

Second Women in Migration Conference

**The Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs,
the Hon Philip Ruddock**

The Second Women in Migration Conference
Sydney
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Introduction

It is my great pleasure to welcome delegates to this Second Women in Migration Conference and to officially open proceedings.

In doing so, I welcome a first-class list of speakers and participants which includes community representatives, policy makers, key thinkers and practitioners. Thank you all for coming. The Government is very pleased to have sponsored this event bringing together such a high level group for two days of discussion and examination of contemporary issues for women in migration.

Migration issues are of keen interest for most of the community and this conference will make a contribution to informed debate which might not otherwise take place. By providing us with the latest essential information and potentially raising general awareness of the issues, this conference encourages informed public debate and fulfils one of its key roles. The devotion of this Second Conference specifically to women's issues dates back to 1992 and the success of the inaugural Women's conference.

Themes

In the interim, BIMPR has produced several relevant publications on women in migration and has strengthened its gender-specific studies, a development which redresses the balance in an age when women are the majority of our

immigrant intake and their contribution goes beyond the ordinary parameters of migration statistics.

The three themes of this conference provide the opportunity to discuss the social, economic and political development of migrant women and the ramifications of multicultural policies and programs for our culturally diverse society.

The first theme examines the changing family context, including a focus on migrant women as carers and the experiences of young ethnic women. To coincide with this issue, various new research papers will be released including on intermarriage issues.

The second theme is concerned with achievements and problems in careers and focuses on employment, training and business, looking at language services, barriers to work and pathways to employment. Again the Bureau will be launching a new report in this area.

The third theme examines rights, power and participation - women in lobby groups, women's experiences in the education system, the health system, politics and to what extent they participate as equals. It also looks at violence against immigrant women.

Research papers

The experience and characteristics of families who have migrated to Australia from Hong Kong is the topic of one of these research papers which examines the impact of this particular cycle of migration over the past decade. It is entitled *Astronaut Families and Parachute Children*.

Another of the studies being launched here today examines immigrant women in part-time work. It is not new that women from non-

English-speaking backgrounds are less likely to be in part-time work than their Australia-born counterparts. But this report looks at the reasons for this and some of these are financial need and the fact that they have access to informal child care from family members.

A couple of the other reports to be released cover two important areas which help us to understand the context in which immigrant women are living in Australia: Firstly, access to language services for women whose first language is not English. Secondly, ethnic family formation, which examines the unique characteristics of ethnic families.

All of this research gives us a solid basis on which to examine and understand the rich fabric of this multicultural nation of which we are all a part, not to mention providing a basis around which policy can be constructed.

But this conference serves two other vital purposes. Firstly it brings to the forefront an authentic community focus - in the next two days we will hear from many individual women migrants and workers telling of their own experience of the issues.

And secondly, the conference promotes discussion of new research and policy developments in a nation which offers the most comprehensive settlement policies in the world.

History

The Coalition played an important role in the development of Australia's migration program and in the growth of our cultural diversity policies. Coalition governments presided over the arrival of millions of migrants in the 1950s, 1960s, late 1970s and early 1980s - periods that have spanned the greatest diversity ever experienced in our official intake. We have played an important humanitarian role by resettling half a million people from war ravaged regions of the world and last, but certainly not least, we led the way in the abandonment of the White Australia policy in the 1950s and 1960s.

We established the first settlement services for migrants, many of which still form the basis for Australia's multicultural policies. It was the Coalition which set up the first English language classes for migrants, grant-in-aid worker programs, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), Migrant Resource Centres, and the first government agency to represent multicultural interests - the Institute of Multicultural Affairs.

You will be aware that the Coalition Government is currently undergoing an intense period of review in each portfolio, but I would like to give you today some indications of the Government's thinking on future directions and of our commitment to settlement and migration issues.

1996-97 Program

In the course of my consultations to determine next year's migration program, I have met with more than a thousand community members and groups. These consultations are designed to give everyone a chance to have their say about the national interest and gives me the opportunity to balance up differing community perspectives.

Given that the Government's policy is to maintain the program at about the same level as it was this year, I anticipate that the current program will be the starting point for next year. I believe this to be in the national interest. It will give Australia a population growth rate lower than that of Canada, the same as that of the USA and slightly lower than that of New Zealand.

Women are now in the majority of our immigrant intake and play a key role in the maintenance of social networks and support structures in Australia which are essential to the economic development of our nation. This is all the more reason to focus for the next two days on some of the comprehensive strategies that have been developed to deal with their needs in the face of ongoing structural change in domestic and global issues.

And it is on that point that I want to lead

briefly into some of the Coalition Government's policies in this area before we concentrate on a couple of areas that have specific implications for women.

The Coalition Government has signalled its commitment to multicultural affairs by creating Australia's first Ministry for Multicultural Affairs. As Australia's first Minister, I will be taking an active and strategic interest in activities across a wide range of policies and programs to ensure that multicultural issues are a distinct and unifying force in Australia and that access and equity becomes a reality for all Australians, whatever their background. A nationwide initiative followed a meeting I had recently with State and Territory Government Ministers who agreed to establish a national working party of Commonwealth and State officials to develop strategies to promote the benefits of multicultural policies.

This Government is strongly committed to an immigration policy that best suits both our national interests and our international responsibilities... that is, a program which has broad community support and which provides benefits to all Australians - present and future. Family reunion is essential to the national interest to ensure successful settlement across the board. Our humanitarian intake is essential to our international responsibilities. These categories will remain central elements of that program.

Humanitarian program

You will know that proportionately, Australia operates one of the largest humanitarian resettlement programs in the world. Over the past 10 years the program has enabled the resettlement of more than 133,500 people.

The Coalition Government has made a commitment not to reduce the refugee component of the Humanitarian Program. We take our commitments and our international obligations very seriously.

I would like to ensure there are no

misconceptions about the size of the 1996-97 program.

This year's Humanitarian Program started at 13,000... of which 4,000 places were set aside for refugees. The former Government borrowed 2,000 places from next year's program and brought them forward to this year. Within that 2,000, were 665 places brought forward for refugees.

So the starting point for consideration of the numbers of refugees for the 1996-97 program is 3,335 not 4,000.

Whatever the Coalition Government's final decision on the size and composition of next year's Humanitarian Program, we must remember that 665 places for refugees have already been taken.

I am determined to make the Humanitarian Program more efficient and equitable, and to this end, we are currently reviewing the Special Assistance Categories to ensure that refugees, who are most deserving of our compassion and whose numbers have been significantly downgraded over a number of years, are no longer disadvantaged.

Gender Guidelines - Asylum seekers

An issue I would like to make special mention of in this forum, is the need for gender guidelines for refugee and humanitarian decision makers.

Procedures are already in place to treat applicants for asylum in a culturally sensitive manner. There are however, no guidelines to ensure gender-related claims are dealt with sensitively and consistently.

Women refugees and asylum-seekers may face particular problems in seeking protection. They may experience persecution differently to men and they do not necessarily have the same remedies for state protection... nor the same opportunities for flight.

They may also face barriers in making refugee claims.

In response to these needs, my Department has been working on draft guidelines on gender issues to ensure immigration and review officers are aware of and are sensitive to the needs of women refugees and asylum seekers.

The draft guidelines focus on two aspects of the problem:

Firstly; Procedural improvements designed to overcome any barriers women may feel in raising refugee claims related to their gender or in discussing their personal experiences;

Secondly; Promoting a greater understanding among decision makers, of the effect of gender in assessing these claims against the Refugees Convention, by providing guidance on the different forms of persecution that women may face and reasons for that persecution.

The draft guidelines are now complete and are ready for comment. I have asked my Department to circulate the guidelines to relevant groups to ensure there is proper consultation.

Once the comments are considered, the guidelines will be implemented, along with gender sensitive training for Departmental decision makers... both in Australia and those being posted overseas.

In relation to this issue, the Government will maintain a commitment to the Women at Risk program. The program will this year account for about 10% of the refugee component of the Humanitarian Program. The places are specifically reserved for vulnerable women and their dependents.

The Secretary of my Department will outline other matters relating to the Women at Risk Program tomorrow when she addresses this conference.

Social Security

While Australia's immigration policy will remain totally non-discriminatory, the waiting period for social security benefits has been extended in some categories to ensure greater self-reliance on the part of individual migrants and greater responsibility from sponsors.

This was a policy developed, outlined and debated well before the election campaign and we will be consistent and fair in its application.

There will, however, be a safety net special allowance for changed circumstances after arrival in Australia covering circumstances such as unemployment or death of a sponsor.

An example of changed circumstances of particular relevance to women, will be the situation where there is a breakdown in a relationship due to a violent situation. Due to these changed circumstances, the women may be eligible for a sole parent pension or similar payment.

This waiting period, will not, of course, apply to refugee or humanitarian entrants who will continue to receive Medicare and employment assistance and free language tuition and assistance.

Community organisations

Prior to the election the current Government made a commitment to provide non-government community agencies with greater opportunity for involvement in service delivery wherever possible. The Government is now considering a range of options including expanding Grant-in-Aid funding and expanding Migrant Resource Centres.

We recognise that community involvement with settlement issues is vital to the success of the migration program and that many services such as on-arrival accommodation for refugees and aged care, can be more efficiently run by community agencies, or groups who are more

attuned to the needs of women (and men) from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

I am determined to ensure that these services are meeting demonstrable needs... and that the services are being provided efficiently and effectively.

Employment issues

Another major priority for the Coalition Government is our determination to address language teaching deficiencies. We believe that failure to speak and understand English can lead to disadvantage in employment opportunities, workplace safety, productivity and wages, and access to services. It especially increases the isolation and dependence of ethnic women. I intend to give greater emphasis to English language in selection criteria and I intend to address the issues of English language training through the implementation of our policy.

Family migration

I have already undertaken that the Coalition Government will preserve family reunion and the humanitarian intake as central elements of the immigration program.

At the moment, five out of every eight applicants come to Australia under the preferential family migration program. The family unit is the foundation of our society and so a core issue in immigration policy. With some 25 percent of the population born overseas, the ability to sponsor members of one's family has been a major factor in ensuring a smoother, more stable settlement period for hundreds of thousands of migrants, and will obviously be an overriding consideration for them.

At my recent meeting with State and Territory Government Ministers we also addressed the matter of incentives for regional settlement and improved access and equity policies to ensure migrants receive timely, appropriate and efficiently delivered services.

We reviewed progress on the National Strategy on Violence Against Women and the national summit on domestic violence to ensure that future strategies address the needs of women from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Spouse sponsorship

Community concern has been widely raised about the use of spouse sponsorship for other than bona fide relationships, especially in the case of serial sponsorship.

To avoid this avenue for abuse, I intend to make the current two-year probationary period which is applicable to onshore sponsorships, also apply to offshore sponsorships. But there will be protection for women who are victims of domestic violence. They will still have the opportunity to become permanent residents if the marriage has broken down due to domestic violence.

Serial sponsorship will also be curbed under the Coalition. In our election policy we signalled our intention to limit individual sponsors to two spouse sponsorships, a minimum of five years apart, other than in exceptional circumstances. My department is currently examining this issue.

Onshore applications for unlawful spouses

Another issue of concern to me has been the requirement for one member of a genuine married or de facto couple who has overstayed their visa to travel offshore before seeking residency on the basis of their longstanding relationship with an Australian resident or citizen.

People should come forward and discuss their options before they place themselves and their family in this situation. However, from 1 August this year, where there are compelling circumstances, it may be possible to waive this requirement to apply overseas. I expect the waiver to be used in limited circumstances and

there will be no general lifting of restrictions on visa overstayers.

now officially declare the conference open.

Compelling circumstances will be those of a strongly compassionate nature, such as where there are Australian citizen children in the relationship or where the couple have been in a genuine and continuing relationship for at least two years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to quote the Governor-General, Sir William Deane's, words to the Australian Parliament when he undertook, on behalf of the Coalition Government, to give Australian women greater equality of opportunity to succeed, and genuine choice in their lifestyle, their aspirations and the way they share family responsibilities. He undertook that this Government will continue to develop the great strengths which we derive from cultural diversity in Australian society while affirming the unifying values we all share.

Let me say that I will be doing my utmost to deliver those undertakings to migrant women and taking account of the special difficulties they face when targeting needs and services.

Because I believe that the immigration program is about creating a better Australia, a more innovative, diverse and dynamic Australia - it follows that the economic, social and humanitarian dimensions of our immigration program deserve careful and considerate attention.

The Australian people have welcomed the changes cultural diversity has brought to Australia and we are leading the world in multicultural policies. That is a process and a prospect we can look forward to continuing and improving well into the new millennium.

I want to commend the efforts of those who have been involved in the organisation of this conference - Bureau staff, authors, speakers and all the participants. I have no doubt it will be a very stimulating and productive two days and I