

Reaching Out: Enhancing the Accessibility of an Employment Rights Advisory Service for Migrant Women

This project was initiated to explore ways of enhancing the existing services that the Queensland Working Women's Service (QWWS) provides for migrant working women in Queensland. QWWS strives to provide advice and advocacy services on employment related matters to women from all backgrounds, but the organisation's statistics have shown recently that contact by migrant women was low, and they were significantly under-represented in its client population. QWWS therefore identified migrant women as one of their key priority target groups, and together with a research team from Griffith University, a project was developed to examine how QWWS could improve its outreach and advocacy services for this group. The subsequent report provided a number of recommendations including that the continuation of QWWS's existing advisory and advocacy services be further expanded to lobby governments over broader funding issues, the introduction of pre-employment workshops and programmes, to broaden networks with local, regional and state migrant organisations, and to enhance its profile amongst migrant women.

QWWS is a not-for-profit, community-based organisation, and has been in operation since 1994. QWWS provides a free confidential service that assists women of all backgrounds with employment related matters, specifically focussing on employment rights, minimum conditions and pay, and upon issues that are discriminatory in nature. The organisation provides a referral service for women where issues may require further investigation and action. In the 2005 QWWS Strategic Plan, women from migrant backgrounds were identified as a key priority, as the number of migrant women using the service had dropped significantly (by 48% since 2004 figures). As a result, QWWS were concerned that they did not adequately understand the issues faced by migrant women in the workplace, and therefore needed to improve their understanding of the issues specifically relevant to migrant women. In its 2007-2008 Annual Report, QWWS reported that the number of clients accessing their service from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds was 6.3%, compared to 74% of English speaking backgrounds, and 1.1% of Indigenous Australians (QWWS 2008: 16). The research project therefore aimed to assist QWWS in gathering information to assist the organisation in enhancing its ability to meet the needs of migrant women in Queensland.

Not much is known about migrant working women's experiences in Queensland, and little is known of how, or even whether, migrant women access information about their rights at work, whether they are aware of the services offered by organisations like QWWS, or even how they would interact with such a service. There is also now a growing body of research suggesting that advocacy based organisations are important in providing employment advice and worker representation to people from a diverse range of backgrounds and to those that are in more precarious employment situations (Heery, Abbott & Williams 2009: 2-3). Further, these types of organisations can fill gaps or be accessed in addition to services offered to workers, such as those through trade union membership (Heery et al 2009: 3).

Migrant women experience significant change between their social and familial roles upon settling into their new, industrialised home (Alcorso & Harrison 1993: 33). Research in the 1980s and 1990s showed that migrant women sought employment after arrival to ensure greater economic stability for their families because, more often than not, they needed to supplement the income of their male partners who were likely to be employed in the lower skilled and low paid sectors of the labour market (Alcorso 1991: 20; Montague & Stephens 1985: 7). Women who found employment were also more likely to be employed in lower status positions that attracted low rates of pay, within the low and unskilled segments of the labour market (Collins 1991: 78-79). Of the 332,527 migrant

women of working age resident in Queensland in 2006, 51 percent were employed, 43 percent were recorded as not being in the labour force, with only 3.4 percent unemployed and 2 percent not stating their labour force status. The unemployment rate for CALD women and mainly English speaking country (MESC) born women residing in Queensland were both recorded at 4% (DIAC 2009: 121).

The research in this project focussed on the ways in which QWWS could increase their interaction with migrant women in Queensland. Six focus groups were conducted in three different locations in Queensland: in Brisbane (3 focus groups) and in the large regional towns of Townsville (2) and Toowoomba (1). The research team aimed to include a diverse range of migrant women's experiences, incorporating different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and length of time resident in Australia. Our research showed that migrant women experienced difficulties from the pre-employment stage, where simply finding a job was complicated by inadequate language skills (real or perceived by employers), discrimination or non-recognition of educational qualifications and/or previous employment experience in their home country. Many women suggested QWWS information be included in pre-migration information sessions as well as for newly arrived migrants. For migrant women who had been in Australia for a period of time, information about employment rights and where to seek further information needed to be provided when first commencing employment.

There was clearly a lack of knowledge about QWWS and its services with few having seen the QWWS brochure and/or accessed the QWWS website. Once we had provided information about QWWS's services, the groups were positive about the existence of such an organisation. Suggestions for enhancing QWWS's ability to reach out to migrant women included raising QWWS's profile amongst migrant women through the addition of more diverse 'faces' on the brochure and website to indicate that migrant women were welcome to use the service, placing brochures in areas migrant women regularly accessed such as supermarkets, doctor's clinics and refugee and migrant services and redesigning the QWWS brochure and website to clearly state their aim by adding phrases such as 'Advice about your rights at work'. In addition, including information about office hours, providing links via the website to a wider range of migrant-focussed agencies, health and educational services, together with links to significant regional events such as multicultural festivals. Many women felt these changes would demonstrate that QWWS welcomed enquiries from migrant women. The participants also suggested that QWWS could produce 'fact sheets' to advise on issues from employment rights and discrimination, to what to do in an interview or how to prepare a resume, vital services needed by migrant women but either non-existent or difficult to access.

The overwhelming response to QWWS was relief that such an organisation existed to assist migrant women to overcome the hurdles faced in gaining and maintaining employment. Changes included QWWS demonstrating its commitment to migrant women by clearly outlining the services if offered and the availability of services. With these changes, migrant women believed QWWS could enhance its visibility amongst the migrant women community in Queensland.

References

- Alcorso, C 1991, *Non-English speaking background immigrant women in the workforce*, Working Papers in Multiculturalism No. 4, Wollongong, Centre for Multicultural Studies, University of Wollongong, p. 133.
- Alcorso, C & Harrison, G 1993, *Blue collar and beyond: the experiences of non-English speaking background women in the Australian labour force*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.
- Collins, J 1991, *Migrant hands in a distant land: Australia's post-war immigration*, Pluto Press.

- Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) 2009, *Migration Flows to the States in population flows: Immigration aspects 2007-08 edition*, Belconnen, ACT, access date: 24 March 2009, accessed at:
<http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/popflows2007-08/PopFlows_09_chp8.pdf>.
- Heery, E, Abbott, B & Williams, S 2009, 'Worker representation through Civil Society Organizations: Evidence from Britain', conference paper presented at the 15th World Congress of the International Industrial Relations Association (IIRA) Conference, Sydney, Australia, August 24-27, 2009.
- Montague, M & Stephens, J 1985, *Paying the price for sugar and spice: a study of women's pathway into social security recipiency*, A. G. P. Service, Canberra, National Women's Advisory Council.
- Queensland Working Women's Service Inc (QWWS) 2008, *Queensland Working Women's Service Inc Annual Report 2007-2008*, access date 19 November 2009, accessed at:
<<http://www.qwws.org.au/media/Annual%20Report%20final%20300908doc.pdf>>.