

Budget 2020 – Migrant and Refugee Women

Migrant and Refugee Women Overview

Budget 2020 includes a number of measures that will have specific implications for Australia's migrant and refugee women, who make up just under 4 million of the Australian population or one third of the Australian female population, according to the 2016 Census. In particular, these include the changes to the English language program, the family/partner migration stream and the humanitarian program, as well as the extension of the migrant and refugee youth programs. Further—noting the universal measures that will likely have impact on migrant and refugee women as a significant population cohort—the Women's Economic Security Statement seeks to address the diverse needs of women, including women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Of significant concern is the lack of measures to support safety and wellbeing (including financial wellbeing) of women on temporary visas.

2020 Budget impacts on migrant and refugee women

The Budget

Women's Economic Security Statement

The National Women's Alliances, including the national migrant and refugee women's alliance, will continue to be funded as part of the \$47.9 million over four years allocated to the Women's Leadership and Development Program Advocacy Grant Scheme (2020 Budget Paper No 2, p.67). The Second Women's Economic Security Statement, which announced the funding, recognises that women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds face particular challenges with regard to economic participation and financial security. The effectiveness of the measures in addressing the needs of, and achieving positive change for, migrant and refugee women will require tailored and dedicated responses to the specific needs and considerations.

Family visas

In response to a likely slowdown in visa approvals and applications from overseas, the government budget proposed a shift in the balance of Australia's intake towards more family migration, in particular partner visas (2020 Budget paper No. 1, Statement 2: Economic Outlook). The planning levels for partner visas increased from 39,799 in 2019-20 to 72,300 in 2020-21.

Onshore visa applicants and partner visa applicants where the relevant sponsor resides in a designated regional area are also to be prioritised for the 2020-21 Migration Program.

The Government will apply the family sponsorship framework to Partner visas. This will mandate character checks and the sharing of personal information as part of a mandatory sponsorship application, and subject the sponsor to enforceable sponsorship obligations. Accordingly, the government announced the introduction of English language requirement for partner visas, and an additional \$420 charge to cover additional background checks over and on top of the \$7715 partner visa fee.

Humanitarian Program

The Government will set a ceiling on the Humanitarian Program of 13,750 places; allow flexibility in places between offshore and onshore categories in response to COVID-19 travel restrictions; reform the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP); and develop a reform program for settlement services and the Community Sponsorship Program. Over four years from 2020 21, this measure will result in an overall reduction in expenditure of \$958.3 million and revenue reduction of \$47.0 million (2020 Budget Paper No 2, pp 108-9).

Social Cohesion

The Government will provide \$62.8 million over five years from 2019 20 to strengthen Australia's social cohesion and community resilience in the COVID 19 recovery period (2020 Budget Paper No 2, p. 112). As part of these measures, the Government is reforming the AMEP to improve English language outcomes for migrants. This includes removing the 510 hour cap on class hours and time limits on the free tuition, as well as making the program more flexible to enable better access.

Youth

The Government is providing \$12.7 million over two years to Home Affairs to improve integration outcomes for humanitarian entrants through the existing Youth Transition Support and Youth Hub programs.

Employment

From the beginning of the pandemic, the government resisted enabling temporary visa holders to access Jobkeeper and Jobseeker; wavering only briefly to allow certain categories of Special Category Visa holders (NZ citizens). This budget held no good news for temporary migrants on this front with no extension of Jobkeeper or JobSeeker to temporary migrants. The government advised most temporary visa holders with work rights to access their Australian superannuation to help support themselves -- if they have any superannuation and in the unlikely event that it will be sufficient to enable them to survive for very long. Many in this group have had little time to build superannuation accounts. In addition, many temporary visa holders have also been victims of wage theft and most of those victims who try to get their wages and superannuation back are not successful. The Prime Minister has advised temporary migrants to "go home" if they could not support themselves (Gibson and Moran 2020). However, for many temporary visa holders, this was not a feasible option as countries around the world closed their borders, even to their own citizens.

Gender implications

Why is this an issue for migrant and refugee women?

Fluency in spoken and written English are critical skills for effective settlement in Australia, including gaining employment. Removal of the timeframes placed around accessing AMEP alleviates particular barriers to women. Women often delay learning English in order to support our partners and children in settling into a new country, and miss out on this key opportunity. Women make up the majority of AMEP clients compared to men, comprising as many as 72% in the Family/Partner stream.

The move to introduce an English language requirement for Partner visa applicants has been criticised on the ground that it could push vulnerable women onto temporary visas, rendering them even more helpless. The requirement however has the potential to encourage women to take up AMEP classes—and to facilitate their partners' and families' support in this regard—as long as the implementation is undertaken in an enabling and not a punitive way. Enabling implementation would need to include a flexible framework allowing for a variety of ways to demonstrate efforts towards acquiring English language proficiency and providing for exceptions on compassionate grounds.

Increase in the Family stream and prioritisation of onshore applicants will likely benefit a significant number of women onshore who have been awaiting outcome of their permanent partner visa applications.

Similarly, shifting the Humanitarian Program intake onshore will likely benefit women in the process of their status determination. The capping of the offshore intake will, however, suspend the women at risk program—allowing women escaping gender-based crimes to find safety in Australia—which had been set at 20 per cent of the Humanitarian Program.

Temporary migrants have been left behind in the raft of support measures that have been announced in response to COVID-19. This lack of support has seen many temporary migrants like international students forced to queue for hours for free food packages from local councils. Universities offering support saw their financial support programs exhausted within days because of excess demand.

What are the 2020 Budget impacts on migrant and refugee women?

The 2020 Budget response is inadequate in providing reliable support in view of the COVID-19 pandemic to many migrant women, particularly those experiencing income loss and/or family and domestic violence while on temporary visas. This has significant ramifications for the wellbeing of migrant and refugee women, as the loss of individual or family income and ineligibility for income support payments increases their risk of experiencing poverty, homelessness, mental health issues, as well as family and domestic violence.

Further, the need remains for a systematic and coordinated approach to prioritise the safety of women on temporary visas and their children in situations of violence, regardless of their migration status, by addressing structural barriers to accessing social security and seeking safety.

Recommendations

1. NFAW recommends that migrant women be included in economic support and recovery packages in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, regardless of their visa status.
2. Access to ongoing income support, crisis payments, healthcare (including mental health), crisis accommodation and safe housing, should be made available to all women experiencing family and domestic violence regardless of their visa status.

References

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