

# Migrant women, marginality and public policy

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**Developments in industrial relations policy have done little to advance the true working conditions of women.**

**Caroline Alcorso examines some of the reasons why.**

In 1988 Eliadis, Colanero and Roussos from the Association of Non-English Speaking Background Women of Australia prepared a policy options paper for the Federal Government on non-English speaking background (NESB) women's issues. The key theme of that paper was the problem of the marginalisation of women from culturally diverse backgrounds in the political process, and strategies to address this.

At the time, I remember someone commenting that while this represented the legitimate desire of middle class minority ethnic women to sit on advisory boards, councils, hold positions within government and so on - in other words, to enter the echelons of political power - it would do little to improve the social circumstances of working class women from NESB.

Clearly, this view has some merit. Many of us know, through our own experiences or through observing the experiences of others, that participating in government (or government-related) organisations and agencies often seems to have more power to change the views of those who participate than to change the course of government action. Lucia Parella, in a paper to the 1992 Immigrant Women's Speakout Association Conference, detailed the "fundamental forms of co-option" involved in

participation in government consultative and decision-making structures, and advocated only "critical and selective engagement".

Yet at the same time we recognise that the virtual absence of women from NESB in high status positions in the bureaucracy and the continued dominance of Anglo-Australian men on most councils, committees and boards makes it more difficult to have the perspective of women from NESB heard. The Government's recently released Multicultural Australia report, *Towards and Beyond 2000*, notes that participation of Australians from NESB in the three tiers of government has in fact decreased since 1986 (no separate figures on women are given). On a different level, I can comment on the considerable difficulty the Working Women's Centre is experiencing in finding bilingual female union officials to speak at information sessions for women workers from NESB.

So how do we ensure meaningful participation? Participation that results in lasting change? Obviously this is a huge topic and has been addressed in-depth by many - the Speakout conference discussion referred to above in fact summarises the debate and draws several conclusions which readers can consider.

Here I would simply like to comment on one aspect of the debate and relate it to changes in work and work relationships. That is the issue of placing women from NESB at the heart of public policy; an illustrative example is in the field of industrial relations.

One of the major government-promoted shifts in systems for regulating social relations in Australia in recent years has been the introduction of enterprise bargaining, particularly at the federal level where a majority of workers are now covered by enterprise

agreements that partly or completely replace award provisions.

The likely adverse impact on women, on workers from NESB and particularly on women workers from NESB, was well-known and articulated at the time when the system was being formulated by the Federal Government and being endorsed by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

Indeed, the introduction of protections by the Government in the form of legislative anti-discrimination, 'no disadvantage' and consultation requirements was a response that contained within it a tacit recognition of the likely disadvantages of the new system for vulnerable workers.

The remaining issue, however, is that while showing some acknowledgment of the problems inherent in the system for these groups of workers, the government and the ACTU maintained, without deflection, the fundamental policy direction that is towards the decentralisation of wages and conditions determination in Australia.

This is not the place to discuss in detail the way in which enterprise bargaining is disadvantaging women from NESB in the work force. The point is that in this instance, as in many other economic policy decisions of the government in recent years, the experience of women workers from NESB - a significant disadvantaged group in Australian society - has remained marginal to key decisions.

Whether we examine policy-making in relation to the level of tariff protection for Australian industry, the training guarantee levy or termination of employment legislation, the same pattern is found. Indeed, it is illuminating to conduct a 'thought-experiment' by imagining what these policies would look like *had* the interest from women from NESB genuinely informed them.

Take the example of termination of employment law, noting the obligations to fairness which

were effectively reduced a few weeks ago. If one considered the very high unemployment rates of women from certain ethnic communities, and the consequent need to regard all jobs as precious, the minimal requirements placed on employers under the *Federal Industrial Relations Act* to follow due process before dismissing employees would hardly be considered too onerous and in need of watering down.

If there are major question marks as to whether the perspective of women from NESB could be said to inform policy-making in the crucial (but typically Anglo-male dominated) bastions such as economic and industrial relations policy, is it different when we examine multicultural policy itself?

At the recent Global Diversity Conference, and in many other forums over the last three years, 'productive diversity' has been articulated as a promising new direction in this area. Employers are exhorted to start recognising the wealth of skills, experience and knowledge of their migrant workers, especially in order to assist them in operating within international markets, to boost sales in Australia (by targeting local ethnic community markets) and to provide a pluralist perspective within the workplace. That can be harnessed for the purpose of making business improvements.

Many have welcomed the new approach because of its emphasis on the 'positives', generally accepting the government's argument that older, welfare-oriented forms of multiculturalism stigmatised migrants as a special needs group, people with problems.

But if productive diversity is to be informed by the experience of women from NESB in the Australian work force over the last 50 years, it must also come to terms with the fact that the industry's 'valuing' of the skills of women from NESB has typically had more positive outcomes for *employers* than for women from NESB themselves.

The history of work force experience for women from NESB in the post-war period shows the

extent to which their skills and capacities - albeit deployed in a very circumscribed range of occupations - have been consistently central to Australian economic activity. Not only have women from culturally diverse backgrounds done more paid employment than other women for much of the period, they continue to work longer hours.

The many capacities of these women migrants in Australia have indeed been 'valued' (including, as one employer put it of Lebanese women, "their ability to work uncomplainingly in hot dirty conditions that Anglo-Australian employees would not tolerate"). The point is that such 'valuing' has not prevented their exploitation, and in fact has often been an intrinsic part of it. Today, in the decentralised bargaining context referred to above, good use is increasingly being made of their ability to be 'flexible' - as described by many clothing outworkers and 'family business women' who combine paid and unpaid work.

When we see multicultural policy, economic policy and government policy-making in general assert the right to secure fairly-paid, healthy and satisfying employment as a central goal for all Australians, we will know that the concerns for women from NESB are no longer at the margins.

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