

## **MOVING TOWARDS CULTURAL COMPETENCY**

This paper presents an overview of the work of the Northern Territory Working Women's Centre ('the Centre') in the provision of education to men and women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and Aboriginal backgrounds about basic workplace rights and responsibilities. This paper will also describe how a small community based, feminist organization, addresses the issues of inclusiveness and cultural competency in service delivery. This is an evolving process, which we are developing into a framework for delivering culturally aware community education and Industrial Relations support.

### **The Northern Territory Context**

#### The Northern Territory Working Women's Centre

The Centre is a community-based, independent organization that provides information, advice and support to low income women about workplace problems. The Centre services the whole of the Territory. Although based in Darwin, we also make regional and remote visits. The Centre's objectives are to provide accessible information, referral and support services that not only increase Northern Territory (NT) women's knowledge of their workplace rights and entitlements under the law, but also improve those rights and entitlements for all NT women through individual and systemic advocacy.

There are presently 4 Industrial Liaison Officers at the Centre, making up 2.5 full-time equivalent positions. There is a co-shared Co-ordinator position, supported by an Administration Officer. Up to recently, there was also a Senior Community Educator, with extensive experience in adult and Indigenous education. There is also a Specialist CALD Community Educator position of approximately 1 day a week. Although a very small organization, ours is a culturally diverse workplace. We have 7 women who identify with 6 cultural traditions, and speak 7 languages at varying levels of proficiency. The glue binding this group of women is a strong belief in, and commitment to, women's rights and empowerment at work, home and in the community.

#### Definitions: Culturally and Linguistically Diverse & Aboriginal

The Western Australian Office of Multicultural Interests defines Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) as:

“... the wide range of cultural groups and individuals that make up the Australian population. It includes groups and individuals who differ according to religion, race, language and ethnicity except those whose ancestry is Anglo-Saxon, Anglo Celtic, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander..” (Office of Multicultural Interests <  
[http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/omi\\_terminology.asp](http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/omi_terminology.asp)>

Many people from CALD backgrounds experience cultural transition when they arrive in Australia. Cultural transition is a term often used to describe the process of acculturation, identity development or cultural adaptation that occurs when individuals live their lives between two cultures (normally one they inherit, and one in which they live). For CALD migrants and refugees, there are shared settlement

experiences. There is also the experience of leaving a culture behind, adapting and sometimes adopting the values and cultural traits of Australian culture. Many will even reach that level of 'bi-culturalism' where they are able to value, appreciate and respect aspects of both cultures that they wish to retain or include in their lives.<sup>1</sup>

Aboriginal cultures are those of the original inhabitants of Australia. In the NT, the largest non-English speaking cultural group is Aboriginals who account for 30% of the Territory's population (ABS 2008). For the rest of the paper, I will refer to the term Aboriginal, mainly because this is the most commonly accepted term amongst the Aboriginal Territorians. Language grouping is the most common way in which Aboriginal cultural groups are distinguished. The enclosed language map of Aboriginal Australia succinctly demonstrates how language and cultural groups don't conform to territory and state boundaries. This highlights in a simple and direct way how at a fundamental level, there is a difference in the way non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians defines Australia's geographical (and hence cultural) boundaries. Northern Aboriginal Australians first had contact with foreigners between 1500-1700 when Indonesian fishermen visited Northern Australia to hunt for trepang. Throughout the time of first contact, and subsequent white contact, different Aboriginal cultures experienced different levels of inter-cultural interactions. In delivering services to regional, rural and remote communities, service providers must be cognizant of some of the historical, social and cultural contexts of the communities they are working with. To this end, partnerships and collaborations with Aboriginal controlled organisations, and inter-professional partnerships will significantly increase access to services by the local community (DHS 2008).

### Barriers to Employment

Barriers to employment for people from CALD backgrounds have been widely documented in Australia (ECCV 2008, EMC 2008). These barriers can be broadly categorized into two areas: structural barriers to employment, and employment discrimination on the basis of religion or race (ECCV 2008, p.5). Widely recognized themes of English language skills in the workplace; recognition of prior qualification; lack of knowledge about the Australian workplace culture and lack of Australian work experience are examples of structural barriers that abound in the literature.<sup>2</sup> For refugees, there are the added issues of: education and training; labour market knowledge; access to formal and informal employment networks; poor provision of advice (including guidance and training), cultural transition and pre-arrival experience. Additionally, many refugees have spent years in refugee camps living in extremely difficult situations, lack possessions and recent work experiences, and have experienced torture and trauma (EMC 2008, p.67).

For Aboriginal people in the NT, barriers to employment are similar to those outlined above, but with the added dimension of remoteness and social, economic and political developments that constitutes the 'post-colonial' condition of Aboriginal Australia. Aboriginal Australians have been subjected to shifting government policy and control since White contact. Since the 1970s, Australian federal and state governments have adopted a policy of 'self-determination'. In effect, self-determination has led to 'communalizing and corporatizing' (Rowse 2000) of indigenous Australia,

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.counselingcenter.illinois.edu/?page\\_id=133](http://www.counselingcenter.illinois.edu/?page_id=133) accessed 24 June 2010

<sup>2</sup> see Reference list (Gwatirisa 2009); (ECCV 2008); (EMC 2008);

encouraged by the legal incorporation of indigenous groups and further embedding them into the structure and processes of mainstream society.<sup>3</sup> This has manifested in the lack of employment opportunities and participation, in training and education opportunities for many rural and remote Aboriginals. The past 2 years have seen major reforms to Indigenous employment, the most significant of which is the phasing out Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP). These reforms place emphasis on training and education opportunities for job seekers and introduced incentives to employers to provide sustainable employment opportunities for Aboriginal people. Although CDEP remains in place in remote communities, the focus is now on providing ‘on-the job’ training and ‘building skills’, with the aim of moving participants to employment outside the scheme.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to structural barriers to employment, CALD and Aboriginal people experience another type of barrier, which is discrimination on the basis of race and religion. In the NT, we recently had a case in which a Muslim woman was asked to remove her hijab during a job interview – she refused and subsequently filed a complaint to the NT Anti-Discrimination Commission. For migrants and refugees, discrimination is a commonly felt experience (ECCV 2008). Towards the end of our education session, participants are asked to create role-plays about discrimination. This seems to resonate with participants as we often see very interesting and realistic scenarios – both from CALD and Aboriginal participants. It is also significant to note that the factors common to all three groups – English language skills; labour market knowledge; systems knowledge and workplace culture – are the same factors that impact on empowerment *in* employment.

### **NTWWC and Cultural Competency**

As a service that provides industrial relations information, support and advice to NT women, we are also mandated to target services to women in disadvantaged bargaining positions, insecure and low paid employment. In the 2008-09 year, we provided services to 58% ESB women, 42% to women of CALD (20%) and Aboriginal (22%) backgrounds. Over the past few years, we have seen a steady increase in the number of CALD women attending our Centre for assistance. Through planning and judicious resourcing, we have been able to provide a more inclusive and accessible service to our target group. In our community education and client work, we have adopted the action-research methodology of action, critical reflection, feedback, refining methods.

### Community Education about Workplace Rights

The Centre provides workplace rights education to community groups and organisations. These include: Indigenous Employment Service Provider in Darwin; the Nungalinga College (as part of their prevocational community services course); high schools; Darwin’s International College of Languages; Charles Darwin University (Certificate IV); and ethnic community groups. We are in the process of

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<sup>3</sup> This raises fundamental questions about the nature of ‘self-determination’. Given that Indigenous Australians do not have legal and citizenship rights over and above other Australians, to what extent should the policy of ‘self-determination’ encourage the development of self-management and self-governing bodies?

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.deewr.gov.au/Indigenous/Employment/Pages/default.aspx> accessed 17 July 2010

trialing bi-cultural delivery of workplace rights education to refugee and emerging communities.

### The Concept of Cultural Competency

Today, more than ever before in our history, the average Australian interacts with people from different cultures on a daily basis. Yet, our institutions and organisations remain relatively unchanged in the way they interact with the people they service. However, there is growing recognition that cultural and racial background can be a barrier to accessing government and mainstream services, which in turn entrenches disadvantage for consumers from CALD and Aboriginal backgrounds (Thomson 2005). This is most evident for example, when we look at health and educational outcomes for Aboriginal people, where the increasing disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians had been a source of concern for governments since the 1980s.

In the past decade, the concept of cultural competence had been gaining momentum in Australia. It refers to the idea that when organisational behaviour, practices, attitudes and policies respect and respond to cultural diversity of communities and clients they serve, they are better able to deliver equal access, participation, quality of service and outcomes to all groups in the community. Cultural competency is, at its core, about changing organisational and individual behaviour to respond to culturally diverse communities and their needs, so that services are inclusive, accessible and utilized by *all* members of the community (DHS 2008).

### Aboriginal Cultural Competency

At the Centre, we have been taking incremental steps towards providing culturally competent services. In 2002, we published the Injustice! Indigenous Women and CDEP Report. This Report was a response to Aboriginal women in remote communities expressing the need to know and understand the industrial relations systems they find themselves in through participating in schemes such as the CDEP. The Report raised serious concerns over the disparity between work conditions under the CDEP scheme compared to work conditions in mainstream Australia. This impacted negatively on women participating in the scheme as their work was not adequately recognized nor were they felt to be justly rewarded compared to those doing the same work outside the CDEP scheme. In 2008, we followed up our Injustice! Report with a series of consultations with Aboriginal NT women. We found again that remoteness, training, language and literacy remain the prevailing barriers to employment for Aboriginal women.

Although CDEP and Indigenous employment had undergone major changes since 2008, it is interesting to note that some issues still have currency. Broadly, these are: the need to know and understand workplace rights and obligations; training and skills acquisition; job creation and economic development; aligning CDEP conditions with mainstream conditions; language and literacy. As the CDEP scheme is slowly being phased out, to be replaced by Indigenous employment programs that support economic development and real job creation, workplace rights and conditions for Aboriginal people come under Australia's industrial relations regime. In light of these developments it is really important, I believe, that rural and remote Aboriginal

workers know and understand their workplace rights, and have access to industrial relations support services as they enter mainstream jobs.

Through these Reports, our Centre was able to identify Aboriginal women's experiences of work, and how to address some of remote women's concerns about their workplace rights. In areas of health and education, Aboriginal cultural competency refers to how service providers could change their institutions, work space, and client interaction to be more sensitive and responsive to Aboriginal clients (NHMRC 2005) or "involving Indigenous people developing programs they will want to participate in and ensuring that the outcomes align with their aspirations" (Mahon 2008, p.10). In the context of women and work, we recognize also that the impact of government policies, and the lack of recognition of the value of women's work intersect these structures and processes. Understanding Aboriginal women's relationship to the systems they work in, the impact of government policies on their working lives, and how Aboriginal women respond to these pressures are an important element of cultural awareness of the post-colonial reality of Aboriginal Australia.<sup>5</sup>

Although staff understands and is aware of the issues and concerns Aboriginal women have about work, our Aboriginal cultural competency has some way to go. We currently do not have an Aboriginal Liaison Officer (ALO) position at the Centre. Our next step towards Aboriginal cultural competency is to remedy this gap in our service.

### CALD Cultural Competency

In 2006, we conducted a series of Consultations with Darwin refugee communities that resulted in a training package used by the Centre to educate young people from refugee backgrounds about their workplace rights and responsibilities. We continue to use a variation of this training package and its resources today.

In 2009, we conducted a series of mini-focus groups with CALD and refugee women to elicit their experiences of work overseas and in Australia (CALD Women and Work Report). The results of these mini-focus groups were used to inform our community education sessions. The discussions sought to elicit women's experience of work and its impact on expectations and attitudes to working in Australia. We had discussions with about 9 women, all from different backgrounds, either through mini-focus groups or interviews. Some of the findings tallied with the issues identified previously in barriers to employment. Discussions also raised some differences in conceptions of power: power differentials in the workplace; enforcement of rights; and rule of law. For example, many participants came from cultures and societies where there is a high differential between worker and boss. This has an impact on the way workers will approach workplace problems such as bullying, discrimination and occupational health and safety. In some cultures, rigid hierarchical social structures mean that people are less reluctant to challenge authority, which may have the effect that women from these cultures are less likely to speak up when they experience

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<sup>5</sup> Aboriginal Cultural Education in the area of health often include 'Journey of Well-Being' which brings the historical and social context into Aboriginal social and emotional well-being. Similar concepts feature in public health research – such as the 'social determinants of health'.

difficulties at work. Similarly, in countries that lack legislative frameworks where enforcement of the law are often connected to bribery and corruption, there is less faith in the system to address any contravention of rights at work. This is further compounded for refugees who may have been persecuted by the state or its institutions. People bring their culture and experiences with them when they come to Australia. Adjustments to Australian social and legal systems takes place at varying rates for different cultural groups. An awareness of these preconceptions, and appropriately addressing participants or clients' concerns ensure that clients are more confident in asserting their rights work.

Also of interest were issues such as workplace culture; cross-cultural communication and systems knowledge. For example, participants report that working in Australia is very different from what they were used to back home. For many African women, working back home meant being self-employed, juggling family and work via a network of family and community. In Australia, access to childcare and transport and the lack of family networks are considered major barriers to employment. Workplace culture in Australia differs markedly because it is a more egalitarian workplace that encourages asking questions and less formality between management and staff. It is also a workplace where tasks and behaviour are governed by policies and guidelines, adherence to the dominant social culture, and a myriad of other underlying cultural norms and practices. Workers unfamiliar with the workplace culture can be locked out of systems and informal social and professional networks.

#### Community Education at NTWWC

In the 2008-2009 financial year, our Centre conducted 21 community education sessions to a total of 181 participants. Of the participants, approximately 50% were Aboriginal; 34% from CALD backgrounds; 16% from ESB; 11% were young women and 56% were from rural, regional and remote areas. Most of the sessions were delivered in educational settings such as Nungalinga College; Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP); Australian College of Languages; Charles Darwin University (Certificate IV English Proficiency) and High Schools. We delivered 5 sessions in a large community based organization in remote NT. We also conducted outreach trips to Alice Springs and Borroloola. We were able to reach remote women from NE Arnhem Land through our 7 sessions at Nungalinga College.

The Centre's Senior Community Educator developed and delivered some innovative sessions to Aboriginal women. For example, she abandoned the use of powerpoint oriented seminar and adopted an interactive workshop format, drawing on principles of adult learning and English language teaching. In these workshops, we relied on more visual and tangible materials, interactive activities and role plays designed to extend participants' understanding of work and industrial relations law while developing their knowledge of the language of workplace relations. We also incorporated stories of participants' own experiences and experience of others to provide a rich resource of information that could be extended to a better understanding of workplace relations. Sessions delivered to remote Aboriginal participants at Nungalinga College were presented with Aboriginal facilitators who would translate where required, and who provided cultural support and facilitation.

In consolidating what we had learned about CALD and Aboriginal women's experiences at work, we were very conscious that although the same information was

being presented each time, by adopting adult learning principles and a more informal and interactive approach was always much more successful. This was particularly the case when we presented to groups who have had some work experience in Australia or who were actively seeking work. With these groups, there were always lively discussions because people were able to understand and relate some of their experiences with workplace rights (or wrongs) they had encountered. When this happens, it becomes more than just knowledge transfer, but an opportunity for fellow participants and presenters to learn from these stories and experiences.

Ongoing evaluation of sessions and methods are reviewed and feedback obtained through written evaluations and presenters' reflection on activities and their effectiveness. Teachers were also very active participants in feeding back on aspects they thought worked well or needed improving.

### Use of Role Plays

Community Education to CALD groups were usually conducted over two sessions, and usually delivered to a group with a relatively good command of English. The first session canvasses workplace rights - where these rights come from, and the Australian Industrial Relations framework. We also developed role-plays to present 'ideal situations' to participants. This became an opportunity to demonstrate to participants how communication is expected to occur between a worker and a 'boss' in the workplace, particularly how to ask questions and what questions to ask. We encourage participants to ask questions, and discuss how to negotiate with employers over workplace problems. We provide resources by way of suggested questions to ask at a first interview, questions aimed at establishing basic work conditions and rights. We also provide information on preparing for negotiations with employers. By the end of the first session, participants understand about workplace rights and obligations, and have had an opportunity to observe through role play how to effectively assert their rights, and role model how inter-personal exchange occurs in a work context.

In the second session where we focus on discrimination, we ask students to break into groups and devise their own role-plays on the issue. Amongst Aboriginal and CALD participants, discrimination role-plays yield many entertaining and instructive moments. Everyone nods their heads when we start the discussion, and everyone has a story to tell, either from their own experience, or via the grapevine. At the same time, there seems to be a general tolerance for discrimination which raises the question of whether this was a result of tolerating difference, lack of knowledge of discrimination law, or an acceptance of powerlessness. A very entertaining role play I would like to relate here was one in which an African participant claims that he was sexually harassed by a 'white' female boss who took a liking to him after he told her he had 16 children from 8 wives. He was told he was a 'strong' man and that she wanted to be his boyfriend. However, when he refused, she denied him access to training opportunities. In the role-play, he was told by his friend to make a complaint to the NTADC or the Human Rights Commission. This brought a lot of laughs in the class, although one particular female class member was quite concerned that he had so many wives, even though she herself came from a country in which polygamy was legal, she felt that polygamy itself was not fair to women. Other than being an extremely entertaining role-play due in no small part to the terrific acting, it allowed us to tick all the boxes in our learning outcome. A great moment, amongst many.

Role-plays are very effective learning tools. Given the volume of information that we cover, we do not have enough time for more than one role play per session. Other possibilities with the use of role-play could include one scenario with two different outcomes, and engaging participants in discussions about achieving a desired outcome. Alternatively, role plays that enable participants to practice asserting rights, or asking questions would also consolidate some learning objectives.

### Role of Industrial Relations Institutions

In the second session we also discuss ‘problems at work’. The opportunity here arises for us to elaborate on the roles of industrial relations institutions such as Fair Work Australia; Fair Work Ombudsman; Northern Territory Work Safe Authority; Northern Territory Anti-Discrimination Commission are explained, emphasizing their independence from ‘government’ and how they enforce laws. Issues of confidentiality, law enforcement, impartiality, investigatory and enforcement powers are discussed to dispel any misconceptions about institutional power and corruption. We placed emphasis on these issues as a direct result of findings from our CALD Women and Work Report. However, in our clinical work, we do find instances in which although misconceptions are addressed, women may opt to not pursue complaints to relevant regulatory bodies due to fear of reprisals from employers.

### Bi-cultural Education

Following on from our CALD Women and Work Report, we trialed a bi-cultural education session with the Nepali Speaking Bhutanese community in Darwin. We made contact with the community through an enthusiastic woman who was probably the most proficient English-speaking member of her community. She was also working part-time, and very interested to know about her own workplace rights. Importantly also, was her enthusiasm to learn ‘everything about Australia’ because she felt that it was important for her and her community to know as much as they can about life in Australia. I spoke at length with her about her community, about life on the refugee camp, about working in Nepal and the kind of work experiences she and others in her community had whilst living in the camps. I also met members of the community at AMEP where they were doing their English courses. I then started working with her, talking her through the basic workplace rights and responsibility information, discussing any concepts that were new to her, and preparing with her our presentation, which we would be presenting in both English and Nepalese. She was responsible for communicating with her community, organizing venue and time, and organizing catering (which she was providing with some other women in her community). We conducted our education session over 2 hour session. Given the low English language proficiency of participants, we opted for information delivery. Two young people from the community did the role-play, which was a source more of entertainment than learning.

The trial allowed us to build a solid relationship with the community through one of its most active members. Also important was the potential for the bi-cultural presenter to act as a resource person within her community. An added advantage in working with new and emerging communities is the fact that they tend to be close-knit and more easily identified and accessed given the high level of support they receive in the first few months of settlement. However, engagement with new and emerging communities could pose problematic issues, such as concerns with ‘overloading’

communities during their settlement phase. In this regard, training needs to be demand responsive rather than supply driven – a rule of thumb that I believe is applicable to all community based work, not only to training and education. Additionally, unemployment is a significant problem for new and emerging communities in Australia, so it is arguable that education, employment and training should take precedence. However, given Darwin's robust employment landscape, I think that the unemployment issue is less of a problem in Darwin than elsewhere.

### Community Education – Some Challenges for NTWWC

To date, we have delivered community education within educational settings. Although we have trialed a community based education session, we need to do more to establish their efficacy. More challenging is access to the more established, and less supported migrants, such as those who come to Australia either under the skilled migration programs and international students. Language and systems knowledge are significant factors amongst these migrant communities. Again, issues of understanding and asserting rights at work are also issues of concern for this group of migrants, particularly when they are not fully aware of their rights. When they do enter the workforce, problems they encounter may also arise from a lack of understanding of workplace culture, workplace rights and expectations.<sup>4</sup> Access to these 'communities' had so far been difficult for us, mainly because they transient, less visible due to the stigma attached to being a migrant worker. Additionally, they belong to more established cultural groups, such as Chinese, Filipino, Polish etc.. and the fact that their 'purpose' in Australia is limited to working within visa constraints, they are less identifiably a 'community' in the conventional sense. Another complicating factor, also associated with the 'stigma' (and fear) is that workers don't necessarily voluntarily self-identify as 457 visa holders.

Another challenge for our Centre is access to rural and remote Aboriginal people. In 2009, we were invited by a community based organization to attend a remote community to deliver basic workplace rights and obligations education to its employees. We delivered five sessions to Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal employees, and a session at the local high school. CDEP reforms and the movement within Indigenous employment policy towards job creation and economic development, may provide opportunities for our Centre to deliver similar education sessions in remote Aboriginal communities. An Aboriginal Liaison Officer would also greatly enhance our capacity to provide community education and access to Aboriginal women living and working remote.

### **Moving towards Cultural Competency**

Although a small service our Centre is well on its way towards cultural competency. This is an ongoing, evolving process that we have only recently embarked on, but it is a good start that is yielding results in the number of women walking through our doors. The addition of a Senior Community Educator with a background in adult and Indigenous education to an existing Specialist CALD Educator position have significantly increased the Centre's capacity to respond to the issue of access for CALD and Aboriginal communities.

At the clinical level, we have weekly team meetings where we recognize and address cross-cultural communication issues between ILO and client. An awareness of

cultural and language barriers in the workplace also enables us to better service clients, and understand the choices they make (or do not make) about the problems they face at work. Most importantly, having the awareness that certain decisions are made under the constraints of cultural norms, ILOs could address those constraints so that women feel empowered and safe when they seek advice.

In clinical consultations, ILOs are increasingly aware of the cultural impact on a client's perception of workplace rights and expectations. Some of the factors at play are: power differentials between worker and boss; confidentiality; assertion and enforcement of rights; roles and expectations of industrial relations institutions; cross-cultural communication and mis-communication. Appropriately and sensitively addressing these factors with clients ensures that clients are truly empowered when they assess the advice we provide.

In community education, we look for different ways to present information based on principles of adult learning and English language teaching. We are more open to trialing different ways to present information and concepts, utilising role-plays; role modeling behaviour and expectations; participatory discussions; and story-telling by encouraging participants to share their experiences. By moving away from didactic and one-way communication, we create a more safe space in which participants feel confident to share and be involved in the learning process. Similarly, presenting information with a bi-cultural educator who is able to assist in developing the presentation, who organizes the venue and time suitable to the community, and who is seen by the community to actively participate in the information being delivered (as opposed to just translating it) are factors that helped in creating a safe learning environment.

Regular visits to AMEP increased our service's access to new and emerging communities. AMEP also provides classes to 457 class visa holders. Although presently we do not have capacity, ideally we would have liked to provide outreach services at AMEP when such capacity exists. Provision of NTWWC cards in different community languages; interpreting services; workplace words and definitions booklet; and simple pocket sized information cards are some of the tools we have to ensure easy access to industrial relations information and services. These measures, combined with our action-research approach to program and service delivery, have led us to incrementally move towards cultural competency at all levels of service provision.