

Migrant Women's Shuffle: 2 Steps Forward, 1 Step Back

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In general terms there have been significant gains for NESB women in Australia over the last decade. There is today an acknowledgment at a policy and service level of their unique position characterised by the intersection of gender and ethnicity. Their experiences can be analysed from both feminist and multicultural perspectives, but the sum total of their experiences is greater than these two perspectives added together.

Summary of gains

Given this context, it is possible to identify a number of significant gains that NESB women have made over the past ten years:

- We have been acknowledged at a policy level as a group with distinct needs, based on our unique experience, and access and equity policies have been an important response.
- We have an improved body of research in key areas affecting our lives to base our work on.
- There has been an increase in multicultural and ethno-specific services, particularly in the areas of domestic violence, health and information/advice.
- Interpreting and translating services have become more gender appropriate, particularly for health, domestic violence and sexual assault.

- Labour market programs have cushioned the blow for many retrenched and unemployed women, particularly the Special Intervention Program, Textile Clothing and Footwear Labour Adjustment Package and Jobskills.
- There has been some increase in the active participation in unions.
- Involvement in community-based organisations is stronger, at a local, state and national level.
- We have a greater understanding of the workings of government and how to influence them.
- Second generation women have increased access to education and better employment than their mothers had.

Conclusion

Progress is slow, however, and the last ten years have been characterised by a two steps forward, one step back approach for NESB women. We are not operating in a vacuum but in a context where economic efficiency and development are seen by many to be paramount. It is assumed by many of our leaders that if we get the big picture right - that is the economy - then social justice and prosperity will follow. If business is assisted through subsidies and less regulation, then jobs will follow.

NESB women are part of this context. Many of the gains of the last ten years have been aimed at protecting the disadvantaged, softening the effect for those who do not come out on top. This has been important and has made a difference to many individual women and their families. Ultimately, gains for NESB women will come with improvements at the macro level that affect employment, income, social

infrastructure, etc. The following demands from the Commission for the Future of Work are relevant reminders of what we should be aiming for:

- enough secure and adequately paid work for all who want it;
- equitable sharing of unpaid caring work between men and women and between families and the community as a whole;
- that significant groups in society are not marginalised from and within the paid work force; and
- full employment to be consistent with a sustainable economy.

The macro picture is not only economic, however, but one that should include various other overarching fundamentals for Australian society. Sheehan, in his article 'The Myth of Multiculturalism', criticised an Australian society where the pendulum has swung the other way and multiculturalism is translating into state infrastructure and funding. In a response to Sheehan, Irene Moss says that multiculturalism is not a myth, it's a reality given that more than five million people have migrated to Australia in the last half century. She argues that Australia is a tolerant country, despite our colonial history, and that this has been made possible by investing in people's settlement. Our multicultural policy explicitly demands an overriding commitment to Australia, including its laws, structures and institutions. With this comes the right to utilise Australia's institutions and resources to overcome discrimination and enable equitable participation in a civil society.

In this regard, we should also be aiming for a number of other strategies that are of equal importance to our economic development and efficiency. These demands relate to government and include:

- a guarantee of social justice and access and equity for all Australians;

- leadership in anti-racist behaviour;
- a commitment to multiculturalism;
- a guarantee of basic social services and infrastructure.

These are features of a civil society concerned with economic and social prosperity; a society which respects difference and benefits as a whole. To a society such as this, NESB women will contribute much more than they will cost.

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