre-term birth and low birth weight),<sup>3</sup> mental health (e.g. anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder)<sup>4</sup> and reproductive health.<sup>5</sup> Language barriers alone present significant barriers to health access for migrant and refugee women with limited English proficiency, including when seeking help in situations of family, domestic and sexual violence.

Engaging interpreters and not relying on ad hoc facilitators of interpretation (such as family members or friends) is recognised as best practice, and has been found to: decrease communication errors; improve the delivery of person-centred care; reduce unnecessary tests and treatments; improve clinical outcomes; raise the quality of care to the same level as that for patients without language barriers; and improve patient satisfaction.<sup>6</sup>

Harmony Alliance commends the Free Interpreting Service (FIS) that funds the provision of interpreting services for accessing private medical practitioners and pharmacies. However, a significant gap remains with FIS not covering the cost of interpreting services for access allied health practitioners, particularly those in private practice. In the context of family, domestic and sexual violence, this is a major barrier for women accessing psychologists and counsellors when seeking help.

#### **5 - Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business portfolio**

##### **Embed a strong gender and cultural response as part of the New Employment Services Model to ensure tailored approaches and enhanced outcomes for women job seekers from migrant and refugee backgrounds**

Migrant and refugee women experience particular barriers to workforce participation and higher unemployment rates due to structural barriers that limit their economic participation. 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, jumping to 6.7 per cent for women who speak a language other than English at home.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Higginbottom M, Morgan M, Alexandre M, et al. Immigrant women's experiences of maternity-care services in Canada: A systematic review using a narrative synthesis. *Systematic Reviews*. 2015;4:13/2-13/30.

<sup>4</sup> Kirkmayer L, Narasiah L, Munoz M, et al. Common mental health problems in immigrants and refugees: General approach in primary care. *CMAJ*. 2011;183(12):E959-67.

<sup>5</sup> Keygnaert I, Guieu A, Ooms G, et al. Sexual and Reproductive health of migrants: Does the EU care? *Health Policy*. 2014;114(2-3):215-25.

<sup>6</sup> Karliner LS, Jacobs EA, Chen AH, Mutha S. Do Professional Interpreters Improve Clinical Care for Patients with Limited English Proficiency? A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Health Services Research*. 2007;42(2):727.

<sup>7</sup> ABS 2016 Census, for people aged between 20 and 74 years old

<sup>8</sup> AMES Australia, *Hidden assets: partner-migration, skilled women and the Australian workforce*, (Australia, 2016), p 15-16.

Harmony Alliance welcomes the enhanced services delivery approach, as part of the New Employment Services Model, to help address job seekers' barriers to work. However, it is critical that refugee and vulnerable migrant women are provided with tailored solutions that are culturally and gender responsive, address particular barriers faced, and enable the flexibility in assisting the migrant and refugee women job seekers to balance settlement needs and family considerations.

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