



## Unlocking Potential:

Addressing the economic participation  
of migrant and refugee women in Australia

**Policy Brief**

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**SSI**   
settlementservices  
international

# Overview

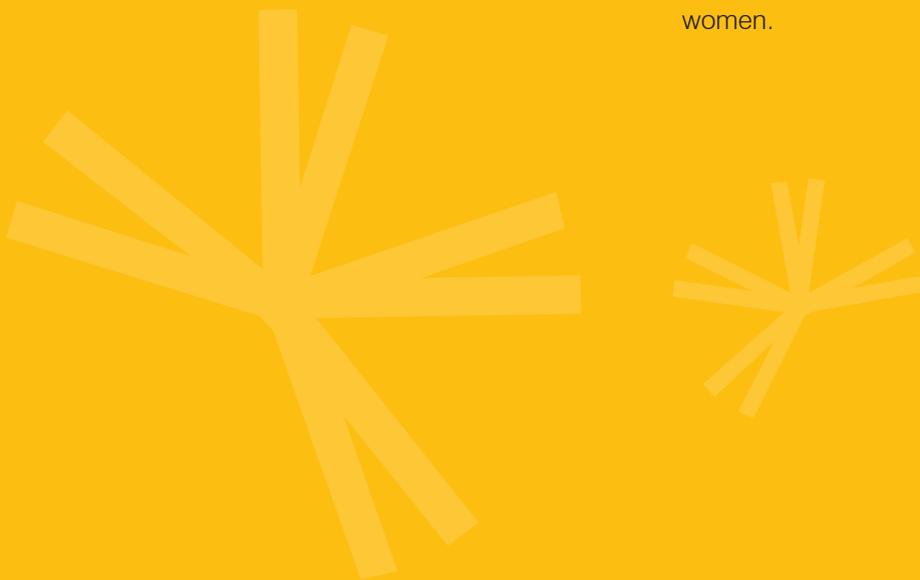
It is well established that we now live in what has been called “the age of migration”<sup>1</sup> and that the drivers of gender inequality are a global phenomenon<sup>2</sup>.

Immigration has been a central feature of Australia's social, cultural and civic life and a defining element of our economic development. As we emerge from the pandemic which reduced immigration to a trickle, migration is once again front-of-mind as one of the levers to help recover from the pandemic and address labour and skills gaps<sup>3</sup>.

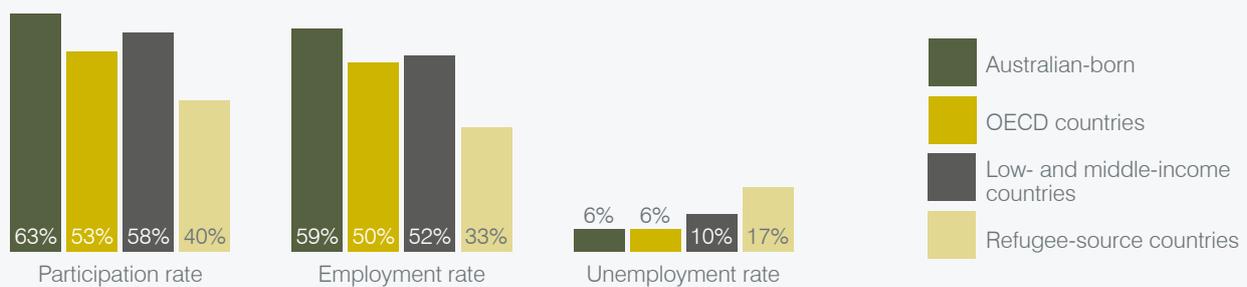
Concurrently, there is increased attention on gender equity issues and their impact on Australia's economy as we emerge from the pandemic<sup>4</sup>. As the most recent Intergenerational Report noted, improvements to women's economic participation are not just meaningful at an individual and societal level but could significantly increase GDP and thereby add to Australia's economic growth<sup>5</sup>. However, apart from some recent exceptions<sup>6</sup>, relatively little attention is paid to the economic participation of migrant and refugee women, who make up an increasing part of untapped potential in the Australian workforce.

This policy brief draws on research commissioned by SSI and carried out by researchers at National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) at the University of Canberra to develop a more robust evidence base to guide progress towards unlocking the economic potential of migrant and refugee women.

Broadly, the research indicates that refugee women and migrant women from low- and middle-income countries (i.e. non-OECD countries) are lagging behind other women in the Australian labour market, despite their relatively high level of skills, qualifications and motivation to work. Census data of labour market indicators shows that the proportion of overseas-born women in employment is lower, and unemployment generally higher, than for Australian-born women and the participation rate (i.e., the proportion of working-age people in the labour force) is lower for women born overseas. This highlights the need for a more targeted policy focus at Federal, State and Territory levels on improving economic participation and outcomes for these cohorts of women.



**Female labour market indicators by country of birth (2016)**



Source: ABS 2016 Census in Batainah, H. S., Hawkins, J. & Miranti, R. (2022).

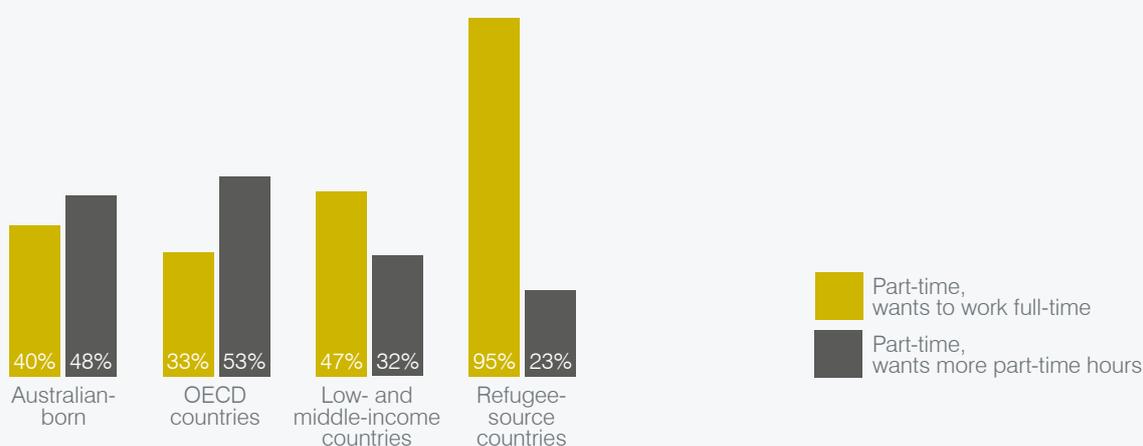
## Key messages

- A major barrier to unlocking the potential of refugee and migrant women’s economic participation is that they are engaged in low-skill, low-paid jobs which are not commensurate with their skills and qualifications. This is especially the case for refugee women and women from low- and middle-income countries.
- Women born in low- and middle-income countries have much higher levels of graduate and post-graduate degrees compared to Australian-born women; women from OECD and refugee-source countries have similar levels of qualifications to Australian-born women.
- Similarly, there is critical untapped potential in the labour market with refugee women and women from low- and middle-income countries who are working part time more likely to want to work full time compared to all other women. For refugee women the results are very striking, with almost all part-time workers (95%) wanting to work full time.
- Migrant and refugee women, irrespective of where they are born, are actively engaging in Australian higher education at rates comparable to Australian-born women.
- English language proficiency is strongly linked to positive labour market outcomes among women overall. However, women who have come to Australia for humanitarian or family reasons are more likely to have poorer English language proficiency even though they are actively pursuing further education.
- Migrant and refugee women lag behind Australian-born women in terms of job satisfaction and their subjective wellbeing. Wellbeing is an important element of integration with a two-way relationship where economic participation contributes to wellbeing, while improved wellbeing can also contribute to better economic participation.
- Refugees are over-represented in the health care and social assistance sectors (mostly women), manufacturing, and construction (mostly men). Refugee women rank the lowest in terms of economic participation, due to a range of intersecting social, cultural and economic factors.

## Recommendations

- A more tailored and targeted policy response is needed at Federal and State/Territory levels to unlock the economic potential of migrant and refugee women that sees them as new entrants to the workforce including, for example: subsidised entry into vocational and tertiary courses to bridge skills and qualifications gaps; careers advice; and opportunities for paid internships and structured mentorship pathways. These targeted initiatives should focus on refugee women and women from low- and middle-income countries where the disparities in terms of labour market outcomes are most acute.
- Federal and State/Territory Governments should work with industry and accreditation authorities to streamline processes around assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications and skills. This should include making it easier for newly arrived migrants and refugees to navigate the steps required to have their skills and qualifications (academic and trade qualifications) and prior learning recognised. For example, Germany has a multilingual online portal which provides a one-stop-shop for all information on skills recognition.<sup>7</sup>
- A more targeted focus in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) is needed to engage women in the family migration stream and humanitarian program including:
  - a range of flexible options for women to access the AMEP that allow for caring responsibilities;
  - a monitoring and evaluation mechanism to track English language learning outcomes for women in the AMEP.
- The Australian Government enacted a number of reforms in the AMEP in recent years. These reforms should be independently evaluated to determine the extent to which they have improved English language proficiency outcomes for refugee women and eligible migrant women.
- In recognition of the impacts of forced migration, refugee women require more intensive support over a longer timeframe to provide pathways to secure employment and improve their economic participation. This support should span recognition of skills and qualifications, enhanced support for English language learning, tailored education and training opportunities, on-the-job experience and career progression.

Rates of underemployment among part-time female workers by country of birth (2019)



Source: ABS Education and Work Surveys 2019 in Batainah, H. S., Hawkins, J. & Miranti, R. (2022).

## Background

Economic performance and prosperity are often couched in terms of the ‘three Ps’: population, participation and productivity. Female participation rates (the proportion of the working age population who are in the labour force) in Australia have been increasing since the 1970s, though there remains a persistent gap between male and female participation overall. Much less is known about the economic participation of migrant and refugee women.

Australia has three major permanent migration streams: skilled, family and humanitarian. Each stream has vastly different entry requirements. Differences in the rationale, design and eligibility of each of these visa streams naturally lead to differences in economic outcomes. The skilled visa stream is highly selective and specifically geared towards economic outcomes; the family visa stream is made up primarily of spouses/partners and children of Australian residents and is designed to reunite families; and the humanitarian visa stream is designed to provide protection and safety for people fleeing conflict and persecution.

Existing analyses of available data sets in the Australian context usually focus on the rates and types of economic participation in general, and the participation for women. Where research addresses migration program outcomes, these tend to be ‘gender blind’ with little attention to how women under various visa streams are faring in terms of economic participation. While the skilled migration program is designed to facilitate economic integration, other streams, especially the humanitarian stream, are typically not examined in economic terms given the primary goal is humanitarian. This means that there is limited evidence regarding the economic opportunities and trajectories of migrant and refugee women.

## Research Scope and Approach

The research analysed and synthesised evidence from multiple sources, related to the economic participation of migrant and refugee women. It included a review of the academic literature, as well as analyses of major data sources including the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the National Centre for Longitudinal Data which manages the Beginning a New Life in Australia (BNLA) Survey and the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. Where possible, this evidence distinguished between women born in Australia, migrant women born in OECD countries and born in other (non-OECD) countries and women born in refugee source countries to build a more nuanced picture of the economic participation of migrant and refugee women in Australia. While the research was unable to examine all of the intersecting issues (e.g. affordable housing and access to early childhood education) that impact on migrant and refugee women’s economic participation critical insights did emerge.

# Key Findings

- Economic participation for migrant and refugee women depends on a number of factors including country of origin, educational level and recognition of qualifications, English language proficiency and domestic or family context.
- There is a persistent marked difference between the economic trajectories of women from OECD countries, women from non-OECD countries and refugee women compared to Australian-born women.
- The migration stream is directly linked to employment rate. Unemployment is lower – and participation higher – for skilled and family migrants than for refugees. Overseas-born women face higher unemployment rates and lower participation rates than their male counterparts across all three permanent migration streams.
- Refugee women and women born in non-OECD countries working part-time are more likely to want to work full-time than women born in Australia and women from OECD countries.
- The data suggest that cultural attitudes and gender norms have some impact on labour market participation with higher unemployment rates for women born in countries where the difference between men's and women's labour force participation rates is higher than in Australia.
- Time spent in Australia is a significant factor in improved outcomes. The longer a migrant or refugee woman has been in Australia, the more likely she is to be employed, the less likely to be unemployed and the more likely to participate in the labour force, though this is unlikely to be at a level commensurate with her skills and qualifications.
- Over a fifth of refugees work in the health care and social assistance sectors. This proportion is likely higher for refugee women, as women are highly over-represented in these sectors. Other industries in which a larger share of refugees than the general population work include manufacturing and construction.
- Women born overseas are on average better educated than Australian-born women. However, recognition of overseas qualifications and skills continues to negatively influence labour force outcomes.
- Very few Australian-born female graduates work in low-skill occupations. The proportion is notably higher for women from non-OECD and refugee source countries.
- Refugee women's participation in higher education is similar to Australian-born women's participation. Women from OECD countries participate less in higher education in Australia when compared with Australian-born women, other migrant women, and refugee women.
- Refugee women consistently rank the lowest in labour market participation when compared to other visa types. Refugee women face more barriers to inclusion in the workforce, although more research is needed to understand the drivers of this exclusion.
- Economic participation contributes to wellbeing, while improved wellbeing can also contribute to better economic participation. Migrant and refugee women, particularly from mainly non-English speaking countries, not only lag in terms of their economic participation, they are also behind Australian-born women in terms of their subjective wellbeing.
- Women working full-time with dependent children do more unpaid work than their male counterparts. That said, the number of unpaid hours worked by women is similar across overseas-born and Australian-born women.
- Like other women, the economic participation of migrant and refugee women was adversely affected by the pandemic and associated public health restrictions. Even as many have pointed to the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic as a 'pink collar recession', the picture specifically for migrant and refugee women remains unclear.

## Reference:

Batainah, H. S., Hawkins, J. & Miranti, R. (2022). *Untapped potential: trends and disparities in the economic participation of migrant and refugee women in Australia*. NATSEM/Settlement Services International.

## Conclusion

**Globally, there is a growing awareness of the corrosive effects of gender inequality that preceded, and was often exacerbated by, the pandemic<sup>8</sup>. There is also greater awareness that policies that lift the participation of the most disadvantaged in the community ‘trickle up’ to other parts of the economy<sup>9</sup>. This led Christine Lagarde, of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to conclude that “reducing excessive inequality – by lifting the ‘small boats’ – is not just morally and politically correct, but it is good economics”<sup>10</sup>.**

This research shines a light on inequality in Australia and indicates that refugee women and migrant women from low-and middle-income (i.e. non-OECD) countries are lagging behind other women in the Australian labour market, despite their relatively high level of skills and qualifications. Paradoxically, the research also indicates that these are the cohorts of women most likely to be underemployed and wanting to work full-time. This highlights the need for greater policy focus on improving equity in terms of economic participation and outcomes for these cohorts of women.

Consistent with the findings of previous research, this study found that labour market outcomes among migrant and refugee women improve with longer residence in Australia. However, barriers persist which prevent them from achieving their full economic potential earlier in their settlement journey and at a level that matches their skills and qualifications. Some of the policy options recommended here have been canvassed in the past. However, the research that underpins these proposed policy options is informed by a gender lens, adding a deeper understanding of where the gaps are for overseas-born women and, importantly, the cohorts of women where poor labour market outcomes are most acute. A critical factor in unlocking this economic potential relies on a stronger government commitment to include migrant and refugee women at all stages of policy design and implementation. With a focussed policy effort and investment in targeted programs, there is every reason to believe that progress can be made to improve the economic participation and allow migrant and refugee women to reach their full potential in Australia.

1 Castles, S., H. De Haas, and M.J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. 2014, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

2 United Nations Secretary General's High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment. Seven drivers and recommendations. Available at: <https://hlp-wee.unwomen.org/en/about/seven-drivers>

3 CEDA. 2021. A good match: Optimising Australia's permanent skilled migration. CEDA

4 Wood, D., K. Griffiths & T. Crowley. 2021. Women's work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian women. Grattan Institute

5 2021 Intergenerational Report: Australia over the next 40 years. The Treasury/Commonwealth of Australia

6 Expert Reference Panel of the NSW Women's Economic Opportunities Review. Letter to The Hon. Matt Kean, MP, NSW Treasurer, 10 June 2022.

7 Settlement Council of Australia. (2019). Recognising overseas skills and qualifications, maximizing human capital in newly arrived migrants. Available at: [http://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Recognising-Overseas-Skills-and-Qualifications\\_Maximising-Human-Capital-in-Newly-Arrived-Australians-1.pdf](http://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Recognising-Overseas-Skills-and-Qualifications_Maximising-Human-Capital-in-Newly-Arrived-Australians-1.pdf)

8 Whiting, K. The motherhood penalty: How childcare and paternity leave can reduce the gender pay gap. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/05/reduce-motherhood-penalty-gender-pay-gap/>

9 Dabla-Norris, E., et al., *Causes and Consequences of Income Inequality: A Global Perspective* in SDN 15/13. 2015, International Monetary Fund; Wilkinson, R.G. and K. Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*. 2010: Penguin Books.

10 Lagarde, C., *Lifting the Small Boats*, in *Grandes Conférences Catholiques*. 2015, IMF: Brussels.



Settlement Services International and its subsidiaries acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Land. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging and the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Ancestors have walked this country, and we acknowledge their special and unique place in our nation's historical, cultural and linguistic identity.



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