

# working well newsletter

amharic arabic cantonese  
croatian dari farsi greek hindi  
italian khmer macedonian  
mandarin somali spanish tagalog  
thai tigrigna turkish vietnamese



**working women's health: putting immigrant  
women's health first!**



**this issue we look at:  
immigrant women in the  
australian labour force**

Working Women's Health is an immigrant women's organisation committed to improving the health and wellbeing of immigrant women working in paid and unpaid employment across Australia.

Working Women's Health provides national leadership and excellence in multilingual health education, advocacy, training, and research with specific expertise in sexual, reproductive, occupational, and mental health.

**what's happening at working women's health**

	<b>new books</b>	
<b>amharic</b>	<p><b>Chinese</b> books and CDs on <b>mental health</b>, relaxation techniques, yoga, massage and pain management. <b>Greek</b> books on back pain, managing stress and panic attacks through <b>self-help techniques and relaxation methods</b>. <b>Italian</b> resources on mental health including depression, anxiety, <b>drug dependency</b>, and traumatic events. Books specific to drugs (antidepressants and stimulants). <b>Stories</b> on Italian migration. This is just a hint of the acquisitions in the Multilingual Library Collection (see attachment). <b>If you would like to access these books</b>, please call Carmela and <b>ask about library membership</b>.</p>	
<b>arabic</b>		
<b>cantonese</b>		
<b>croatian</b>		
<b>dari</b>		
<b>farsi</b>		<b>gambling project</b>
<b>greek</b>	<p>The '<b>Healthy Women, Healthy Communities Project</b>' will provide <b>multilingual education</b> to Victoria's <b>CALD women about problem gambling</b>. The Project will be incorporated into WWH's existing health promotion model, with an <b>emphasis on harm minimisation</b>. <b>This will mean access for women who do not usually access this kind of information</b>. <b>Strong linkages with Gamblers' Help Services</b> will mean women are linked with specialist services, and that health education sessions are based on accurate and useful information. (The Project is funded by the Community Support Fund/DHS.)</p>	
<b>hindi</b>		
<b>italian</b>		

**what's happening at working women's health**

	<b>industry visits</b>	
	<p><b>During 2004 Working Women's Health offered health sessions in factories after hours for the first time.</b> These sessions took place during women's lunchbreaks at evening and night shifts, sometimes to the amazement of the workers.</p> <p><b>Their surprise was that they would be included in any health promotion plan</b>, given that <b>they work</b> at a time <b>when everything else stops and everyone else is asleep...</b></p>	<b>khmer</b>
		<b>macedonian</b>
		<b>mandarin</b>
		<b>somali</b>
		<b>spanish</b>
	<b>sexual harassment</b>	<b>tagalog</b>
	<p>The '<b>Sexual Harassment is not part of My Job!</b>'Project (with ongoing partners the Equal Opportunity Commission, Northern CASA, SBS Radio, and WWH), has produced four postcards for <b>Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic, and Turkish-speaking women on sexual harassment</b> in the <b>workplace</b>. The postcards include relevant contacts and referral details.</p> <p>If you would like copies of these postcards contact us here at Working Women's Health and we will mail them to you!</p>	<b>thai</b>
		<b>tigrigna</b>
		<b>turkish</b>
		<b>vietnamese</b>

## immigrant women in the australian labour force: looking ahead

Women's health and wellbeing is integrally connected to their work. In the case of immigrant women, their deteriorating health over the first five years of living and working in Australia (Alcorso and Harrison, 1993), is a strong indicator that all may not be well in relation to their labour force experience in Australia.

The position of non-English speaking background immigrant women in the Australian labour force is currently undergoing significant and fundamental change. Historically, women from non-English speaking countries emigrated to Australia as non-English speakers with limited opportunities in the Australian workforce, restricted to factory floors and production outlets in Australia's prosperous manufacturing industries. In the most part during the post-war period, 'blue-collar' work was plenty for immigrant women; even in the face of social and cultural alienation, and in spite of chronic disadvantage and systematic devaluation and marginalisation, they participated in the labour force in large numbers, in some instances, participating at higher rates than Australian born women (Alcorso and Harrison, 1993).

The migration flows in Australia have mainly been from other English-speaking nations, but a developing economy



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The breadth of change in the Australian labour market has been immense and unabating, and has impacted on different industries and individuals in different ways.

**One of the persistent signifiers of these changes has been the declining participation rates of immigrant women in the labour force and simultaneously, their growing numbers among the retrenchment figures from the Australian economy.**



necessitated the acceptance of a significant inflow of immigrants from non-English speaking nations. The waves of migration over the past four decades can be summarised into the following categories: Italians, Greeks, followed by Lebanese, then those from the former Yugoslavia, followed by Turkish, Filipino, Spanish-speaking countries, followed by Vietnamese, Chinese, Cambodian, and more recently African, Indonesian, and Malaysian migrants.

Despite the diversity of entrants into Australia, in respect to the labour force and especially in relation to women, immigrants have been funnelled towards particular industries, and have been expected to take up particular forms of work. Immigrant women in particular, have traditionally been located in the most disadvantaged positions within the Australian labour force, concentrated in industries and occupations with poor working conditions and pay.

If disadvantage and inequity characterised the position of working immigrant women in the past, then all indications suggest that the future holds the same for them. The breadth of change in the Australian labour market has been immense and unabating, and has impacted on different industries and individuals in different ways. One of the persistent signifiers of these changes has been the declining participation rates of immigrant women in the labour force and simultaneously, their growing numbers among the retrenchment figures from the Australian economy.



**Immigrant women are also over-represented in blue-collar occupations, such as in trades, transport and labouring, with a combined rate of 24.4%, compared with the 15.1% national average for all women.**

**Conversely, they are under-represented in decision-making occupations, such as managers and professionals, making up 33.4%, compared with the 39.3% national average for all women...**



Today, immigrant women are under-represented in the labour force compared with Australian-born women and women born overseas in an English-speaking country. While the national average employment rate for all women is 24.5%, the employment rate of immigrant women is 20.4%. Similarly, both unemployment rates (2.2%) and rates of immigrant women not in the labour force (27.5%), are higher than women's national average—1.9% and 23.5% respectively (the next edition of the 'Working Well' Newsletter will elaborate further on the topic of immigrant women's experiences of retrenchment and exclusion from the labour force).

Despite falling rates, immigrant women do remain strongly represented in the Australian labour force, with particular representation within certain industries and occupations. The latest data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate that there are over 4.7 million people who have migrated from a mainly non-English speaking country living in Australia. Of these, 484,684, or 10.3%, are women who are employed in the Australian labour force (ABS, 2001). Immigrant women are over-represented in some industries, with twice as many immigrant women employed in manufacturing industries for example, as English-speaking background women (ABS, 1997). Immigrant women are also over-represented in blue-collar occupations, such as in trades, transport, and labouring, with a combined rate of 24.4%, compared with the 15.1% national average for all women. Conversely, they are under-represented in decision-making occupations, such as managers and professionals, making up 33.4%, compared with the 39.3% national average for all women (ABS, 2001).

Current figures then, show a picture of a group that remains concentrated in the 'lower paid, poorer conditions' end of the labour market, combined with added concerns of relatively higher unemployment and exclusion from the labour force compared with other Australian women. Decision-making involvement, a crucial element in improvement of working conditions and achieving good occupational health and safety, is low. As Jock Collins has noted, immigrants generally tend to have limited

union representation and involvement, receive low wages and work in poor conditions, and immigrant women have the lowest wages and poorest working conditions (Collins, 2000).

There are many barriers to meaningful employment for immigrant women, including language, discriminatory employment practices, poor recognition of overseas qualifications, and limited access to education and general skill development opportunities (Vanden Heuvel and Wooden, 1995).

Despite the fact that immigrant women have played a central role in the production process of many industries, they are regularly excluded from the key decision making processes and are frequently not able to access opportunities for job improvement. Opportunities for the type of skill development that might have allowed for their participation in the representation of their needs and rights are similarly limited (Stephens and Bertone, 1995).

This broad sketch of immigrant women's status in the Australian labour force shows that there is much work to be done in improving immigrant women's employment conditions and opportunities and in enabling them to participate more actively and meaningfully in the Australian labour force. Their health and wellbeing depends on it.

**dr adele murdolo**

## references

- Alcorso, C. and Harrison, G. "Blue-collar and beyond: the experiences of non-English speaking background women in the Australian labour force", AGPS, Canberra, 1993. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, Victoria, 1997.
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**if you are interested in immigrant and refugee  
women's health and wellbeing, become part of  
wwh, contact us for a wwh membership form.**

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