

## **Recent African migrant women in the workplace: recognising OH&S issues.**

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The NSW WOMEN'S HEALTH AT WORK PROGRAM which is funded by NSW Health to work with women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD) on issues arising from their employment and on psycho-social issues that impact on the lives of the women and their families. Women's Health at Work sits within the Sydney West Area Health Service Diversity Health Institute and began in 2001.

In most circumstances the women the Program works with are not employed in industries where there is support from other bodies such as unions or professional organisations. Due to the lack of targeted support many CALD women are marginalized and vulnerable in their workplaces. The broad aim of the Program is to empower women by working with them to improve health and well being.

In 2004 the Program in partnership with the NSW FGM Education Program undertook a research Project to provide a clearer understanding of the experiences of African women in the workforce in Australia and Africa

Ninety three (93) women from Nigeria, Southern Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Ghana participated in the study. The outcomes from the research were consistent across the various groups interviewed.

*The areas in which women had found employment in Australia included:*

- Aged care (majority), community work, factory and processing work, commercial cleaning, customer service and clerical positions
- A small number of registered nurses and a small number in health education and welfare professions
- Owner operated hairdressing and African food supply businesses

*Employment issues in Australia*

- Women obtain employment on arrival more readily than men

- Barriers to employment include difficulties in access to and cost of childcare, language difficulties, and a need to provide proof of Australian work experience
- Ongoing difficulties with lack of recognition of overseas qualifications reflect the mismatch of employment with qualifications and experience. This results in underemployment or unemployment.
- Many women experience family and relationship difficulties due to the challenges posed by settling in a new culture
- Poor mental health, including the unresolved issues of grief and loss, depression and isolation result in other women being excluded from meaningful employment.

As a result a 3 year project was funded to work with 4 communities. It was decided to work with women of refugee background – Liberian, Ethiopian, Sierra Leone and Sudanese rather than women who came to Australia as economic migrants.

The function of the project is to implement strategies that meet the recommendations of the research project rather than to conduct further research.

### **Recognising OHS Issues.**

The majority of women the project has worked with are relatively new to Australia having arrived within the past 5-10 years. The challenges they face are numerous – a new country, new culture, new systems, the need to establish a life here, the ongoing need to send money home on a regular basis, family issues, community issues all of which can result in a fairly chaotic life. Which, for a service provider, can make it hard to work with the women.

The women understand what is wrong in their workplace – the bullying, racism, discrimination, understaffing, and unrealistic demands for example. The issue is how to respond.

It is difficult to challenge co-workers and management as women fear losing their job, making the situation worse or fear that it will impact on their chances of getting another job.

By participating in the discussion of OHS issues – OHS legislation, anti-discrimination law, basic workplace rights in NSW, the recent changes to IR law and the role of unions and other services that provide information and advice to workers, women are empowered to decide what to do, know that they have options and know that if they make a complaint they are entitled to do so.

*As some of the Liberian AINs said:*

*“You say to them authoritatively that you know your rights and they don’t push you around”*

*“My actions let them know I know my rights.”*

*“I just say - Do you know how many sessions I’ve attended with the Nurses Association?”*

As the program is a health program a holistic approach has been taken – what are the issues impacting or potentially impacting on the women and their families?

Topics covered include women’s health with a focus on sexual and reproductive health and screening. This is not commonly discussed in some communities and for some women it was the first time they had seen what the reproductive system looks like and how it all works. Feedback from the Coffs Harbour outreach visit included:

- ❖ *This information is very important for us single mothers to protect ourselves from the men in our community*
- ❖ *The information session taught us to be open with the health workers and not to be embarrassed to tell about our issues.*

Nutrition and healthy eating. The healthy new migrant affect can rapidly fade in Australia with the change in diet and lifestyle. This information was particularly well received and a follow up survey of 20 Sudanese and Sierra Leone women indicated all had modified their diet and some have taken up exercise.

Other sessions included: money management, stress management and self care, self defence and mental health and sexual health sessions for young women.

An attempt was made to work with men in the Liberian community the idea being to discuss migration and gender issues, but unfortunately political problems in the community prevented this from going ahead.

### **What strategies have we employed?**

The project has been a case of trial and error. The initial idea of monthly meetings faltered quite quickly – winter came, limited private transport, topics on offer were not considered interesting enough to leave home for after arriving home from work and family responsibilities.

This method has been replaced with larger and less frequent information events that combine 2 or more topics are lively, fun and include lunch and time to socialise. The aim being to make fewer demands on limited time and to make it worthwhile giving up time to attend.

The hairdressing and aged care industries have been targeted. We have worked closely with one of the organisers from the NSW Nurses Assoc to deliver sessions on workplace rights and OHS issues such as bullying, working under staffed etc.

Together with a physio we organised an injury prevention program for hairdressers in Bankstown. Which was quite successful as follow up surveys indicated some of women had changed some work practices and were experiencing less pain and discomfort.

As the program is statewide we have been able to meet with women in the regional areas of Wagga and Coffs Harbour. On both occasions a combined session of women's health and OHS relevant to the industries women work in were presented in partnership with local service providers.

- ❖ *This is such new information that we did not know before - I am glad that you came and told us these things*
- ❖ *It is very important that we pass this information to our young girls so that they do not get sick*

The nature of community work is very slow – it takes time to build a relationship and as previously stated the available time of the women is limited. We have started with the basics, working with women to build or build on their knowledge.

Information has primarily been provided in one off sessions with the exception of nutrition and the program for hairdressers. While programs would be preferable and arguable more beneficial, we have found that women are unable and unwilling to commit their time. Further the most suitable time has been Saturday or Sunday which has meant organising speakers particularly government services difficult to organise.

The challenge is and has been the delivery of information within a short time frame with limited resources. However, despite the challenges posed, the project has had its successes – over 350 women have attended the various sessions, feedback from a number of women from each of the communities indicates the information has been beneficial. The power of word of mouth - information on workplace and nutrition has been passed on to family and friends and continues to come up at community events that the project workers attend.

Where to from here? The project finishes in November this year. The final events will be another Aged Care Workers Forum and a workplace / health event. We are currently developing a radio strategy that involves the broadcast of information on Basic Workplace Rights, Anti-discrimination, NSW Ombudsman and healthy eating that will be broadcast in Krio and Sudanese Arabic on Sierra Leone and Sudanese community radio stations. And as a final reminder of health and workplace information services available a large fridge magnet is being produced. The final report will be available on the website by early next year.

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