

**ECCV Response
to
The Victorian Government's Gender Equality Consultations on the
Development of Victoria's Gender Equality Strategy
October 2016**

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria Inc. (ECCV) is the voice of multicultural Victoria and the peak policy advocacy body for eight regional ethnic community councils and up to 220 members including ethnic and multicultural organisations across Victoria.. For over 40 years, we have been the link between multicultural communities, government and the wider community.

ECCV has a strong history in advocating for the rights of multicultural communities on a broad range of issues relating to health, civic and workforce participation and social cohesion.¹ ECCV also has a strong role in informing industry practice and influencing Government and relevant stakeholders on a range of issues concerning equitable access and inclusive framework development. For example, ECCV was a member of the Consumer Affairs Victoria Renting Advisory Committee and contributed to the development of resources on renting for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in CALD communities² and is the co-convenor of the Commission for Children and Young People's CALD Strategic Partnership Advisory Committee.

This submission builds on previous activities conducted by ECCV including submissions to the Victorian Government's Royal Commission into Family Violence Report³ and ECCV's Submission to the Victorian Gender Equality Strategy⁴. ECCV is pleased to contribute this submission to the development of the Victorian Government's Gender Equality Strategic Plan.

Background

ECCV commends the Victorian Government's commitment to an extensive consultation process and is pleased to have Department of Premier and Cabinet staff attend ECCV's three multicultural consultation sessions and Hon Fiona Richardson's participation in ECCV's Women's Policy Advisory Committee meeting, a sub-committee of the ECCV Board, in October 2016.

Prior to the meeting, ECCV held consultations which were attended by members of culturally diverse new and emerging and established ethnic communities and the service providers who support them.

The consultations were represented by individuals of Afghan, Burmese, Indian, Sudanese, South Sudanese, Somali, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Sri Lankan, Malawi, Israeli, Russian and Zimbabwean. Ethno-

¹ ECCV, [Submission to the Victorian Gender Equality Strategy](#), March 2016; ECCV, [The Electoral Matters Committee's Inquiry into Electronic Voting](#), July 2016; ECCV, [Submission to the Victorian Inquiry into the Labour Hire Industry and Insecure Work](#), November 2015 and ECCV, [Submission to the Review of Victoria's Charter of Human Rights](#), June 2015.

² Consumer Affairs Victoria, [Understanding Renting/ Dari](#), July 2016

³ ECCV, [Victorian Government's Royal Commission into Family Violence Report](#), April 2016

⁴ ECCV, [Victorian Gender Equality Strategy](#), March 2016

specific organisations who attended included: Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre, Women's Health in the South East, WAYSS Ltd, City of Greater Dandenong, Cardinia Shire, African Women's & Families Network, New Hope Foundation, Monash Multicultural Women's Group, Australian Hazara Women's Friendship Network, Community Beam Inc, Flemington and Kensington Community Legal Centre, VICSEG New Futures, Australian Muslim Women's Centre, Women's Interfaith Network, Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition, Monash Health FARREP Program, Life Without Barriers, CoHealth, Council of Brazilian Citizens in Victoria, In Touch Multicultural Centre against Family Violence, and Centre for Multicultural Women's Health.

The unprecedented involvement of so many culturally diverse organisations at these ECCCV consultations indicates a high awareness of gender equity issues in Victoria's multicultural communities. It also highlights the encouragement felt by the multicultural community from their input into the government's consultation process and the importance of the Gender Equality Strategy [the Strategy] to culturally diverse Victorians.

It is important to note that at some of the consultation sessions, men participated in support of and to advocate for consideration of issues facing women and girls in their cultural community groups. Men have a key role to play in any strategies formulated as part of this process as champions and participants in realising the goals of gender equality.

A 2014 ECCV roundtable on men's health⁵ produced insights to indicate that we need to have men as allies to ensure a strong community-wide response to the issue of multicultural gender equality. This involves educating culturally diverse men to give women room to participate and work with cultural and religious leaders to be champions in the gender equality space. It may also involve addressing the health needs of men from culturally diverse communities to help them to become affective allies in achieving longer-term gender equity goals.

ECCV acknowledges the value and importance of the government's consultation process to the ethnic community and is pleased to provide further insight to the concerns, barriers, enablers and potential remedies to the gender equality issues faced by culturally diverse Victorians and contribute to the development of the Strategy.

A key feature of the Government's consultation process has been that the Strategy has been promised to be a living document which will affect change across the Victorian community and positively impact on the life of every woman and girl.

Below are issues that ECCV believes should be considered in the Strategy to affect that change.

Diversity within Cultural Diversity

An overwhelming message heard at ECCV's consultations was that the Strategy must consider differences within culturally diverse groups. Even within faith groups, there are differences. We were informed at the consultations that some Somali Muslim women have different practices to some Turkish Muslim women for example. These nuances impact on the uptake and success of initiatives offered by service providers.

Similarly, the needs of new and emerging communities are strongly related to their settlement needs. For example, access to information and service system navigation to successfully participate

⁵ ECCV [Men's Health Matters Because Men Matter: Roundtable Discussion Summary Report](#), June 2015.

in civic life, education and employment. An example was the lack of understanding of a newly arrived refugee who did not understand how the Newstart Allowance worked. This resulted in her payment being suspended for six weeks impacting on her livelihood and, potentially, the health of her baby.

To achieve equity, an acknowledgement of differences is required which necessitates different approaches to the same strategies. There are many grass roots female community leaders who currently work very closely with their communities on matters relating to family violence, employment, service access and capacity building. They have established trusting relationships and knowledge which can assist in shortening the design process of gender equality programs and initiatives and supporting the implementation of these projects.

Recommendation 1:

Involve female community leaders in co-designing the solutions which are developed by the government to achieve equity for ethnic women and girls that acknowledges the diversity within their cultural groups.

Racism, Safety and the Media

The issue of personal safety elicited robust discussion in the consultations. In particular, the safety of women and girls who look different whether it is their cultural attire or skin colour.

‘My daughters don’t feel safe going out at night on the train because they are scared for wearing their headscarves.’

Women in the consultations also spoke about their not being able to get a job because they wear a headscarf.

Similarly, the negative portrayal of young African people in the media, people of Muslim faith and the lack of positive images of culturally diverse people contributes to negative stereotyping of ethnic Victorians. Racial vilification affects the reputation of young ethnic community members with impact on their feeling of safety, opportunities for employment and social participation.

‘...when there is a crime committed why do they say that a Sudanese man in Dandenong committed the crime, why not just say that a man in Dandenong committed the crime. When they say it like that, it makes people think all Sudanese people are violent or criminals.’

Misconceptions and generalisations through false identification and misleading media reports feeds a perception that all members of a particular faith or cultural group are the same and this puts ethnic women and girls at risk. Further, the portrayal that men from culturally diverse backgrounds are somehow more violent than other backgrounds adds to stigmatisation and has the effect of depicting gender violence as a cultural issue and not ‘everyone’s problem’.

Recommendation 2:

Include positive images of ethnic Victorians in government media campaigns and set a new norm which is reflective of the 46% of Victorians who are either born overseas or have a parent who were born overseas.

The consultations gave hope as young ethnic people from emerging communities came forth with great ideas on addressing issues of racism, community education and capacity building. For example, a group of young African women in Melbourne's south east have designed the African Women's Project which is a social media campaign that addresses a range of topics including family violence, parenting and professional development.

The solutions exist within the ethnic communities, particularly on the approaches to take that would be effective in the cultural context.

Recommendation 3:

Support grass roots initiatives to be delivered by culturally diverse community members as they understand the approaches which work and have the trust of their community to implement the initiatives.

Volunteerism and Employment - Professionalisation of Bicultural Workers

Extensive discussion was had on the unpaid and unrecognised efforts contributed by ethnic community leaders. There was recognition of volunteerism being necessary and valuable contribution to Victorian society. It was acknowledged that this is how many of the large not for profit organisations started out.

It is important to recognise that the motivations for volunteering for established older communities and new and emerging culturally diverse communities are significantly different. New and emerging communities are in general energetic and enthusiastically contributing in a volunteer capacity in the hope of gaining employment. Higher rates of volunteerism by culturally diverse women and girls, however, do not always lead to meaningful or regular employment. It also raises issues which could be addressed by organisational policies in consultation with funding agencies.

'I've been volunteering for 15 years and still no job, and what about her; she's been doing this for 20 years.'

The issue of burn out and self-sacrifice, even though the effort contributed to bringing about change for themselves, their families and the broader ethnic community, was a concern for community members who had been participating in consultations, advocacy efforts and supporting community members at the cost to themselves.

Being that the key driver for volunteerism for a lot of the participants was for gainful employment, discussion shifted to that of creating pathways for employment for culturally diverse community members.

'...just give the girls a chance, like volunteer at the organisation and then it's up to them to prove themselves. That's how two of our girls got jobs at the New Hope Foundation.'

The move from consulting in a volunteer capacity to the provision of a sitting fee was also discussed. Whilst it is important and absolutely necessary to consult with culturally diverse communities on

program development, community members felt that this happened sometimes in a tokenistic way. Some were offered a token sitting fee only to find their intellectual property or those of their community groups taken away. There was great frustration that such information was used by these very organisations to further themselves with little benefit to their community. ECCV have found this same concern expressed across many grass roots groups who are mostly unsuccessful in competing for government grants at the expense of larger mainstream organisations.

Participants at the consultations spoke about the cost of time for some organisations which did not have grass roots connections to learn about the culturally diverse communities they are supposed to support before they can start implementing funded projects. People felt that this results in less of the funding making it to the ground level where it can make a real difference. Community leaders spoke about how they could make a great impact with very few resources and were keen to have these lost resources made available to them.

There was a call for funding the coordination of volunteering in community groups and for a shift away from volunteer consultation or sitting fees towards the professionalisation of a bicultural workforce. Valuing the knowledge and expertise of ethnic community members and being respectful of this should translate into employment opportunities with skill development. A best practise example was provided by Whittlesea Council which supports a volunteer mentorship program which offers support and training for volunteers to transition into paid employment.

Recommendation 4:

Government procurement policy should stipulate quotas for culturally and linguistically diverse workforce targets for all government funded programs, encouraging the employment of bicultural workers particularly in initiatives targeting culturally diverse communities.

Recommendation 5:

Implement a requirement for government funded organisations to report on their gender and diversity balance in work roles, including senior roles, as an accountability measure.

There is also a role for industry in supporting pathways to employment through mechanisms such as internships and mentoring programs. Consultation participants spoke about programs run in the private sector including the National Australia Bank (NAB) and Jesuit Social Services' African Australian Inclusion Program (AAIP). This program provides six months of paid corporate experience to skilled African Australians. One of the participants is enrolled in this program and said that over 230 staff from African background have been employed through this program.

Another participant at the ECCV consultation session stated that Southern Cross Care, an aged care provider, similarly recognised the contributions of their volunteers. They noted a case where a female migrant volunteer was supported through an employment pathway with Southern Cross Care from volunteer to Personal Care Attendant to now completing her Master's in Business Administration Course over an eight year period.

There is opportunity for government to incentivise this kind of initiative and support pathways to employment for migrant and refugee women and girls.

Recommendation 6:

Assistance for new and emerging culturally diverse communities to approach companies, through their corporate social responsibility agenda, to sponsor mentorship programs that will provide employment pathways.

Government to develop and set best practice guidelines for internship and apprenticeship

Fitted for Work was an initiative that was raised as another best practise example of program that delivered results. Another issue enthusiastically discussed as a need in the community was for programs to be tailored and delivered by mentors who understand the cultural norms of ethnic women and the business environment to give them their best chance of finding work. One woman spoke about the hijab being a barrier to work and how they would be interested in working out a 'work uniform' in collaboration with their employer.

Limited opportunity for part time and family friendly roles for women wanting to re-join the workforce after having children was also raised a concern, particularly where there were additional barriers such as local experience and language and literacy proficiency.

Recommendation 7:

Develop and support work readiness programs which address the cultural needs of ethnic women to support their entry into work.

A significant barrier to working reported by participants during ECCV's consultations was the perception that working costs money in terms of childcare and travel. Affordable childcare was raised time and again as a key enabler for women to participate in the workforce.

Family Day Care programs was highlighted as an affordable option, though feedback from ethnic community members was that the increase in bureaucracy and increase in compliance requirements made it difficult for Family Day Care providers to continue to operate. Members of the African community stated that the tax changes, increase in regulation, Medicare and Centrelink compliance requirements also put them at risk, forcing some providers to discontinue their business operations.

Recommendation 8:

Support capacity building programs to ensure ethnic providers with little exposure and experience in the Australian taxation and regulatory environments are compliant with changing regulations to run affordable multicultural childcare schemes such as Family Day Care to remain sustainable.

Women working in the cash economy were also highlighted as an at risk group. These women are exploited in family businesses or businesses within their own communities with no superannuation or health and safety access. A health service provider spoke about a case where a woman working for a community member's deli had cut herself on a machine. The owner of the business drove her to the hospital and instructed her to tell the emergency department that she had cut herself at home with a knife.

Unemployment in families was also linked to the risk of family violence. The pressures that families experience, the change of roles from men being the bread winner in traditional households to women becoming the provider is also a pertinent issue. The solutions offered were opportunities for multicultural women to gather, educate themselves and become aware of what is available to support them. The key was that women needed safe places to gather in.

One suggestion was for education programs to be community based and accessible to women where they are. Programs run by neighbourhood houses go a significant way to providing a place for women to overcome social isolation and to be exposed to educational and skill development opportunities. Examples included Well Springs for Women and The Women's Friendship Cafes.

The Women's Friendship Cafes have also been instrumental in developing information booklets about a girl's right to choose whether she wants to get married early or not.

Recommendation 9:

Government to invest in delivering community education programs targeted at culturally diverse communities within the community so that they can access services to them.

The issue of meeting places for women and girls and to participate in social and recreational activities such as sport was raised many times over across generations. Older women spoke about the lack of meeting places, the high cost of meeting places whereas girls spoke about groups as many as one hundred girls who want to participate in female only sports in the City of Monash who did not have venues to gather in.

Recommendation 10:

Support and fund local neighbourhood houses and friendship cafés in the same way that men's sheds are funded to provide safe meeting places for culturally diverse women and girls.

There is no lack of appetite for work among ethnic women or ability to earn their money and acquire financial independence to affect their self-determination. What is missing is opportunities which include: structural, systemic and regulatory design; education and training; capacity building and corporate and social intervention.

Education and Learning – Same Same but different

Consultation participants said that there were two very broad cohorts of refugees and migrant in this space, those that had access to education prior to their arrival in Australia and those that did not. Interestingly both cohorts ended up in the same employment sphere. That is, they both were more likely to work in the care, service and hospitality industries.

The barriers faced are related to English language skills, access to English language classes and vocational and educational training. This has ‘downstream’ impacts on the children of migrants and refugees where they also had similar limitations in job opportunities due to their limited English language proficiency.

Recommendation 11:

Establish initiatives to engage corporate sector in work experience for adult migrants/refugees to practice English outside of the home environment.

The issue of qualifications being unrecognised in Australia and not being able to find jobs in the industry of their education and training is a significant factor for migrant women. These women face the cost of requalifying, additional time delay in progressing in their career and potential child care needs at a time when they are also trying to meet the demands of establishing their life in a new country. There was a call for a register to be developed which stated recognised qualifications. While ECCV is aware that the Government has some initiatives for recognising overseas qualifications, consultation attendees were not aware of them.

The situation is more dire for women and children who did not have exposure to formal education in their countries of origin. Children of refugee backgrounds may have limited access to English learning schools prior to entering into mainstream school. This may be as brief as 6 months to two years. In the Victorian mainstream education system, children are placed according to age group. This is problematic for children who are older for whom the transition is too fast for them to adequately catch up in their language and literacy skills and impacts on the VCE performance outcomes and opportunity for further education.

Recommendation 12:

Develop and deliver bridging programs which support individuals to move into higher education.

In some cases, youth may have trouble settling into the schooling regime and become disengaged with the education system. Where these children are from female headed households, there may be added complications, as shown by the following Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) presentation attendee comment below:

‘...in my culture the father is the head of the household...if the child’s father goes to fight for their country or killed and the mother has to go the camps with the children and the children feel like their mother can’t protect them, they lose respect for their mother. They also lost their head of their house. It’s like they lose their way back to their culture and their heritage.’

Further, in situations where parents have limited literacy skills, the children are further disadvantaged by the lack of assistance with homework support. Consultation participants spoke of volunteer homework support programs which were run within ethnic communities to support these children. Opportunities such as these need to be supported and expanded to include support for multiple generations, particularly for culturally diverse communities where schooling and education of children is primarily the responsibility of the mother.

Recommendation 13:

Provide additional funding for community homework group programs to ensure equitable education outcomes for migrant and refugee children and their parents.

Gender, Cultural Norms and Choice

A strong message that came across in ECCV's consultations was that of the right for a woman to exercise her choice to be a mother and homemaker and that this is not a lesser role than her participation in the paid economy. In some cultures, financial participation is a foreign concept; women are firstly wives and mothers.

These cultural norms may also become cultural barriers for women to participate in the workforce as husbands see it inappropriate if women are interacting with other men. This situation can be cause for violence against women – comprising their mental and physical health. In these instances, women have to ask permission from their husband to work.

These gendered stereotypes for multicultural women require a multigenerational approach which supports the shift of social and cultural norms.

Though attitudes were reported by some of the participants as changing, some women said that they were only able to work part time so as it did not compromise her homemaking role. Homemaking is seen as women's role and so women are expected to fulfil all home duties in addition to their work.

'African women compromise themselves for their kids.'

Women are good leaders; however motherhood is causing them to leave their goals behind. From a cultural point of view, family expectations will affect the girl child or the mother's priorities.

An African male participant in ECCV's gender equality consultations also spoke about the need to educate girls on their potential, to finish her education and fulfil her goals before starting a family. This was said to be particularly pertinent for women and girls living in the outer suburbs who may be sheltered within their communities where the messages about cultural norms are stronger.

Recommendation 14:

Create multigenerational primary prevention programs which address the diverse roles and potentials of multicultural women and girls in society and the positive contributions they make through community education and promotion campaigns.

Resettlement in Australia can cause a conflict in identity as well as difficulties in balancing things in terms of financial access to the community.

Structural Change

In order for the recommendations put forward by community members and service providers to make a difference, there needs to be a body that oversees and advises the development of an implementation plan. An Interdepartmental Gender Equality Steering Committee which is informed by the needs of the culturally diverse community needs to be established to undertake this task.

Recommendation 15:

Establish a State-wide Inter-departmental Gender Equality Steering committee with ECCV representation on behalf of multicultural community.

Conclusion

There has been a great deal of interest in the consultation process from the multicultural community on the Victorian Government's Gender Equality Strategy. A key feature is that the Strategy has been promised to be a living document with priorities which will move and shift as they become relevant in the implementation process. It is ECCV's hope that recommendations we have put forward with input from ethnic community members and the services that support them, some of which may be considered for immediate implementation, and others which are medium term opportunities, will inform the Government's implementation plan.

For further information, please contact Galina Kozoolin, Policy Officer at 03 9349 4122 / gkozoolin@eccv.org.au