



Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Women and Work

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Northern Territory Working Women's Centre

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1. BACKGROUND

1.1 The Northern Territory Working Women's Centre

The Northern Territory Working Women's Centre (NTWWC), established in 1994, is a community based, non-profit organisation governed by a management committee made up of volunteers. The Centre's funding comes from the Commonwealth Government through the Workplace Ombudsman, and from the NT Government through the Department of Employment and Training.

The Centre provides information, advice and referral for NT women about work related issues such as pay, working conditions, unfair dismissal, superannuation, discrimination, harassment, occupational health and safety, and bullying.

Emphasis is placed on providing services to those in a disadvantaged bargaining position, insecure and low paid work. The NTWWC pays particular attention to:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) women
- Women from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds
- Women who have a disability
- Women in regional, rural and remote areas
- Women with family responsibilities
- Women of mature age
- Women negotiating a workplace agreement
- Young women

Services are provided throughout the Northern Territory, and staff visit regional centres and some remote communities.

1.2 CALD Focus Groups Project

In the past 5 years an average of 13% of NTWWC enquiries were from CALD women, and 10% of case work (in which NTWWC provided ongoing assistance) at NTWWC were with CALD women. The NTWWC wanted to engage with CALD women at an earlier stage, through community education, and developed the focus groups project to better inform and improve community education for CALD women.

From March to May 2008, NTWWC conducted 2 focus groups and 2 interviews with women from various CALD backgrounds. The women came from the following backgrounds: Somali, Liberia, China, Timor, Burma, France, Burundi and Ethiopia. The focus groups explored three areas: working experience prior to arriving in Australia; working experience in Australia; and differences (positive and negative) about working experiences. Participants were asked to make recommendations based on their experience as to how services could better address the issue of introducing workplace rights and responsibilities to new arrivals. NTWWC anticipates that findings from the focus group will assist NTWWC us to design educational sessions among the CALD community, as well as impetus to continue to work in partnership with other community organizations in addressing the lack of knowledge and understanding of workplace rights and responsibilities. Also significant is the fact that these focus groups provide a forum for women from many different backgrounds to share their experiences and stories with each other, and reflect on how similar and common their individual experiences are.

1.3 CALD Women and Work

In the past few years, there have been growing concerns about workforce participation among new arrivals in Australia. Around Australia, many projects and initiatives have been developed to address settlement needs of humanitarian entrants. Overwhelmingly, a combination of work experience, awareness of workplace culture, flexibility and English proficiency are key to successful programs that address workforce participation.¹

NTWWC offers a unique service to women, in combining education about workplace rights and responsibilities, and individual support and advice about workplace problems. For the most vulnerable group in the community, new arrivals and women from culturally diverse backgrounds, access to NTWWC services is crucial to promoting and maintaining positive work experiences. Positive work experiences lead to long term workforce participation, better work/life balance and better health and well-being for women. Participants acknowledge initial periods of settlement are always difficult, and are ready to face the challenges. However, they do feel an acute sense of disempowerment when they are not equipped to deal with problems at work.

2. AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The NTWWC, with support from the Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory (MCNT), Melaleuca Refugee Centre (MRC) and Anglicare conducted a series of small focus group interviews with women from various Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds (CALD) with a view to elicit their experiences of work. It has been well acknowledged within the community sector that new arrivals and migrant communities face barriers to employment. The focus had been very much on assisting new arrivals in gaining employment, through training, education or on-the-job experience. More recently, there have been indications that gaining employment is just a first step towards successful settlement of new Australians, and issues such as workplace rights, conditions and problems at work are also important elements of continuing success in workforce participation of new arrivals.^{1,2,3,4}This was made clear at initial meetings between NTWWC, MCNT, MRC and Anglicare.

Women attending the NTWWC invariably share their experiences of problems at work, in the hope of obtaining support, advice and assurance. This project is aimed at eliciting the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women, particularly those relatively new to Australia. The project takes a step back and discusses with participants their experience of work in a general way, including their experience in their country of origin.

Much had been written about barriers to employment. This project attempts to elucidate and focus on women's working experience in general, and how this may impact on their expectations and attitude to working in Australia. Additionally understanding women's past and their cultural and social attitude to workplace issues will enable us to better 'get' women's attitudes to workplace problems. These attitudes

impact on issues around settlement and workforce participation for first generation migrants. From these experiences, NTWWC hopes to develop appropriate education and engagement strategies that empower women at the workplace. Findings from this project will also assist other community groups in developing settlement strategies, particularly around workforce participation.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Recruitment

Participants were recruited with the assistance of MRC, MCNT and Anglicare NT. We were interested in talking to women from CALD backgrounds who have recently arrived in Australia, and who have some work experience in Australia. One of the difficulties with recruiting was the availability of women with proficiency in English. Some women who were approached were overloaded with family, work and/or study and community commitments. The 2 participants in the interviews fall within this group.

3.2 Focus Groups & Interviews

Focus groups are an informal way to obtain information, attitudes and views from participants. Focus groups are often used for: exploratory work; assessing multiple dimensions of a given topic; in-depth knowledge; and how opinions form and change within a group discussion. It is also non-confrontational, and encourages discussion and sharing experiences.

2 focus groups and 2 interviews were conducted in Darwin over a period of a 6 weeks. All participants are gainfully employed, and are fluent in English. In each focus group, there were 3 participants, all from different ethnic backgrounds.

Participants came from the following backgrounds: Liberia; East Timor; Myanmar; France; China; Ethiopia; Somalia & Burundi. The French and East Timorese participants grew up in Australia, although both have worked and lived overseas. Both discussed their family members' experience as new arrivals (both are married to men who grew up overseas), and made comments and observations about their own communities' experiences.

3.3 Focus Group Questions

The following set of questions was asked at each focus group/interview.

Although the questions are directed at participants' experiences, discussion was broadened to include participants' opinion and observations of women within their own community.

1. What do you like about working in Australia?
2. What's different about working in Australia?
3. Experience of working in Australia
 - What was difficult about working in Australia?
 - What helped in adjusting to working in Australia?
 - What could have helped for work experience in Australia?

4. RESULTS

4.1 Working in Australia

All participants were in employment at the time of interviews. There was a general consensus that participants generally enjoy working.

Positive experiences could stem from a good working environment and employer,

“I really like working in Australia, since I arrived, [current employer] is the first place I've worked.....there's lots of help here for one another, and we share, we communicate, and since I've been working here, no one has been angry at me, or shout at me, you know, everything has been very fine”

“..you know I like to work in here [with current employer] its fair for getting a job if i don't have a skills or whatever you know, I can not do the job I wont be able to get it.”

or an appreciation of Australian work culture,

“I like here, more relaxed and no stress compared with China, and people are nice. The simple relationship, in China the relationship is so complicated”

or an individual's attitude and attributes to work.

“I think also with the Timorese community, it would depend on the individual as well, as to how they would relate to their bosses, I know my mother is quite strong willed and she will boss her boss around. So she doesn't stand for anything.”

There was also an acknowledgement that participants faced some difficult situations when they first started working in Australia. These difficulties revolve around issues of language; adjusting to work culture; underlying discrimination; understanding workplace rights. Barriers to work were also canvassed, involving issues of transport, childcare and recognition of qualifications. These matters will be canvassed below.

4.2 Differences between Working Overseas and in Australia

All participants had working experience prior to coming to Australia. All women experienced difficulties when settling in Australia, and overwhelmingly, all reported that working in Australia was generally better than in their country of origin, particularly when it comes to issues around employer/employee relationships (hierarchy & power distance); industrial relations laws and regulatory frameworks that protect the rights of workers.

As set out below, generally, participants report that the social and legal structures that they previously worked in impacted on how they approach the working environment in Australia. From their experiences, the arbitrariness with which rights under the law were enforced created a sense of powerlessness, resulting in a lack of trust and an unwillingness to pursue rights with employers. Similarly, the power differentials between employer and employee, corruption and experiences in refugee camps created a sense of mistrust and skewed workplace relationships. Legal systems, a clear understanding of rights under the law, and the ways in which they are enforced are important aspects of any induction or introduction programs for new arrivals. A clear understand of basic rights at work, and how they are enforced is crucial to creating a sense of trust and empowerment for new arrivals. Access to services and information about workplace rights are important steps in empowering new arrivals at work.

4.2.1 Power Differentials between Employer/Employee

Participants reported that the power differential between employer/employee is markedly less in Australia than elsewhere. For this reason, participants enjoy working in Australia.

“... in China the relationship is so complicatedeven if you have education background and work experience your boss won't employ you, you have to have very good connection, your family background should be very good, otherwise you can't take good position”

“I think there's a big difference in power, in hierarchy, I find its more egalitarian here”

“...sometime you know in Africa it was hard to approach your can I say your boss, and if even if you had some problems it was difficult to tell him or her I have a problem, but here, you can you can approach him or her, but still we do have such, such thing where we come from”

“Back home, its like, you have to do what someone says to you.. You don't make your own decision. Like, I'd say, on being here [referring to current employer] you do whatever you want to do. If I see any problems, I would just go to my boss and we would sit and discuss, share ideas. But back there, you have to, someone has to tell you something and you do something, whatever that she wants you to do.....Back home if your boss does wrong to you, and you want to take step against him, then its.. you're just killing yourself. Even if she or he does wrong to you and it hurts you, you'll just have to forget it, and.. if he's angry at you or she's angry at you, you'll just have to apologize”

This more 'egalitarian' nature of employer/employee relationship enabled participants to talk to employers if work related problems arise. However, participants are aware that they are able to do this because they are in a good relationship with their employer. They see that there are other women in their community who may not be so lucky and through a combination of past experience and workplace culture in their country of origin do not approach employers about work-related problems. This results in women not expressing any difficulties they may have at work, for fear of losing their job.

“...because in our country or in African country it is hard to report that oh my boss did this for me, so if he knows this I will be fired from my work. But still we have that thing in our mind, if I report this my boss would... I would lose my job, so I just keep silent, so as I can continue, and sometimes not good, especially when working, how can they report those things...it's not easy to do, even myself I know it. Yeah because we don't want to make any trouble because sometimes we may tell you something and you say yes just to please.”

“...for me its...you've got rights, you've got rights to do this, to complain. But especially for those that have not gone to school, even if they see those people, they want to retain their jobs, they won't call, they won't lodge a complaint”

“Yes, they want to do their job, because no one wants to get bad record from the boss, so you know they would just keep everything here, and they would go ahead with the job. Like I've got a friend that is working somewhere, she is working with one lady, the lady is her boss, but if this lady wants to do something, she would say, leave it I'll come and do it, leave it I'll do it, knowing that that boss will have to do something as well, but she would tell her boss to sit down and she does all the work, you see. Its like back home, where you see the boss coming, you'll be.....you'll work harder so that you know, she or he could get that interest.. Here it's completely different.”

4.2.2 Workplace Rights & Corruption

Lack of legislative frameworks that protect the rights of workers resulted in workplace cultures that are unstable and prone to human whims. Bribery and corruption are regular workplace practices in some countries.

“..sometimes you want to keep this job, the position is going up you have to give lots of gifts to your boss”

“But in my country, whoever apply for the job, so many people and applications, even if suitable skills for position, have to sit a test first to get a job, then you know, oral interview, probably 3 steps, and finally we get a result. But not really fair, some, not some but many departments receive bribe money, like that big competition – 5 million in the city, altogetherwhatever the job have to be approved by the boss, or committee, bribe money to be respect, too much respect like that..”

“Also the pay, over there they just pay you whatever they want to pay you. You can't complain to anyone, there's a union, but its not working there's corruption”

Similarly, the lack of legislative protection to workers resulted in uncertainty and workers disempowerment. Even where legislation is in place protecting workers rights, they are not observed and enforced.

“...all the places I work except the Red Cross is owned by the same people, same language. But they would pay you the way they want to pay, not like in Australia, its not very uniform”

“Even our right for annual leave, in Burma we do have 4 weeks annual leave per year, sick leave, very hard to get annual leave..... Back home in Burma, its very hard to get annual leave, even if its our right, you have to give excuse, so many excuse. And sick leave as well, is very hard.”

Conversely, one participant made the following observation about Australian law:

“I think there is big difference here, in Africa for example, a woman who has maternity leave, can still be paid in Africa, in Africa they can still pay you money while you are on maternity leave, but here you have to work, if you don't work they won't pay you, in Burundi, even in Tanzania.... But here if you don't work, no money. Because to have to be pregnant...I heard many people saying when you are pregnant, why you're taking leave they don't pay you.”

4.2.3 Women and Work in Africa – Somalia & Liberia

Participants from these countries raise some issues about women's levels of skill when they arrived in Australia. As reported by the Somali participant, there are currently around 10 Somali families in Darwin. Among these families, she knows of 3 women who work (including herself). She raises the point that generally speaking, In Somalia, women work mainly in small business enterprises, such as market stalls and other cottage industry work. The great advantage with this type of work is the flexibility it affords women, as they are able to simultaneously care for their children, or have children cared for by family over a short period of time (whilst they are at the market for example). In Australia, these women find themselves unskilled, and coupled with language, childcare and transport difficulties, find it hard to enter the workforce. This participant recommended a concerted focus on training Somali women in basic skills, such as skills in the use of domestic technologies (vacuum cleaners etc..) and chemicals (safe use and handling) so that they could find low skill work. She also recommended women be taught to drive and have better access to childcare. She acknowledges language acquisition is adequately addressed through programs such as Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), but sees other barriers for Somali women who have not had experience in working in developed countries.

4.2.4 Working in Refugee Camps

Two participants' only experience of work prior to coming to Australia had been on refugee camps. All participants who came as refugees worked on the camps. These experiences may also impact on participants' expectations and attitudes to work.

One participant spoke about her experience of working in a refugee camp, and when asked if she was in paid work, her reply was:

“...oh I think I cannot call it....can I call it an incentive, because its just a small amount and it helped us to survive.”

Later, she explained:

“I think there is a big difference in working in a refugee camp and in Australia, because when they compare, in refugee camp it was like volunteering because even I have already said the wages were like to encourage you, and we have to do that because we have to support our community in how to adjust to the new environment, and here, it’s a little bit, there is a big difference, because you can see how the money you earn per hour, and... and when you compare to some workers, Australian workers or other people, you can see that there is no, its almost the same. Yeah, there's a big difference but...[interviewer: is that important for you to see how much earn and value of work in comparison to long term resident?]but it depends because, like for me, I'm just new worker in Australia, maybe I can see I think, I can see the money that I've earned per hour but [interviewer: why is this so important?] because I think, if I compare, we were paid enough, monthly, it was just like \$20 per month,... I think there is a big difference...I don't know how to call it.....

This discussion is interesting because of allusions to questions like equality of treatment and the value of work – this participant is pleasantly surprised that she is paid the same amount as someone else in similar work. Impliedly, her experience on the refugee camps did not reflect this. In less regulated environments, such as refugee camps or more totalitarian societies, enforcement of workers’ rights under the law is patchy at best.

Another participant explained that her work experience in the camps enabled her to be trained to provide training and support services to women in the camps:

“The organization I worked for.... was owned by an American organization... so it was like we go out there, sensitize the group, the population, have focus group...and then women would tell us you know, what they are going through. From there we have a training centre where we train women to do just to be self reliance, to fix their own clothes, to sew, to tie and die, just fixing their own clothes. And then after that, when they have completed the training, then the organization would then give them money for themselves and then they would start their own business.... They would give them a certificate and things...”

Another refugee participant also reports that she was very active in the refugee camp, working with the UN to ensure women’s safety. She worked in various roles at the camp, many of which were voluntary, some paid by NGOs. She also studied whilst in the camps, and achieved qualifications.

It is fairly clear from the above, that the trajectory of these participants’ experience in refugee camps has greatly enhanced their ability to enter the workforce and settle in Australia. These participants have had an opportunity to work, to earn some money, to obtain skills and play some leadership role within their own community prior to coming to Australia. Their community service continues in Australia, as they are currently engaged in working in the community sector, at least in the first few years post-arrival.

4.3 Work Experience in Australia

The bulk of discussions centred on participants’ experiences of working in Australia. Two participants had been raised in Australia, and had experience working in other cultures. They contributed to the discussion by relating their own family members’ experiences, which still have an impact on their own lives. One such

participant is particularly affected by her mother's experience in Australia, with one of the major difficulties at work being language and disempowerment as a result of class and ethnicity. Other themes canvassed included: language and culture; discrimination; understanding of rights at work and communication with people from English speaking background.

Some of the issues identified by participants that act as barriers to work also included: language and culture; skills and qualification; transport and childcare; and the workplace landscape. Participants also identified support mechanisms they were able to access, which alleviated some of the barriers they faced during settlement. These included: language classes; community and family support. Ultimately, all these factors impinge on participants' perception of their own and their community's understanding of workers rights in the workplace. Many community members rely on informal networks, including work colleagues, to inform them of their workplace rights. In the case of new arrivals, participants recommend earlier intervention with regards to educating new arrivals and refugees about Australian workplace relations, rights and obligations under the law.

4.3.1 Barriers to Work: Transport & Childcare

A theme identified by women from refugee backgrounds is the lack of transport. Public transport is the main means of travel to and from work for this group of women. One of the criticisms of public transport is that it doesn't run on time.

“And the other thing is, means of transport, coz you have to transport yourself if you want to be to work on time, you can't you know rely on the bus all the time, and sometimes it's hard for them to get to work on time”

Another participant highlighted that one of the skills women need in Australian society is driving skills. This gives women the freedom and flexibility for work and access to childcare. Thus transport, where women can access it reliably and with flexibility will enable more new arrivals to enter and stay in the workforce.

Not unlike the majority of women in Australian society, access to childcare can be a barrier to entering the workforce for new arrivals. Similarly, for those who work, even with access to childcare, the lack of family support strains family circumstances.

From my experience if you have children, you become very busy woman because you have to take care of the children to childcare then go to work, after work go quickly to childcare, you come home and prepare food for them, yeah its busy. If you are also studying, but this is the way it is, so what can we do? And the other thing is that we don't have extended family here, because in our country you can ask your friend can you look after my daughter, now I'm going to do this, if he's ready he can also look after your daughter. But here we don't have extended family

These barriers have broader impact and implications on participation and engagement in the community.² Thus lack of access to childcare may mean that women cannot attend English classes and/or any training and upskilling.⁵

4.3.2 Barriers to Work: Qualification & Skill-sets

Another identified barrier is the lack of recognition of prior qualification and skills of new arrivals. This meant effectively that women have to start again, and coupled with other barriers, can be disheartening.

“...and just thinking about my partner, he's French, when he came too and his qualification helped him to migrate to Australia, that helped him get here, once here at uni it wasn't really recognized. He didn't start from scratch but had to do a couple of years”

“Its very demoralizing for my husband, he's a, he's got a degree in sociology and planning, and he doesn't have the English skills and he's cutting potatoes and stuff at the moment. Its quite demoralizing for him.....”

“...like even when I'm saying that I studied in Africa and I come here and I study now, they cannot allow me to go straight away to work in Australia because they have to assess me to see if I can do a job”

“...what I've noticed is here is that, even if you come here with whatsoever qualification, it is not recognised”

“But we had to leave from our country and came here, all my education are useless, I have to start at zero, and not recognise our education..... Here in Australia, don't recognise our skills and education from back home, but we can try”

There is also the cultural shock of moving to a very different type of economy and workplace landscape.

“It is hard, especially some of the women in my community who were doing businesses back home....yes, their own businesses, and then in the mornings they just get their things, go to the market, do their own business whatever they want, earn their money, go back home. But here, it's just so hard for, especially the language. And the other thing is, means of transport”

For many new arrivals, Australia presents a very different way of working, with attendant concepts such as 'work', 'value of work' and 'workplace' which are radically different for women who traditionally worked for themselves and who invariably juggle work and family home life in a very different cultural and social context. Without an introduction to the Australian workplace relations landscape, the laws that underpin them and the agencies that enforce them, many workplace environments can be alienating and difficult for new arrivals. These personal difficulties may lead to low retention rates in the workplace, particularly for those learning new skills.

4.3.3 Difficulties at Work: Language

By far the most significant barrier for working women is language. Not being able to speak English is a disempowering experience for women at work. It locks them out of peer social network and support, and more importantly, exposes women to systemic and structural disempowerment.

“My mum has worked in Australia for many years, 27 years in Australian government but she's always been an outsider, the language has been very difficult..... linguistically its different...She's always at meetings, never ever opened her mouth in 27 years she's never said anything in a meeting. my mum has a lot of paperwork, with super, with retirement, with medicare, a lot of paperwork, just getting her glasses is very difficult “

Similarly, participants had difficulty understanding paperwork and other written material available at work.

“Until recently it was very difficult for me, you know to fill the paperwork, here I'm getting it now, it took me a long time, it was very difficult”

“Again, the difference is the language, it's very very hard. You come here with you know, this huge expectation, you come here and when settling here is, lots of changes. Like people from my community some of them are older people, they are not you know, working before. You come here after a few months, you see, receive a letter from Centrelink to get a job, and its so hard for some of them.”

Another difficulty is a clear sense of disadvantage participants feel, although for one participant, it was a catalyst for her to improve her English.

“...and my English was so bad, because I can read most of the things, but I can't speak, also sometimes I don't understand what people talking because they have Australian slang, and some Filipinos they have the strong accent so I can't understand what they say, and the manager always push me and say you work so slowly and in front of the customer and I feel so ashamed and he said, your English is so bad, how can you work here, and if worked a little bit slowly, for me I don't think I'm .. and then he would be shouting to me and in front of all the customers and say are you dreaming? And every one would watch at me and I'm in front, I was so embarrassed, and at that time, and I told myself, I said, I have to learn English quickly, I have to leave this job..”

Another participant tells a story of how language is a disadvantage to advancement in the workplace.

“I know from my mum, she's disempowered, and also my partner, he's had 2 occasions where he's had problems in his work, he's worked in Australia for the past 7 or 8 years, and not having the language, when you're upset, your language gets more disempowered, and you get muddled up and you don't get the right words, and its very hard, and just to comment on that, he was once in one job, and he had the best sales in the shop, and he was taken for coffee by the boss but the boss ask him could he now get rid of the accent ...his accent's there, you can't get rid of your accent... to be a better worker, and when you're in a situation like that you get so upset, already you're having difficulty with the English language because you're translating everything in your brain, but then when you're upset, you just can't find the words”

“Especially when you're told they'll be watching, whatever you're saying you will be conscious of, “what am I saying?”

Participants feel strongly that language is key to better employment and work outcomes, but also understand that for many within their own communities, language is an extremely difficult barrier to overcome.

“I think people in my community the big problem is their language, because they're still learning English, and plus they wish to get job, they wish to get job but they say oh how can I get this job without at all saying English, yeah it's a big problem”

“...sometime people from my community they feel they are isolated, and this language, this English, for them they think that its... I remember one lady was telling me that you know, I fled the war when people they were wanting to kill me, but here I can see that English is another type of war because just I stay here, I can't go to my neighbour talk to him or her....its a very very difficult... and they wish to go to work, they say, you know we can look after our children, so why can't we work at childcare?”

All participants recognize the significance of language as a key to successful settlement in Australia. Participants recognize proficiency in English is a desirable goal, even amidst seemingly insurmountable difficulties. Participants are also aware that one of the most effective routes to English proficiency is through workforce participation. Given the right level of support and encouragement, participants managed to overcome difficulties in language acquisition.

“At first it's very difficult you know, everything is new to you, even though you know the language, and the language is not even the same. I thought I could understand the English and when I went to university I couldn't understand anything. At first ... when I'm reading I will understand but when they were talking I couldn't understand what they were saying, I enrolled like 2 times from certificate 3. At first I sit in the class I couldn't understand what they were saying, I couldn't understand the whole thing. I enrolled and I did English, and I enrolled in AMEP and I did 6 months. And then for the second time I started and then I, it was still very difficult for me. I withdraw and I didn't go back to the English classes, I was just at home and there were some

support group coming to help me at home, and I slowly picked up and I understand it I started to understand and even reading you know, the way they were putting the words, they way they were teaching it was completely different, it took some time for me to understand everything”

“I found Sky City looking for people and I went there, I know my English was not good, but I want try because I think if I try, maybe I have half, maybe 50% opportunity, I don't try, that's 0, and then they employed me because they said they've got special VIP room, a lot of Singapore and Malaysian junket comes to there, but they can't speak English, so they really need a Chinese speaker, and I thought that was a good opportunity for me, I was so lucky and then they employed me in the VIP room to work... I work with the Chinese speaker, but most of the times, I have to speak English with the supervisors the managers and workmates, so I think my English would improve slightly, and then I did the uni subject, most work I have to do in a group, so I have to talk with classmates, so I find the English was improving quickly, so I keep going and keep going so now I feel a little bit more confident now”

4.3.4 Difficulties at Work – Discrimination

One participant raised the issue of perceived racial discrimination felt by some members in her community.

“...and I think the other thing is, this is general, I heard some people saying that the more you have black skin the more you are disadvantaged at work, maybe your colleague they don't believe you that you can doing a job very well, they think that this black lady oh how they cannot do their job well maybe they suspect but I heard some people saying that, you have black skin, you know...”

4.3.5 Difficulties at Work – Cultural Differences

One of the early difficulties for participants is getting used to cultural norms at their workplace. Participants are aware that not participating may exclude them from the social network and support, and other important workplace information. An inability to adjust to workplace culture does have potential to disadvantage women of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, particularly where cultural practices conflict with workers' values and beliefs.

“I have one thing, Friday afternoon drinks (participant I giggles in agreement) I've never really participated in that, on Friday afternoon here at [work] we have afternoon drinks, I don't go to them, its not really a part of the French culture, my partner also, my mum's work also have always had afternoon drinks neither of them have either participated, but those drinks ties are about networking time, that's where you hear about this job is opening up or there's so much knowledge in that drink time, but if its not part of your culture and you don't feel comfortable doing it.. so much information is shared .. a lot of information about jobs, about rights, about an opportunity at work, maybe a training thing that's happening.... Or new staff coming on or new staff leaving, there's so much in that informal setting”

The same participant told the following story:

“I was a coordinator in aged care and disabilities, and we have lot of staff, and some of our staff were Muslim, or some of them were Cambodian who were strongly Buddhist with vegan ideas and I found that my workplace when we had to sent carers out, they weren't... like I found we had one Muslim girl that was sent out to do a breakfast or a lunch shift and the client I told the client no pork products please, and the client accepted, but then made her cook sausages, pork sausages, and the staff member was quite upset obviously, and I remember my boss and work colleagues saying well you can't discriminate against the client, and I was like, but you're discriminating against the staff member, so there has to be a you know, an equality for both.. same with the Cambodian staff member who didn't want to do meat products and they wouldn't accept that and were very angry and its like well, you also need to accept differences in the staff and respect that and so...”

On a lighter note, a participant talked about the peculiar tradition of 'peck on the cheek' that caused some embarrassment.

"Only thing I know is at new years people will kiss each other ...young women and even old men... because in our culture if men and women carry each other and kiss, it was... what's wrong , what happened?..."

A related problem at work was encountered by a Chinese participant who felt some pressure during the lead up to the Beijing Olympics. She felt that she became the spokesman for China's policies on Tibet, and was placed in an awkward position when workmates took a strong stand against the Chinese government.

"...about more than 10 staff keep talking to me 'no Tibet was not yours, it's a separate country' and everyone kept talking to me, and because my English as much worse than them, and even if I have lots of Chinese issues to talk to them, but I don't know how to talk to them in English and during the time I was so upset because everyone was talking to me, and only me how can I talk to them? So I said, OK its only government politics, not my politics, not my business, could you please stop talking to me? I don't want to hear any more.. but they still keep talking and they say we will wear the free Tibet t-shirt to china and stand there and talk to everyone and say 'Tibet is free'..."

Similarly, another participant's mother had a difficult time in the 1990s over the French government's nuclear test in the Pacific

"...yes, my mum had a very difficult time in the 90s when France was putting bombs in the pacific, so she was I think she was taking a bit of sick time from stress, because everyone was coming up to her and saying you French are bad, blah... and in Australia they were talking about boycotting French products, a lot of people were, so everyone at the office was coming to my mum and criticizing, criticizing, criticizing, she didn't know much about politics, she didn't have an opinion, she didn't really know what was going on and she didn't have the language to defend.."

4.3.6 Understanding & Asserting Rights at Work

There is consensus that understanding rights at work is important for participants and their communities. As evidenced in the above discussions, understanding workplace rights empower workers, and enable them to successfully transition from the culture they leave behind to Australian workplace culture. For most participants, this is a new and very welcome change. They no longer have to rely on the arbitrary kindness of employers and co-workers, and as mentioned above, can actually enjoy their work.

"That's what we do, understand policies and procedures and rights in Australia, and understand how to complain when someone is unfair in the workplace. But back home, it's not like that....even here in Australia, especially here in [present workplace] I have so many annual leave, and my ... doesn't matter what I do, even if just stay at home or going somewhere, anywhere ..Back home in Burma, its very hard to get annual leave, even if its our right, you have to give excuse, so many excuse. And sick leave as well, is very hard"

"...for me its...you've got rights, you've got rights to do this, to complain. But especially for those that have not gone to school, even if they see those people, they want to retain their jobs, they won't call, they won't lodge a complaint."

The consequences of not knowing your rights or where to get information about your rights can continue the sense of powerlessness that new arrivals bring with them:

"She's hadn't understood about super, she hasn't understood about our rights at work, about special leave, about anything like that, basic things that everyone else knows but they don't, people don't tend to share that information"

“...some of the people out there they don't understand their rights, and their bosses won't tell them if this happens you do this. Like us here, the families we work with, we tell them everything. If I'm working with you and I'm doing something that you are not happy about, these are the steps, then you clear the way for the person. But some of them don't do it, its like you are leaving the person in the dark, so some of them don't know how do to these things, so it makes it a little big harder”

One participant tells of her husband's experience with a problem and how he dealt (or decided to not deal) with the problem:

“Like my husband is working at the airport, and he's on fulltime. 2 days he didn't go to work because he was sick, he asked for excuse, and he should be paid for those 2 days. When he received his pay that was incorrect. So he called the boss, and said I asked for excuse this day and that day, but when I went to check my pay, it was incorrect. So she said I'm sorry it looks like the mistake comes from office, where it comes from. So he says I'm full time worker I'm entitled to this. So he came home and talked to me about it. I said what do you want to do? He said, well what can I do? Ill just leave it, you see. And he received this workplace agreement with a number on it, like us here, and for him he received it twice over there, and he was worrying, and said even if I did call these people, they won't understand my English, so why should i call? Coz they got this 11800 number, and if you call, they'll ask you this and ask you that...soand he said, no, I'll just leave it.. I'll just leave it.”

This situation classically demonstrates how understanding rights alone does not lead to empowerment. Access to appropriate services and advocacy are also crucial steps to enforcing rights under the law.

4.3.7 Communicating with English Speakers

Some participants raised the issue of their discomfort in communication with English speakers. This is usually due to cultural but mainly language differences.

“...she's never ever felt comfortable and outside of work she's never mixed with Australians, she's always mixed with French or Italian people or some Chinese people, but never with Australians, she's never felt comfortable... I think it's mainly language... they also come from Europe and they understand how she feels, they don't use big words...”

“I slowly learned and I tried to talk to people and ask questions and tried to, I was forcing myself you know to.....I was not happy to sit with the people and talk to the people and it was difficult for me really.... Yeah, but I could talk to the Chinese people and other people that belong to my group you know, I was happy to them even though they speak good or maybe better English, but I was happy to .. I was not too shy to speak to other people so.....”

“...sometimes I feel shy to communicate with my colleagues because of my accent. Sometimes I feel shy, oh they will say your English is not good.....”

With English language acquisition this problem inevitably dissipates. This raises issues of inclusion, particularly in the crucial first years of new arrivals' experience of working. Not being able to communicate with English speakers in the workplace environment disadvantages workers as they would not have access to information about new and existing workplace policies and procedures, and have limited means with which they could informally discuss workplace problems.

4.3.8 Community Support

Many participants agree community support is a major form of support for women with work related problems or questions about workplace rights.

“Yes, like I said, there are things that happen to people, and they don’t take it into consideration, so like when we meet we just sit and discuss among ourselves and we just say just forget it and continue with your job and just pay a deaf ear to whatever people say..... in my community people come and say we went to work today, this happened, you know we just laugh. And I feel its not a complaint that they are bringing, coz if it were a complaint I would say go to this place and seek advice you know. So sometimes its very much hard for people that are facing problems to just voice it out.”

“Everyone goes home and debriefs, with family and friends”

For some small communities, support from your own community can also be problematic.

“...and with my mum I once asked her why don’t you get them to get an interpreter in, she knows all the interpreters, so that’s already one thing, and the second is she once said to me, well they once got an interpreter in, for such and such, and such and such speaks better English than an interpreter so you know I know with the French its quite a tight knit community but at the same time, a lot of them, when they have a problem, they won’t share because ... gossip, you know you tell one person and in a few days the whole 400 French people in the of the Northern Territory know it, so you know....”

“... for some people.. like Chinese you have a lot of people who stay here a long time, like you have people from African background it’s a problem, even though there are some people who are here before me, and they don’t know all these services and you’re not aware all these services are available so what sort of advice you can give, if these are the only people who are around you, and these are the only people you know “

Although community members provide moral support, issues of confidentiality and the potential for misinformation presents problems for those who rely purely on their community for information and advice about rights at work.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is most than fitting that recommendations should first be made by the women themselves:

“If there is a special program like this before you start working where someone can tell you all this before you start working [referring to the NTWWC presentations] and what is happening.... If you have all that information, you are psychologically prepared you know, you know what you’re facing, and you’re not being so afraid, and you can say that its not only me, other people are facing the same problem, and you ...it’ll be much easier if you have something in place before you start working”

“yeah it’s a big problem, and the other thing is sometimes we don’t know our rights and our responsibilities at work, so maybe they, they should have a follow up, for especial for us who come to live here in Australia, there should be follow up to see how its going, because I heard some people who have been sacked from their job because of some reason, and you find that you are sacked from a job, you don’t have courage to go to look for another one, there is no follow up”

“Like if they had, you know, like what you’re doing now, if people from the community knew this, you know, then if something happens, just give them the number, or get a card, saying if this happened you just you know make everything clear to them, in the workplace, this is your rights, these are your, you know your rights, so if something happens and you are satisfied about it, you

can come, just call this number, you can give your advice. Then it would be a little bit easier for some of them, like at the university, where they've got English classes, go there, where they got heaps of Africans, people from different background, and then just you know, have a session with them. If you've got a card, distribute your card, then you will see what will happen after that. people will come to you, and they'll say these are things that are happening, and everyone need you know confidentiality, if they come to you and say this to you coz especially for us, if I come to you and say this to you, I want it to be kept secret."

The focus groups and interviews afforded NTWWC an opportunity to talk to women about their work experience, their history and observations about life in Australia. Participants were very open and frank in their discussions about their own experiences, and those of their families and communities. Although participants came from a wide background, in the end, our discussions highlighted our shared experience as working women. Difficulties in adjusting to a new working culture, communicating in a new language and a genuine desire to overcome the challenges because:

"...here, if you look at this place, you see that we are safe here, whatsoever happening, we just say thank God that we are here, you see, we just thank God, we are here, safe, there's no gun sound in our ears, we can't we can't you know run for our lives anymore."

5.1 Early Intervention - Settlement Issues

NTWWC makes the following recommendations as a result of the Project, particularly these recommendations

- Job-readiness training should include discrete education about workplace rights and responsibilities, and the services available that assist workers when they face problems at work.
- English language acquisition requires support beyond the classroom. Participants report greatest language acquisition when they had opportunities to utilize it everyday, such as at work or in study groups.
- English language classes could benefit with a focus on the cultural aspects of communication as well as language acquisition.
- Transport and childcare are major barriers to women participating in the workforce, or undergoing job-readiness training. Access to childcare and driving skills will afford flexibility and mobility for women with children.
- Cross-cultural training of participants could be built into job-readiness training. It is recommended that cross-cultural training occur in a two-way context. This includes introducing participants to Australian systems and cultural practices in the workplace, as well as cross-cultural awareness training for employers.

5.2 NT Working Women's Centre – Addressing CALD Women & Work

1. In community education sessions:

- actively encourage women to seek help when facing problems at work;
- emphasize enforcement of laws in Australia through more detailed information about enforcement agencies such as Workplace Ombudsman, ADC, NT Work Safe, ATO (superannuation) etc in the sessions;

- provide handouts of information covered in the sessions, in clear simple language as participants tend to have better written/reading English skills than listening skills;
- incorporate more role-plays, examples and work-shop style sessions;
- emphasize confidentiality and information, advice and support, rather than taking action against employers. A conciliatory and empowerment approach to problem solving where women are encouraged and supported to decide course of action.

2. New initiatives in community education could include:

- providing role-plays and workshops to assist women in how to better communicate with employers, co-workers etc. when facing problems at work;
- in preparing community education sessions, consider engaging bi-cultural presenters when presenting in front of a particular community (such as FICT facilitators) – particularly with communication and cross-cultural issues about workplace culture;
- cross-cultural training issues particularly around understanding Australian systems and cultures. 2-way learning rather than going one way;
- in partnership with MCNT, Anglicare and Melaleuca, consider providing small group sessions for new arrivals as part of settlement services. These sessions ideally should be presented in conjunction with bi-cultural facilitator and employ combination of PowerPoint, role-play, work-shopping communication and work-related problems;
- in conducting clinics ⁶ at NTWWC, consider partnership arrangements with Melaleuca and MCNT for provision of bi-cultural facilitators. This will enable ILOs to better communicate and appreciate cross-cultural issues that may inhibit clients' understanding of their rights under the Workplace Relations Act.

6. LIMITATIONS

Participants come from varied backgrounds, and cannot be said to be representative of CALD women in Darwin. However, part of the purpose of a focus group discussion is to elicit issues and observe responses in a group context. What was important for this study was that women are working and had some working experience in Australia, so that we could tease out the difficulties and challenges they face in working in Australia. It was also very interesting to draw on the experience of participants who grew up in Australia, and who were affected by the difficulties their family members faced working in Australia.

Participants with a refugee background were engaged in employment and training whilst living in refugee camps. They had experience working for international NGOs on various programs. Consequently, participants' language and acquired skills enabled them to find employment in Australia in a relatively short period. NTWWC is aware that their experiences of working in Australia may not be representative of less skilled women from the same backgrounds. However, the communities to which these participants belong are very small, and interviews and focus group discussions took this into account and solicited all participants' opinion and experience of their community members in general.

7. CONCLUSION

NTWWC is very grateful to participants for giving their time and sharing their experiences with us. The issues participants raise are repeated in other studies and reflect general experiences of CALD women elsewhere in Australia. Nevertheless, each participant's experience is unique and richly lived. The focus groups confirm women's resilience in the face of extreme change and pressure, drawing on inner strength to overcome challenges with great resolve. Work is an extremely important aspect of participants' lives, embodying hope for positive change, personal development and their family's economic and social well being. Promoting successful engagement of CALD women in the workforce involves empowering women with the means to seek support and advice about workplace problems, and ultimately, to enable women on the path to inclusion in the broader Australian community.

NOTES

1. *Empowering Refugees: A Good Practice Guide to Humanitarian Settlement*, Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008. Consequently, Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) run English language programs; and Multicultural Council of NT run sewing programs that provide childcare to ensure women's attendance.
2. *Engagement of the African Community in the Northern Territory: Their Settlement, Education, Workforce and Community Participation*, Ibtisam Abu-Duhou, School of Social and Policy Research for the Office of Multicultural Affairs, Department of the Chief Minister, September 2006
3. *Supporting Australian Women from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds: Women's Policy Statement*, FECCA 2007
4. *NTCOSS Report: Creating Effective Pathways to Employment and Training for the Employment Disadvantaged in the Northern Territory*, Charles Darwin University Learning Research Group, 2004
5. Consequently, Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) run English language programs, and Multicultural Council of NT run sewing programs that provide childcare to ensure women's availability and attendance.
6. Clinics are 45 minute appointments in which Industrial Liaison Officers provide information and advice to clients about any workplace problems they are experiencing.