



**MULTICULTURAL
AUSTRALIA**

it's who we are

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QWS Consultation
Office for Women and Violence Prevention
Department of Justice and Attorney-General
Electronic submission: women@qld.gov.au

Re: a new Queensland Women's Strategy

Multicultural Australia is pleased to provide this submission towards the consultation on a new Queensland Women's Strategy. We welcome the Queensland Government's public consultation to inform the shaping of the new strategy, to build on the vision outlined in the Queensland Women's Strategy 2016-21.

The vision outlined in the Queensland Women's Strategy 2016-21, is shared by Multicultural Australia – that the Queensland community respects women, embraces gender equality, and promotes and protects the rights, interests, and wellbeing of women and girls. We are keen to support all efforts towards building a gender-equal future – securing women's participation and leadership, economic security, safety, and health and wellbeing.

Multicultural Australia exists to create a welcoming and inclusive community for all new arrivals to Queensland. As Queensland's Settlement Service Provider for migrants and refugees, we have been welcoming refugees, people seeking asylum, international students and other new arrivals for over 22 years. We strive to create a fairer, more prosperous society for all Queenslanders.

As part of this consultation towards a new Queensland Women's Strategy, Multicultural Australia would like to provide some insights derived from our organisational practice; and noting the unique lived experiences of refugee and migrant women in Queensland.

A Women's Strategy for Queensland is important to set community standards and define commitments on gender equality. In order to achieve progress, the Strategy must promote an active and visible policy of bringing a gender perspective in legislation, policy and practice; as well as developing targeted actions to address areas of gender inequality, where identified.

Gender equality is a human right. As party to the *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women*, Australia is committed to equal rights for women and men. In Queensland, commitments to achieving equality between women and men are demonstrated through the *Human Rights Act 2019*; and the Queensland Women's Strategy Report Cards (annualised snapshots on the status of gender equality in Queensland). Women are afforded

the same legal rights as men - yet they do not seem to have the same opportunities as men and even seem to experience significant inequality and disadvantage over their lifetime.

Further, gender inequality is also experienced differently by different women. Intersectional factors such as age, ethnicity, socio-economic status and immigration status serve to highlight the differing experiences of women in our community.

As the Queensland Government undertakes this review of the Women's Strategy, Multicultural Australia is keen to ensure that there is **due regard to the significant diversity of women's experiences in Queensland** and how a renewed Queensland Women's Strategy might reflect this; and ensure that any **implementation strategies secure the participation, collaboration and empowerment of diverse communities and individuals in Queensland**.

Multicultural Australia will provide an examination of some key issues for refugee and migrant women against the stated priority areas for Women's Strategy.

Key issues for consideration

Multicultural Australia works with individuals and communities from diverse backgrounds that span generations, cultures and languages, and may live in metropolitan or regional areas. Even their migration experience may be varied. Women from refugee and migrant backgrounds may arrive in Queensland through voluntary or forced migration (including refugee/humanitarian entrants); they may be temporary migrants (including international students or people on short term work visas); and independent or dependent migrants (in skilled or family migration categories).

The Queensland Women's Strategy consider four key priority areas (participation and leadership; economic security; safety; health and wellbeing). For migrant and refugee women, their experiences around these priority areas may be different to other women in the community; noting second or third generation women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds can also experience inequality in the community. In this submission, Multicultural Australia will focus on the experiences of 'recent arrivals' or first-generation migrants. An examination of key issues is provided below:

1. **Participation and leadership:** gender intersects with other social categories like race, ethnicity, immigration status, etc. Women within refugee and migrant cohorts may experience levels of disadvantage and vulnerabilities, restricting their participation in the social, economic, and cultural life of their family, community, and

workplace. Identifying from a migrant or refugee background can place individuals at heightened risks for experiencing loneliness and isolation. The refugee experience may involve family separation and severance of links. Forming new links and connections during resettlement takes time and a concerted effort. A range of barriers such as, financial constraints, language fluency, transport or mobility issues, and uncertainty around systems governing service provision in Australia, can impact on participation in community life. This situation may be compounded for women who miss out on opportunities for participation as a result of cultural and social norms and expectations around gender. In some circumstances, our practice experience has observed the resettlement experience for women may be mediated through the male members of the family – and some women may find themselves dependent on male family members for information and supports/assistance in Australia. Lack of information or clarity around the options for community participation for women impacts their participation. This is particularly evident for women involved in care-giving roles within the family. Without clear information or access to supports (e.g., transport, financial means, culturally appropriate child care options, etc.) – women in the early settlement period may risk jeopardising the establishment of a secure foundation to life and networks in Australia.

Migrant and refugee women may experience external and/or personal barriers to leadership in the community. In many multicultural communities, there is a lack of identifiable role models in leadership roles or identified community champions in promoting gender equitable role models and social norms; and local networking culture may preclude many women from diverse backgrounds from aspiring to leadership roles. Further, personal barriers like language fluency (i.e., comprehension, accent, etc.); self-confidence, personal links and connections may impact their aspirations.

2. **Economic security:** there are significant barriers to economic participation and control of resources for refugee and migrant women. In our experience, many are not able to engage with equality in the labour force, as they may not have the social capital and networks associated with achieving employment outcomes. In our practice experience, there are several structural barriers to finding employment, such as, lack of recognition of overseas qualifications, skills, and experiences, or other psychosocial factors such as, prior education or lack of English language skills; digital exclusion (based on access, affordability and ability); cultural gender assumptions; care responsibilities; and cultural differences may limit their

employment opportunities, or even negatively influence hiring practices. It is Multicultural Australia's experience, that many migrant and refugee women arrive in Australia with severely limited or non-existent independent financial resources; and many will never be able to accumulate enough towards their financial security or that of their dependents. To ensure gender equality for refugee and migrant women to achieve economic security; a culturally capable, tailored, and place-based approach is recommended to address the multiple inequities identified.

3. **Safety:** the prevalence of violence against refugee and migrant women in Australia is unclear, without clear sight on available qualitative data sets on personal safety. In Multicultural Australia's practice experience and through supporting clients, it is evident that people from minority religious and ethnic communities experience racism, vilification, or hate speech within Queensland communities and in our shared public spaces. This is particularly significant for women in multicultural communities, with evident barriers to reporting such crimes or seeking appropriate recourse. Multicultural Australia recently co-led a public campaign in response to the Queensland Government's inquiry into serious vilification and hate crimes in Queensland with the Cohesive Communities Coalition. Aimed at supporting members of Queensland's diverse communities to safely share their experiences, the campaign secured significant stories of what is a common experience of experience of living with racism, discrimination or vilification in the community. Stronger legislative protection and effective systemic responses are required, for women in Queensland to be able to live safely, to have trust in our systems and feel confident to report instances of crime.

In our experience, there are also varied community perceptions around what constitutes violence, control or abuse within personal relationships; and there is generally a reluctance to share/report issues of violence and sexual violence in particular. The current review by the Queensland Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce on possible legislation against coercive control as a form of domestic and family violence and into women's experience in the criminal justice system is an opportunity to clarify our understanding around the factors impacting women's safety in the community. Multicultural Australia provided a submission to the Taskforce, detailing the significant impacts of domestic and family violence on families – especially women, in the resettlement context. Prior experiences - both overseas and in Australia, cultural attitudes and pressures, and intersectional factors impact on the ability of migrant and refugee women to identify and report

domestic violence and thus, constrain the system's ability to collect sufficient and credible evidence in seeking to enforce the law. This has significant implications as Queensland considers legislating against coercive control – especially in ensuring there is no inadvertent negative consequences of legislation to both victim and perpetrators within multicultural communities.

4. **Health and wellbeing:** migration-related factors are recognised as social determinants of health. Some factors surrounding migration and resettlement may exacerbate health inequities and expose women (and their dependents) to health risks and poorer health outcomes. These factors may be associated with pre-migration experiences, cultural attitudes and beliefs around cause and treatment of disease, mental health, and disability, and/or access issues (e.g., interpreters, transport, private healthcare, education, and health literacy).

For many refugees, pre-migration trauma may predict mental disorders and PTSD. The post-migration context, however, can be an equally powerful determinant of mental health and many factors may moderate the ability of refugees to recover from pre-migration trauma. For many women, exposure to hardships and various forms of violence through the migration experience can have long-lasting impacts on their life, physical and mental health.

Mental health issues can be significant barriers to seeking treatment and care. Further, systemic barriers, social determinants like exposure to social exclusion and discrimination, can negatively impact their access to mental health services and supports. Negative experiences in healthcare can further compound existing inequities and barriers. Failure by healthcare staff to accommodate for past trauma or human rights abuses or not providing culturally sensitive care (sensitive to people's cultural/traditional practices and religious observances) can risk re-traumatising those under care.

The pre-migration experiences including exposure to trauma and post-resettlement experiences can be overwhelming for many women – and many can fail to prioritise their own health or engage in developing health literacy. Systemic capacity building and training for health care providers in approaches to understanding and respecting an individual's cultural values, ethnicity, linguistic background, and prior trauma is recommended to address inequities in health and wellbeing for women across diverse communities. For community members, recovery from trauma occurs within a social context that involves connections with family and kinship groups, engagement in daily

activities and integration into the local community. Design of policy and programs/interventions to support women should be inclusive of diverse backgrounds and context, and provide appropriate infrastructure to build resilience, supporting language proficiency, employment and education opportunities, social support groups and networking – all have a vital role in resettlement, and can assist in women seeking help to address trauma. Such services provided in the community context can help empower women.

Opportunities for consideration

The Queensland Women's Strategy 2016-21, has provided a significant framework for the government and the wider Queensland community to consider action to achieve gender equality in our state. The key priority areas identified under the strategy - participation and leadership; economic security; safety; health and wellbeing – provide identifiable areas for the Queensland community to work towards achieving gender equality. The annual Queensland Women's Strategy Report Cards are a significant development in their provision of statistics on the status of women and girls under the key priority areas.

As Queensland moves towards a new Women's Strategy, it is important to consider ways to build on the progress and achievements. A key focus should be on building on our existing knowledge and evidence about gender equality and how it cuts across for diverse groups in Queensland. Even as we wait for the release of new diversity figures following the 2021 Census, it is important to reflect on the fact that Queensland is becoming increasingly culturally diverse. The 2016 Census reported that 21.6% of Queenslanders were born overseas – with about 11.1% born in non-main English-speaking countries. A recognition of the diversity profile of Queensland women is warranted as we move towards a new Women's Strategy.

Data collection to inform the annual Queensland Women's Strategy Report Cards, should support the identification and reporting on statistics for diverse groups. Findings under these report cards need to be meaningful across communities – whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse, and LGBTIQ communities, as well as people with a disability and from rural, regional, isolated or economically disadvantaged communities.

Also, performance indicators aligned to the different priority areas need to be meaningful across diverse communities and need to be developed in consultation with them. A new Women's Strategy should find ways to involve women from diverse groups and communities to progress this work.

The current consultation on a new Queensland Women's strategy comes at an opportune moment. As indicated earlier, at present there are other key inquiries underway in Queensland, with significant implications for the shape and design of a Women's Strategy. These include in particular - the examination of the issue of Coercive Control (the possibility of legislating against such behaviours and the creation of a standalone Domestic Violence Offence); the Inquiry into Serious Vilification and Hate crimes; as well as the inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland. These inquiries provide a mechanism for a holistic approach to consider the safety, wellbeing, inclusion and community participation of Queensland women. Multicultural Australia's submissions to these current inquiries present detailed examination of the issues confronting diverse communities – as well as suggested recommendations to address these.

In particular, we would recommend applying an intersectional lens, and implementation of a human rights-based framework ensuring participation, accountability, equality, empowerment and legality through:

- The inclusion of the voice of women from refugee and migrant backgrounds in these discussions. Support the development of a dedicated CALD/multicultural women's forum that would inform the new Women's Strategy by working to identify and progress key issues for migrant and refugee women, including:
 - Development of performance indicators (relevant to this cohort) aligned to the four priority areas under the Strategy;
 - The design of appropriate interventions on specific issues affecting migrant and refugee women (including, strategies to enable participation and leadership; to build capacity in addressing loneliness and social isolation; employment; and digital inclusion; leadership, and health and well-being).
- Support community-led activities within refugee and migrant communities to embed strategies for community transformation around gender equality, leadership, employment, and violence prevention.
- Connect gender equality across different but related policy agendas, such as preventing violence against women, discrimination, social isolation etc. to gain maximum impact.

Multicultural Australia hopes to remain engaged in this significant work and would be happy to assist with any further information concerning this submission. For any further communication, please contact Rose Dash, Chief Client Officer, Multicultural Australia on

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Yours sincerely,

Susanne Behrendt
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