Thinking it through

Understanding culturally responsive
work and learning services for women

Dina Bowman and Loretta Mui
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Brotherhood of St Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

Work and Learning Yarra

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Acknowledgements

Overview

The overall aim of the Making it Happen project was to inform the development of an innovative gender sensitive model to address the learning and work needs of women in public housing.

Thinking it through forms part of a toolkit that aims to encourage awareness, discussion and the development of gender and culturally responsive services.

In this document we briefly canvass issues of gender inequality particularly in relation to learning and work for women who live in public housing. We highlight some of the findings of our research with women in public housing and flag some of the issues that informed the development of the gender and culturally responsive framework. We identify key aspects of gender and culturally aware services from a scan of service models.

In the second component of the toolkit, *Sorting it out*, we identify key elements of gender and culturally responsive services. Developed in response to identified needs of women living in public housing, especially those who have a migrant or refugee background, the framework provides services staff and program developers with the tools to critically reflect on how they are meeting the needs of diverse communities.

The third component of the toolkit provides links to resources on a dedicated Making it Happen section of the Brotherhood's current awareness portal BroCAP <http://bsllibrary.org.au/>.

This document *Thinking it through* comprises three sections. The first briefly reviews the issues that shape women's participation in learning and work. The next section draws on our research with women in public housing in the Yarra Employment Services Area (which includes Fitzroy and Collingwood) and with staff at the Centre for Work and Learning, Yarra. The final section identifies the key elements of gender and culturally responsive services.

1 The issues

Despite changes in expectations about women's roles, gender inequality persists (ABS 2011b). This brief review examines the factors that shape women's opportunities for work and learning, with particular attention to women who live in public housing.

As Sylvia Chant observes, 'Gender is not just about women, and poverty is not just about income' (2011, p. 2). Nevertheless, being female increases the likelihood of poverty and disadvantage. The social exclusion monitor developed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Melbourne Institute identifies gender as a key factor associated with social exclusion. Other factors considered are age, country of birth, Indigenous background, health, education, household type and housing (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1   Social exclusion among selected groups, 2009
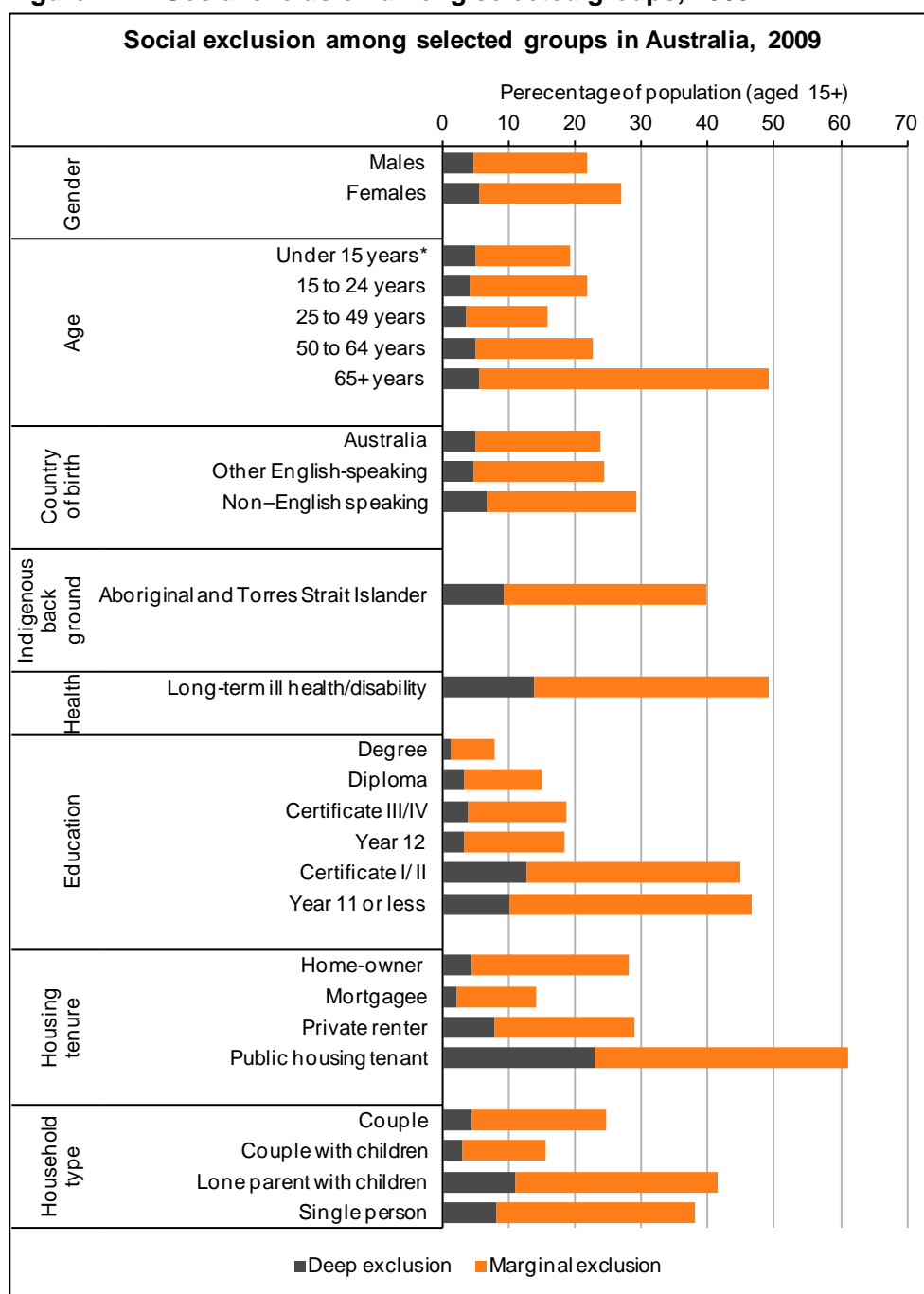
Source: Brotherhood of St Laurence and the University of Melbourne 2012, p.4

Analysis of data from Wave 9 of the nationally representative Household, Income and Labour Dynamics (HILDA) survey of 13,000 people found:

- The incidence of marginal and deep exclusion is higher among women than among men.

- Almost 50 per cent of people over 65 experience exclusion—more than any other age group.

- Immigrants, especially those from non-English speaking countries, are more likely to experience social exclusion than native-born Australians.

- Among Indigenous Australians, 40 per cent experience social exclusion.

- Nearly half of Australians who have a long-term health condition or disability experience social exclusion, and about 14 per cent are deeply excluded.

- Early school leavers are much more likely to experience exclusion than those with a diploma or degree.

- Public housing tenants experience marginal and deep social exclusion at more than twice the rate of people living elsewhere.

- About 40 per cent of single people and lone parents experience social exclusion (Azpitarte 2012).

The social exclusion monitor is useful in identifying the different factors that shape social exclusion, but it does not capture the intersections of these different elements. Women who live in public housing share some common characteristics, but they are also quite diverse. The concept of intersectionality is useful in understanding how gender, 'race', age, place, parenting status, disability and other social categories work together to shape an individual's experience of social exclusion and disadvantage (ECCV 2008, FECCA 2011, Salthouse 2010). This more complex understanding is important because, as Bradshaw points out, women's social exclusion and poverty 'is not only multidimensional but is also "multi-sectoral" … [and] … is experienced in different ways, at different times and in different "spaces"'(Bradshaw cited in Chant 2011, p. 2). The different spaces are both public and private and are shaped by economic and social policy and social and cultural forces. They include the home and family life, the labour market, education, and the welfare system (Chant 2011). For this reason we consider some of the intersecting issues that shape women's involvement in learning and work, including:

- gender inequality in the labour market

- work and care

- low pay, insecurity and poverty

- welfare and work

- work and housing

- post-secondary education.

Gender inequality in the labour market

In Australia, women account for 45.6% of all employees, of whom 54% work full-time (24.7% of all employees) and 46% work part-time (20.9% of all employees). Women constitute 70.0% of all part-time employees, 35.3% of all full-time employees, and 55.1% of all casual employees. The female labour force participation rate is 59.0% (EOWA 2012).

Globally, sociocultural changes in expectations of women's roles and economic pressures have combined to shape women's workforce participation. Between 1998 and 2008, the female labour force increased from 50.2 to 51.7 percent while the male rate decreased from 82.0 to 77.7 percent

(ILO 2010, p.4). In Australia, women's participation in the labour force has almost doubled over the past fifty years: in August 1961 it was just 34%; in August 2011 it was 59% (ABS 2011a). Figure 1.2 and Figure 1.3 show the dramatic increase in participation by Australian women in the child bearing and rearing years and the relatively unchanging participation of men.

Figure 1.2   Labour force participation rates of women, Australia, 1966 and 2011
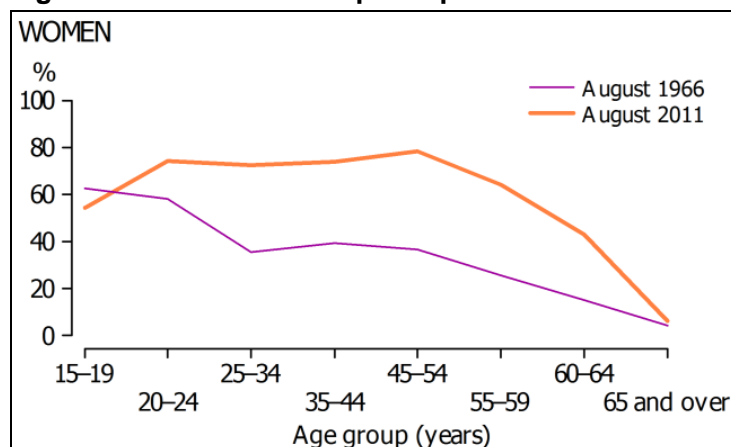
Source ABS 2011a *Australian social trends December 2011*

Figure 1.3   Labour force participation rates of men, Australia, 1966 and 2011
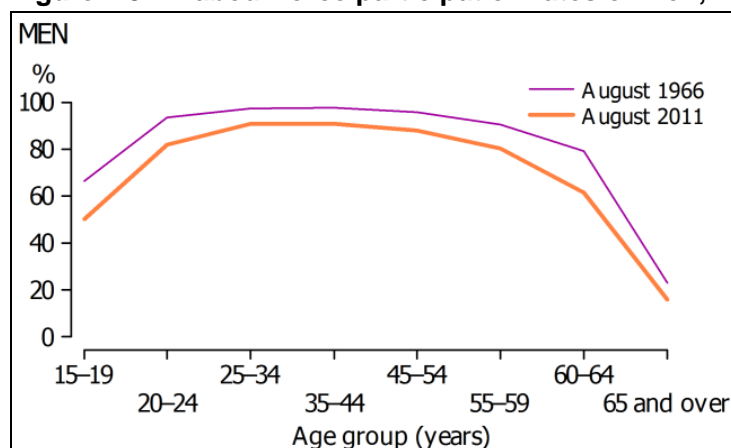
Source ABS 2011a *Australian social trends December 2011*

Despite their increased participation, across OECD countries women earn less than men and are poorer than men (OECD 2010). The recent ILO report into women and work suggests that the persistence of the gender pay gap can be explained by factors including 'the sectors where women work, the types of work they do, the relationship of women to their jobs, [and] the wages they receive [which] bring fewer gains (monetarily, socially and structurally) to women than are brought to the typical working male' (ILO 2010, p. x).

The persistence of gender inequality in the labour market is shaped by social norms that undervalue paid and unpaid 'women's work' (Australian Human Rights Commissioner 2008, p. 12). This undervaluing is reinforced by the design and distribution of paid work, with core 'full-time' permanent jobs dominated by men and casual and part time peripheral jobs dominated by women. Full-time work constrains the worker's ability to participate in unpaid activities and reinforces gendered roles within families. In Australia, the most common approach to managing the tensions between work and family responsibilities is the 'modified breadwinner model' that is, a male full-time 'breadwinner' and a female part-time worker and caregiver (ABS 2011a). Despite the growth in female workforce participation the female carer – male breadwinner model, which was reinforced

by the famous Harvester Judgment of 1907[1], continues to reflect and reinforce gender inequality, as women tend to work part time, and in low-paid jobs. This pattern is 'consistent across the age spectrum, making gender an important issue in analysis of low pay' (Pocock 2009, p.13). Non-standard employment is concentrated in female-dominated industries such as retail, hospitality and manufacturing (ACTU 2011). This not only means that women earn less than men, it also affects women's future earning capacity and total lifetime earnings (MacKeith, Cook & Williams 2010). Importantly, differential pay is 'evident among the sexes along the lines of "race", ethnicity and immigrant status' (Vosko, MacDonald & Campbell 2009 p. 1).

Work and care

Paid employment can be a 'source of social links and the pleasurable exercise of skill' (Williams, Pocock & Bridge 2009, p. 13). Importantly, if adequately paid, employment can provide economic autonomy. Yet, the gendered division of labour in the home continues to limit women's ability to participate in employment (Chesters, Baxter & Western 2009; Heintz 2010; Miranda 2011). Women are more likely than men to experience poverty, especially as they become older (OECD 2010, p. 14). In part this is due to what Paula England and Nancy Folbre (1999) describe as the 'care penalty': because caring is naturalised as a feminine characteristic, caring work can be seen as unskilled and thus worth less than other forms of work. This care penalty can also be seen in relation to women's unpaid caring (England & Folbre 1999, p. 41). Lack of essential support systems—such as affordable quality child and elder care—and inflexible job design continue to shape women's workforce participation. For many women this results in fragmented periods of employment, and a reliance on part-time work as a way of managing work and family responsibilities. Given the high rate of divorce this may be a risky strategy and undermines women's ability to be financially autonomous in the short and longer term (Bowman, Bodsworth & Zinn forthcoming 2013; Bowman & Kimberley 2011).

For low-paid workers the impacts of the 'work–life collision' are compounded because they have 'limited resources to buy themselves out of a work–life squeeze' (Pocock 2009, p. 16). For single mothers, the challenge of balancing income and time resources is intense, and is exacerbated by policies that limit income support to sole parents and emphasise employment as the path out of poverty (see Millar 2010). For many women, income poverty may be replaced with 'time poverty' as they try to manage competing responsibilities relating to work, family, community and themselves (Burchardt 2008).

Low pay, insecurity and poverty

Over the past few decades, the labour market has undergone other significant changes, with a hollowing out of the standard employment relationship (SER) and a growth of self-employment, and casual, contract, or part-time jobs—which often are also casual and low-paid (Bowman, Bodsworth & Zinn forthcoming 2013, Raff& Yu 2010, Mojab 2009). Casual jobs provide a workforce that can be 'drawn upon or dropped' in response to fluctuations in demand (ESCAP 2009, p. 3). While employer and labour market flexibility is maximised through casual employment, the traditional benefits of employment are stripped away. Casual jobs tend to have unpredictable hours and do not have paid leave or other benefits—instead they have an increased pay rate to compensate for this loss of benefits. Non-standard forms of employment like casual work are often referred to as insecure or precarious. Non-standard employment in Australia has risen at a fast rate—especially full-time casual and part-time employment (ABS 2011a; ACTU 2011). Job flexibility has benefited some professionals who have highly marketable skills, but for many low-paid workers, flexibility is employer-driven, leaving workers with deteriorating work conditions and greater stress (ACTU 2011; Stolte 2006).

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[1] See <http://www.e-airc.gov.au/kirbyarchives/harvest and http://www.worksite.actu.org.au/fact-sheets/history-harvester-judgement.aspx> for more detail.

In an analysis of the Household, Income Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) data of 2001–2006, Watson (2008) highlighted the association of low-paid work with insecurity and 'labour market churning' which describes the individual's experience of moving in and out of employment). He observed that: 'Churning is certainly evident at the bottom of the labour market. Those working for low pay, and those with lower skills, appear to be most vulnerable to churning' (p. 80). The experience of job churn is markedly higher for women from non–English speaking backgrounds than for women who are Australian-born (Watson 2008). Furthermore, women from migrant or refugee backgrounds may be characterised as 'inexpensive, flexible and often dispensable source of labour to be exploited' (VIRWC 2008, p. 1).

Discrimination associated with 'visible difference' compounds the challenges facing women from non–English speaking backgrounds. Here visible difference refers to women of colour and those whose cultural practice—for example, wearing the hijab or abaya—makes them look different from the dominant culture. The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA 2011, p. 4) identifies as a major challenge 'the prevailing mentality … that migrants must acculturate themselves' before having the right to equitable access to services. FECCA also acknowledges the challenges that new immigrants face in trying to make sense of employment systems:

> Lack of systems knowledge is a significant barrier to employment for new and emerging communities, as systems knowledge relates not only to government systems and institutions but workplace protocols and rights (FECCA 2011, p. 14).

For newly arrived CALD women (especially those who are 'visibly different') often the only readily available jobs are in gendered and racialised[2] fields, such as cleaning, aged care and factory work. These types of employment have 'high risks of income poverty' (Heintz 2010, p. 436) with low pay and little opportunity for promotion or skills development. For this reason, there is a need for reform to address the 'gendered effects' of inferior working conditions and work structures that distinguish many female-dominated industries (Charlesworth 2010, p. 5).

Welfare and work

During the 1990s, widespread 'transformative' social policy reforms were introduced in OECD member countries. Active labour market policies (ALMPs) 'created new incentives and firm pressures for moving social welfare beneficiaries, particularly those receiving unemployment, disability and public assistance payments, into the paid labour force' (Gilbert & Besharov 2011, p. 295). ALMPs had different manifestations in different countries: for example the United States adopted a stringent 'work first' approach, while countries such Denmark adopted an approach that aimed to combine flexibility with security. In Australia, activation policies have emphasised increasing conditionality and tighter compliance frameworks—a trend that has been taking place for more than two decades and has been generally supported by both major political parties (Cortis & Meagher 2009).

Streeck (in Gilbert & Besharov 2011, p. 295) describes the shift towards active labour market policies as

> an almost universal restructuring of national welfare states in the direction of investment rather than consumption; with re-commodification instead of decommodification[3], strengthening 'employability' instead of raising worker's reservation wage, [and] "activation" for the market instead of protection from it.

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[2] Racialisation is discussed on p. 22
[3] 'De-commodification occurs when a service is rendered as a matter of right, and when a person can maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market' Gøsta Esping-Anderson 1990, *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*, Princeton, pp. 21–2.

Gilbert and Besharov (2011, p.298) identify four active labour market policy approaches which are designed as a 'push and pull towards employment'. The first approach penalises non-compliance and seeks to increase the costs of not working; the second seeks to increase the benefits of work through policies such as the provision of child care and 'make work pay' provisions. The third approach seeks to increase available jobs through an investment in public work programs, the creation of jobs and a redistribution of jobs; while the fourth is 'designed primarily to increase work-related habits of unemployed people' (p. 300).

Effective active labour market policies need to contribute to enabling conditions (such as child care, adequate income support, access to education and training, and tailored employment assistance) that allow women to get and keep decent jobs. Letablier and her colleagues (2011, p. 79) observe that from 'a gendered perspective, activation strategies challenge the traditional gendered labour division by promoting an adult worker norm and therefore introducing a shift in women's social citizenship'. This shift can provide opportunities for greater empowerment and economic autonomy, yet it overshoots the lived experience of many women and men, who continue to be confronted with inadequate care support, inflexible work and gendered cultural expectations (Bowman, Bodsworth & Zinn forthcoming 2013).

Betzelt and Bothfeld (2011) observe that disadvantaged jobseekers and low-paid workers are caught between activation policies that do not recognise the changed nature of work on the one hand, and narrow employment practices that over-emphasise employer flexibility on the other. Furthermore, gender-neutral activation policies compound the 'activation paradox' by ignoring the lag of policy and practice in relation to work and care and the reality of an increasingly precarious labour market (Bowman, Bodsworth & Zinn forthcoming 2013). For these reasons, active labour market policies in Australia must recognise and address the particular needs of women, including those living in public housing.

Work and housing

Women who live in public housing are less likely than other women to be in the labour force. Saugeres and Hulse suggest that 'almost two-thirds [of women in public housing] are not in the labour force compared to just over a quarter of other women' (2010, p. 11). The concentration of non-employed working-age women in public housing is strongly linked to the narrowing of eligibility criteria for public housing, which now give priority to people who are experiencing serious disadvantage, including sole parents and women fleeing domestic violence. In another paper, Hulse and her co-authors (Hulse, Jacobs et al. 2010) describe the 'intertwined' and complex' social exclusion faced by women living in public housing. Such tenants often experience '… life circumstances that present barriers to employment (e.g. disability, health problems, poor educational attainment and solo parenting responsibilities)' (Hulse & Saugeres 2011, p. 2). The 'structural mismatch' between work and school hours, combined with the lack of quality, affordable child care—especially for older children—create particular problems for sole mothers who want to have a job but do not want to leave their children unsupervised in unsafe environments (Saugeres & Hulse 2010, p. 74).

The recent Brotherhood of St Laurence study, *Making work pay and making income support work* (Bodsworth 2010), identified the 'flow-on effect' of housing considerations on participants' decisions about paid employment. For some participants the decision to not to undertake paid work was also informed by the strong disincentives present in the income support system. Concerns about endangering their position on the waiting list for public housing, or the raising of rent based on an increased (but uncertain) income continue to trap women financially. As Bodsworth (2010, p. v) points out:

the current system inadequately recognises the care responsibilities and obligations of many, including single mothers, who are forced to manage care for their children around the demands of their paid work and the inflexible obligations of the income support system.

The impact of effective marginal tax rates (EMTRs) on income support recipients is well recognised (Bodsworth 2010; Coleman 2005; Dockery, Ong & Wood 2002). Considerable literature has underlined concerns about the 'insuperable financial disincentives' that confront income support recipients, with EMTRs higher than 50 per cent if they gain employment (Coleman 2005, p. 4). These effects compound the disincentives to engage in paid employment that Bodsworth identified.

Learning and work

ABS data suggest that a greater percentage of people now have post-school qualifications: 57% in 2011, compared with 47% in 2001. Slightly more men than women aged 15–64 years have a non-school qualification (4.2 million and 4.1 million respectively) in May 2011 (ABS 2011b). Men are more likely than women to be apprentices or trainees (79% of apprentices or trainees are men), while women account for 53% of people aged 15–64 years enrolled in a course of study (ABS 2011a). Women are underrepresented in courses such as engineering and overrepresented in courses such as society and culture (ABS 2011b).

Data from the National Centre for Vocational and Educational Research (NCVER) suggest that women's and men's participation in the publicly funded vocational and educational training (VET) has remained relatively steady (see Figure 1.4)

Figure 1.4   Vocational education and training participants 2001–10
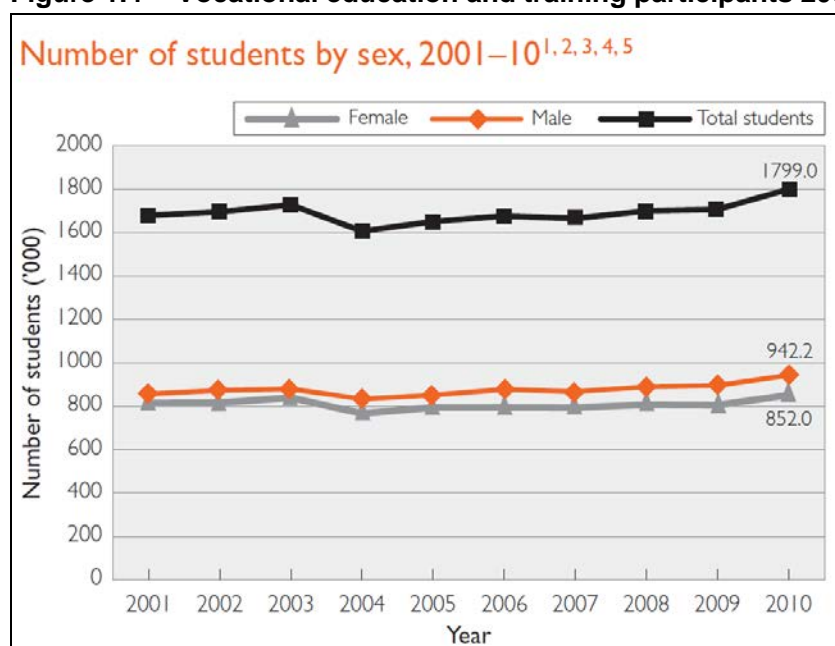
Source: NCVER 2011, Australian vocational education and training statistics: pocket guide, p. 4

When participation in VET by gender is cross-tabulated with age, the NCVER data suggests that women and men have slightly different patterns of participation with men's participation more concentrated in early adulthood (Figure 1.5). The difference between women's and men's participation may be related to gendered family responsibilities and the higher percentage of male apprentices.

Figure 1.5   Distribution of VET students by age and sex 2010
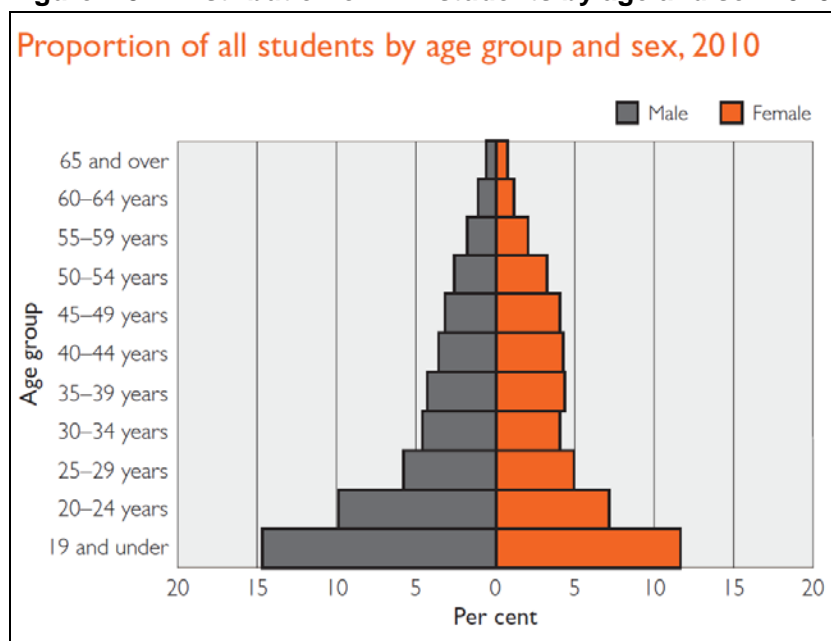
Source: NCVER 2011, Australian vocational education and training statistics: pocket guide, p. 6

Butler and Ferrier suggest that Australia's vocational training system has been influenced by the fact that early nation-building interest in education rested on a 'deeply gendered and anglocentric' model based on the British system of apprenticeships in male-dominated craft unions (2000, p. 61). This model defined skills narrowly, as Ewer (cited in Butler & Ferrier 2000, p. 61) observes:

> the equity problems of the craft model were considerable, including the exclusion from skill recognition of many categories of workers, particularly women in the service sector and migrant workers in mass production and manufacturing.

The divide between those deemed to be 'skilled' and 'not skilled' disproportionately affects women because feminised work such as caring or service work continues to be seen as relatively unskilled, with care understood as a 'natural' feminine characteristic. Paradoxically, the recent emphasis on skills development may act as a barrier to employment because many relatively routine jobs now require formal qualifications. At the same time, lack of affordable good quality child and elder care limits women's access to further education and training. In addition, newly arrived immigrant women are hampered in their access to English classes by a lack of understanding about the informal and formal rules that shape learning and work in Australia.

The importance of gender awareness

This review has highlighted the need for greater awareness of the complexity of challenges facing women in relation to learning and work. Policies that centre on paid employment as the best route out of poverty for women tend to overlook the cultural and social pressures that shape women's participation in learning and work. For this reason, gender-responsive policies and programs that provide enabling conditions are crucial if social and economic inclusion for women is to be achieved (Bodsworth 2010; Bowman 2009).

In the following section we report on the research we conducted in developing a framework for action which identifies key elements of gender and culturally responsive services.

2 Making it Happen research

The new Centres for Work and Learning[4] are an example of place-based, integrated or 'joined up' services planned to address the various needs of individuals in relation to work and learning, with a focus on people living in public housing. To gain a better idea of how we could develop gender and culturally responsive services for women living in public housing in Fitzroy, Collingwood and Richmond, we developed a small mixed-method study. The project involved qualitative research with women in the public housing estates in the Yarra Employment Services Area (ESA).

Background

Brotherhood of St Laurence researchers had previously completed a study to better understand the experience of people who had participated in BSL training services (Bowman & Souery 2010). Our analysis of 2009 enrolment data for 190 individuals suggested that the majority of these BSL students and trainees were:

- over 25 years of age

- women

- not born in Australia, and

- spoke a language other than English—although over half also spoke English.

Most lived near the service locations—in Frankston or surrounding areas, the Fitzroy and Collingwood area or Craigieburn—but students also came from other suburbs across metropolitan Melbourne.

A key finding of that research was the need for support before, during and after training. Our analysis suggested that where individuals had strong social networks and resources, training and formal credentials assisted them to secure employment. For many other students, however, training was only part of the solution (Bowman & Souery 2010). Without support and mentoring, a certificate or qualification was not enough to enable them to get and keep a job.

In late 2009 the Brotherhood of St Laurence established a Centre for Work and Learning (CWL), to develop and demonstrate innovative responses to the learning and work needs of people who experience poverty and disadvantage, especially those who live in the public housing estates in Fitzroy, Collingwood and Richmond. The centre was jointly funded by the BSL and the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) through its Innovation Fund.

Prior to the establishment of the centre, a survey of the learning and work needs of public housing residents in Fitzroy, Richmond and Collingwood was undertaken (Siegmann 2010). The survey showed that while some respondents expressed concern about the impact of paid work on the receipt of government benefits, there was greater concern about lack of experience and skills. In addition, respondents indicated a lack of confidence about the recruitment process and concerns about availability of work. They also identified caring responsibilities as a key obstacle to employment.

Analysis of the CWL client data in December 2012 indicated that 45% of clients were women; most clients were aged between 25 and 40 years; and the vast majority were born overseas, mostly in African countries, with many humanitarian refugees. Half of the clients lived in City of Yarra; and half lived in public housing.

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[4] In May 2011 the Victorian Government committed to support five Centres for Work and Learning in locations with high concentrations of public housing and disadvantage.

This study

The Making it Happen study was designed to inform the development of services that would better meet women's learning and work needs and aspirations, and to highlight the particular concerns of women who experience poverty and disadvantage. We had four main research questions:

- How do service providers (BSL and others) and women in public housing understand the learning and work needs of these women—and of particular cohorts of women in public housing, such as young women?

- What do service providers and women in public housing understand as impediments and enablers to meeting these needs/aspirations?

- How do these understandings of the learning and work needs of women in public housing differ or coincide?

- What needs to happen to develop services that better meet the learning and work needs of these women?

Methodology

The project built on existing research (Bodsworth 2010; Bowman & Souery 2010; Hulse & Saugeres 2008; Saugeres & Hulse 2010). The multi-method study comprised an analysis of existing data and the collection and analysis of qualitative data. A qualitative focus was chosen as we wanted to explore people's understandings and assessments. The research design enabled feedback to and from the respondents. It also provided the opportunity to raise awareness about gender, cultural diversity and work and learning.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted. We asked the women and service staff about their experience of learning and work, their assessment of enablers or impediments and what they saw as important elements of an ideal service in relation to learning and work. Informed consent was sought from all interviewees. Non-staff interviewees were paid $50 to reimburse costs incurred in participating in this research.

We held two workshops to feed back our initial findings to the women and the staff. The workshop with the women was held first. We had labelled cards with the key elements that had been identified in the interviews. We asked participants to rank these elements in order of importance. The photos below show the process that enabled further reflection and discussion of priorities, which we then used to develop *Thinking it through*.

We presented the research findings and the framework for action to staff for their consideration and review, and sought their response to the ordering of the elements in the framework.

The interviewees

Eighteen people were interviewed: 8 staff members (6 female and 2 male) whom we refer to as 'staff'; and 10 women who lived in public housing, mostly in the City of Yarra) whom we refer to as 'women'. The interviewees ranged in age from 19 to middle age. All the women from public housing were of non-Anglo background (Sudanese, Somali, Ugandan, Afghani and Indonesian). All names mentioned are pseudonyms.

Findings

Our research examined the interviewees' experience and perspectives about what helps or hinders their learning (training and education) and employment.

Enabling learning (training and education)

Mismatch between aspirations, ability and available training

Women identified the mismatch between their aspirations (what they want to do), their ability and the training that was available or recommended. There was a sense that the financial imperatives of Job Services Australia providers and registered training organisations (RTOs) could conflict with women's learning needs and aspirations. The women we interviewed had high expectations of themselves but they reported that their ability was often underestimated. This disjuncture between their own aspirations and the assessment of others was a source of frustration, which at times led to a sense of despair and defeat. Some women felt misled because training did not necessarily lead to decent sustainable work. This feeling was compounded by a perceived lack of guidance where specific training could lead. Interviewees talked about being 'pushed to train' and 'forced to train' and 'trained to death'. When asked who or what was doing the pushing, they identified multiple forces, including the employment services system, the growing requirement for formal qualifications even for routine work, and lack of understanding of the vocational training system. For example, interviewees related incidents where women were unclear about trainee programs, their pay and conditions and how they related to future employment prospects. While they were keen to learn, for many the cost of training was a disincentive, especially where there was no clear link to a job.

Guidance and mentoring

The young women we interviewed emphasised the need for guidance about higher education including course prerequisites and application procedures. This reflects FECCA's finding that not understanding how things work is a 'significant barrier' to participation for newly arrived immigrants (FECCA 2011 p. 14). Several interviewees identified the key role of their schools in Australia had played in giving them advice about post-secondary learning and career options. Interestingly these schools tended to be girls schools, and the young women spoke about actively choosing such schools as they felt overwhelmed in coeducational settings. The post-secondary education system seemed impenetrable to those who did not have school-based support and advice. For example, Darya, who had completed her schooling overseas, wanted to undertake post-secondary education but had no idea how. She explained:

> I didn't know the steps. I didn't know the procedures and requirements. I struggled a bit …
> because I wasn't so sure about the Australian education system.

The women who were involved in post-secondary education identified the importance of mentoring and specialist tutoring, especially in relation to the professional language of business and

accounting. They also wanted information about workplace rights, contracts, and pay and conditions. They had plenty of motivation; they needed information and expert advice.

English language and cultural proficiency

A key challenge identified by our research was English language proficiency. Even if individuals had studied English as a foreign language before coming to Australia, understanding Australian accents was difficult. In a similar way, their strongly accented spoken English was an impediment to their participation. For example, Grace had arrived in Australia as a young child and started school in year 7:

> It was harsh … I didn't know any English, it was very difficult. I would say most of them [Sudanese women living in public housing] find it difficult. Sudanese ladies find it hard to find a job, since they can't speak English properly, they are still struggling.

Interviewees spoke about the importance of having the opportunity to improve their spoken English through conversation circles or mentors. They also identified specialised English classes, such as business English, as necessary to provide them with the specific knowledge to succeed at university or college and to get the jobs to which they aspire.

Responding to the needs of CALD women

Interviewees also highlighted the importance of providing culturally responsive services that enable all women to participate in learning. For example, they recommended women-only classes and women-only groups to cater for women who may be uncomfortable or unable to participate in a mixed setting.

Interviewees suggested that women-only classes could counter the discrimination that women experience in male-dominated settings. While gender-specific services may provide the space for women to feel comfortable and develop confidence, it is also important to avoid stereotyping, which can reinforce gender inequality. For example, one interviewee observed:

> I think a lot of the social enterprises have had a more male focus. What worked for women was cleaning, but not everyone wants to be a cleaner.

Yet the women all valued the more equal opportunities that Australia provides:

> When I came to here, women have rights, women go to school, they can do whatever they want to do, men go to work and do the housework too

Nevertheless, cultural beliefs about what is right and proper for women persist. Women's participation in learning may be limited not only because of their direct care and family work responsibilities and the lack of affordable child care, but also because women's learning needs may not be given priority within families for cultural reasons. As one woman said:

> Men can get a job anytime [but] women are responsible for everything.

Flexible services are required, but regulations about accredited training limit flexibility. This may discriminate against those with care responsibilities who cannot commit to full-day courses, or blocks of training. The more informal and responsive training provided by the BSL Stepping Stones program is an example of flexible training delivery, but it is unaccredited. What is needed more flexible accredited training.

Enabling conditions for employment

The factors that shaped women's participation in training and education also shaped their participation in paid employment. Child care and transport are basic resources that enable employment. The interviewees highlighted the mismatch between the type of work that is available

and their family needs. For example, casual shifts in the aged care sector often require early starts, before child care is available. Lack of reliable transport closes off employment opportunities. For example, one woman had turned down a temporary job offer because it 'was very far away, very hard for transport'. Without access to reliable public transport, women need a drivers licence and yet many women in public housing do not have one. Programs that assist refugees and new immigrants to obtain their drivers licence tend to target young people: for example, the Good Shepherd Learner Driver Mentor Program L2P assists learners aged between 16 and 20. The interviewees identified the needs of women older than 20, especially when they have children and live further from the CBD. One woman observed:

> When we were living in Sunshine it was really far, there are no buses on Sundays. Then when we came here everything was close, there was more help around … It's good that public housing is near the city, there is transport everywhere.

Most of the women mentioned the positive aspects of public housing such as a sense of community and security, but they also highlighted concerns about housing policies that act as disincentives to employment. The interviewees in this study echoed the findings of the Making Work Pay and Income Support Work study (Bodsworth 2010). Increased household income means higher rents, yet employment often brings increased costs such as child care and transport, making it difficult to get ahead. As a staff member explained:

> They find that there is not much different. They are just working and there are no changes in their situation, the only changes would be they don't spend time with their kids. When you get the job, you have to pay child care … it's expensive, especially for them … low income earning. Because most of the jobs they get … they don't pay well … like cleaning and all this. Why would they be working? … they go back to benefits. There is no progress at all.

Even women who did not have family responsibilities felt they were caught in a no-win situation. For example, Zahra is studying part-time for a professional qualification, while working two jobs. She cannot save any money even though she works up to 48 hours a week. Rather than feeling supported, she feels discouraged:

> It's like they're pushing me not to work. I'm on the edge [of leaving work] ... it's not fair.

The interviewees in this study highlighted the pressures experienced by women who feel caught between commitments to send money to relatives at home, look after family members here, maintain employment, and comply with policies that seem contradictory.

> They are under pressure from all areas … in my community … If it was not for their kids they would go back … because it is so hard. I think women are really suffering silently … they are really mentally affected from this rejection … We were even better in [the] refugee camp.

This pressure was most intense for single mothers. For example, Zaynab felt caught between expectations:

> At first I went to Centrelink, they said go back to [country]. How am I going to go back? I am [was] pregnant … I was crying almost every day. I am [was] looking for a full-time job … you are pushing too far. I didn't know what to do. You give me little money, I accept it, but why are you doing this to me? … make me cry there … You have to balance your life, you have to go to school … you don't have a husband or partner, you have to do their … thing … Do child care [training] when I have my son … then I couldn't get a job … everywhere I go [they ask] 'Can you work full time?' I can't because I have a son.

This pressure was compounded by their profound and pervasive impact of racial and cultural discrimination. As one young woman explained:

> The young people from my background … you always hear that they bash … there is stereotyping. People think that Sudanese aren't good … that can affect how you get work.

Crystal had applied for a job at a supermarket, and believed that her application had been unsuccessful because 'a black person got arrested. He stole something ... maybe that's why they didn't accept me'. Crystal observed that some of her friends had given up in the face of perceived racial discrimination. She explained that they 'don't even try because they feel bad … so probably they might get rejected'.

Some Muslim women felt that they particularly experienced discrimination in employment. As one woman said: 'Wearing a scarf means you are less likely to get a job'.

Most of the women recounted experiences of discrimination and racism. Miriam had been offered a part-time job over the phone but when she went to a meeting to confirm details the job had unaccountably become full-time. She felt very discouraged and shamed. Miriam explained that she encountered racism every day but what hurt in this instance was that 'He wasn't even a "professional" racist, he was a crazy racist'. In other words, he made his racism too obvious, which compounded the hurt she felt. On the other hand, interviewees also spoke of the difficulty of challenging racism that was more subtle. One interviewee who was an Australian citizen and had Australian qualifications asked 'When do you stop being a refugee?' For this person being classified as a refugee was a form of discrimination, creating a stereotype from only one aspect of life. While most of the women believed that all people should be considered equal, they had all experienced racial discrimination that was hard to define, name or challenge.

Fostering respect and understanding

The interviewees emphasised the importance of working with local communities and existing services to identify local needs and resources. Using existing informal networks increases understanding of local issues. Interviewees also emphasised participation and strong relationships based on trust as foundations of service. As one staff member explained:

> There are steps to working with refugees, and the first thing is to build trust. Enable them to gain control, sense of value and dignity, and rebuild self-esteem, before anything else can be done.

The interviewees talked about the importance of empowerment. This could be fostered through offering support or discussion groups and a space for women to 'work through' the gender and culturally specific challenges they encounter in studying and seeking paid employment. Many interviewees emphasised the need to feel accepted, and to create a sense of belonging and respect so that they could be confident in using services.

Interviewees spoke of the extra challenges they face as 'highly visible' immigrants. Racism was a common experience which needed to be addressed. As one woman put it

> Give people respect, people from other countries they have a really hard time. Just accept us.

Another interviewee observed that women in public housing—especially those of CALD backgrounds—are often 'perceived as not having much knowledge and that is one of the problems. They get discriminated … the acceptance is not there'. These women wanted to make a contribution and to be accepted as fellow Australians without having to choose between respecting their culture and being Australian. Layla summed this up:

> I'm proud to be Somali—proud to be Australian and Somali. It is not good to lose your background. Am I going to throw away the abaya? No way! I don't want to forget my mother tongue or my background. But I want to learn Australian ways too.

Women also spoke of the challenges of rearing their children in a culture where women's roles and family life are quite different from those they were accustomed to. For sole mothers with large families, a sense of isolation compounds these challenges; the interviewees suggested this requires a more supportive, family-friendly approach.

For many of the women an ideal service involved 'less men around so it's [a] more cosy and safe environment'. Interestingly, when we raised the idea of gender-specific services in the feedback session with staff, some people had concerns about the legality or appropriateness of such an approach. It is important to note that Victoria's *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* provides for 'special measures':

> Under the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010*, it is not discrimination for a person (or body) to take a special measure that promotes substantive equality for a group of people who have one (or more than one) protected attributes, for example race, sex, disability (Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission 2012)

While an integrated, person-centred approach is often promoted as best practice, some interviewees talked about the need to acknowledge and address the power dynamics that operate in case management. They highlighted the need to adjust the balance of power in favour of client and community so that 'service priorities are the women's priorities'.

Effective opportunities for participation are important. Women didn't necessarily want to be 'helped up'; rather they wanted the opportunity to help themselves. They recognised that building self-esteem and confidence would bolster their strength to face the challenges of finding a job and exploring educational opportunities. As one interviewee said:

> We need a step up so we can show the rest of the world we can do it.

Services that truly empower and enable women avoid locking women into the client role. In the following section, we review key elements of gender and culturally responsive service delivery which we identified from a web scan of services.

3 Gender and culturally responsive approaches

The International Labour Organization and UNIFEM (2008, p. viii) distinguish between gender aware, gender sensitive and gender responsive services.

- Gender aware services acknowledge 'that women and men perform different roles in society and therefore have different needs which must be recognized'.

- Gender sensitive services 'are aware of the different needs, roles, responsibilities of women and men'. [This includes] 'understanding that these differences can result in difference for women and men in access and control over resources; level of participation in and benefit from resources and development'.

- Gender responsive services are 'aware of gender, disparities and their causes, and take action to address and overcome gender-based inequalities'.

Gender sensitive or responsive services go beyond awareness to take action to do things differently. In a similar way, culturally responsive services actively challenge racialisation and 'race thinking' (Gupta et al. 2007). Woolfe (2010, p. 19) explains that racialisation refers to

> the systematic practices that differentiate and position groups of people (and the individuals ascribed to these groups) unequally (hierarchically) in relation to one another, on the basis of physical and/or social characteristics.

This brief scan identifies common elements in gender and socioculturally responsive approaches to delivering services to women who experience multiple forms of social exclusion. A variety of search terms were used, including: gender sensitive programs, gender responsive programs, employment and learning services, migrant and refugee employment services, assisting women to return to work, work and learning programs for disadvantaged women, work and learning programs for public housing tenants, employment services for people living in public housing. The geographical focus was primarily Australia, with consideration of some international examples.

We identified the following common elements of gender and socioculturally responsive services:

A community base and understanding:

This means more than just being located in a community. As Darcy & Gwyther (2010) observe, outreach is important to understand the issues that affect the target group and the resources and services that already exist. Importantly, they caution that services that are holistic and 'joined up' are not sufficient. Indeed they stress that place-based services

> … must consider issues such as discrimination, stigma, infrastructure and resources which are also the factors of place based disadvantage but which require a response beyond the confines of place (p.16).

Flexibility

A flexible approach considers the aspirations and particular circumstances of the service user, offering greater choice (and decision making power) to the individual. For women who have multiple responsibilities, a flexible approach is key to making services accessible. Many programs that self-describe as gender responsive and/or culturally responsive utilise case management or personalised support in working with service users. Personalised support usually involves 'client-centred planning' in which the worker and the service user develop agreed aims and strategies to gain employment or learning opportunities (Migrant Information Centre 2009, p. 2). However, as Grealy and colleagues (2008, p. 19) point out, it is important to be 'conscious of the power within the client–practitioners relationship'.

Integrated approaches

Integrated learning describes an approach to adult education associated with consciousness building, transitions in the life course and a melding of strategic and practical learning needs. Women who have been historically excluded from education can benefit from this approach which addresses multiple learning imperatives. An example is the winner of the United Nation's 2011 Public Service Award for gender-responsive service delivery, a Korean program which seeks to empower young women in the sex industry in Seoul through employment and education pathways, together with late night counselling services (Huh 2011).

> Complex and fragmented work and learning services compound the difficulties experienced of women who are already disadvantaged. By linking training programs with direct work experience and placements, trainees can be given a stronger chance of gaining employment. Paid work experience is an important element in opening up opportunities, offering some vital financial security for women while they complete training. Child care is vital for mothers, yet few programs offer such a service.

These observations are also relevant to Australia.

Women's participation and empowerment

 Programs which provide women-only spaces include BSL's Stepping Stones program, Fitted for Work's Transition to Work (TTW), WIRE Job Club, Ishar's Wonder Woman Going Back to 'P' Work, Better Pathways' Women4Work (Victoria Department of Justice, Corrections Victoria & Melbourne Citymission 2006) and Project Respect's The Pathways Program. These vary from providing individual support with work preparation skills to offering group training courses with an emphasis on mutual support. In some of the programs, group dynamics is highlighted as having the potential to boost participants' self-esteem and, confidence and reduce social isolation (Lewis 2008). Tara Fenwick (2009, p. 5) observes:

> Women need assistance and spaces in which to name their unique dilemmas, recognise evidence of their progress, and create meaningful projects.

For this reason, women-only groups may create more conducive learning environments for women (Bloom 1999).

Life skills and transition support

Resourcing transitions: Assisting women to make transitions into work or formal learning often involves a focus on life skills development. For example Fitted for Work's Transition to Work and Project Respect's The Pathways Program seek to address the learning needs of women as they move towards mainstream employment. Project Respect focused on:

- issues that confront women who are seeking to leave sex work including shame, stigma, power and violence in the sex industry, and financial issues
- healing, planning for the future, knowing your rights, recognising violence and building good relationships
- preparing to return to work or study by identifying career paths, and how to successfully access educational and employment pathways
- individualised programs, assisting women to pursue specific courses /interests/ employment (Lewis 2008, p. 5).

This approach recognises that women who experience multiple forms of disadvantage need more than job-orientated skills alone. Creating a safe learning environment is also essential when delivering training to women who have experienced hardship. Horsman (2009) describes the

impact of violence as shaping many students' capacity to participate in learning. She suggests that the learning environment 'itself can also be space that supports the whole self and develops safety ... [and] helps each student to have a sense of self-worth' (p. 16). In this way, supported, safe and engaging learning can be a transformative journey.

Mentoring

Mentoring is a way of addressing social isolation and building the service user's social, educational and employment pathways (Mestan 2008). It is also an important means of raising broader awareness about inequality (Bodsworth & Lobo de Queiroz 2012 forthcoming). Bodsworth and Lobo de Queiroz observe that

> The mentor and mentee relationships developed through Stepping Stones between professional business women and refugee and migrant women offer insight into mainstream perceptions of refugee and migrant women and how points of genuine connection can foster change and understanding for both groups.

The mentor–mentee relationship can be a vital ongoing support that broadens the person's social network and facilitates community building. Women living in public housing are well-positioned to benefit from mentoring that combines mutual support and care with the opportunity to provide and gain valuable cultural and social resources and knowledge.

Alternative forms of paid work

Social enterprises and the encouragement of micro enterprises are often understood as offering women and 'excluded' job seekers an alternative to main stream employment or a stepping stone to it. Often these enterprises provide valuable on-the-job training and work experience for people who have not had straightforward access to work opportunities. Yet pressure from funding bodies to achieve successful job placements may result in 'creaming', so there is a danger that the most disadvantaged in the labour market are overlooked.

For many women the opportunity of running their own business is attractive, given the continuing lack of employee-centred flexibility within mainstream work. Micro enterprises are described as an empowering, self-determining and challenging pathway to becoming "one's own boss" for many women. Yet there are risks associated with micro businesses. They may not provide adequate sustainable income; there are considerable costs associated with establishing and running a business; and there is a relatively high failure rate of small businesses in Australia.

Child care

The lack of affordable, accessible child care is a major barrier for women who want paid employment. In learning and work programs, there is growing recognition that to provide an equitable service for men and women, child care facilities must be integrated into program delivery. Yet in our scan of gender and culturally responsive programs only one service (Ishar's Wonder Woman Going Back to 'P' Work) offered child care. This may be related to funding constraints and reflects the general shortage of affordable child care.

Our scan identified some key elements of gender and culturally responsive services. Unfortunately, a common feature is that such services are too often provided on a short-term basis, as pilots or demonstration projects. What is needed is to learn from these projects to implement gender and culturally responsive approaches within mainstream services. Importantly, the challenges that confront women are not only related to services. Broader social, cultural and policy changes are required to support gender equality and the empowerment of women. The second element of this gender and culturally responsive toolkit, *Sorting it out*, provides some practical guidance for service providers about how to make it happen!

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