

A PAPER ON:

THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND INDUSTRIAL ISSUES SPECIFIC TO MIGRANT WORKERS OVER 45 YEARS OF AGE SEEKING EMPLOYMENT, OR ESTABLISHING A BUSINESS, FOLLOWING UNEMPLOYMENT (A QUANTITATIVE APPROACH)

PURPOSE

To provide you with some points of view about the social, economic and industrial issues affecting migrant workers over 45 years of age seeking employment, or establishing a business following a period of unemployment in Australia or those newly arrived refugees in Australia seeking work after a long time of unemployment.

As a migrant I have been involved working with migrants and refugees of that age who were looking for work or inquiring how to start a business after years of unemployment. I have worked in this field for many years, and I therefore believe I have practical experience which I want to share with your committee.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

When migrants and refugees over 45 years of age arrive in Australia, seeking new horizons in their lives, they have to face completely new experiences in seeking employment and adapting themselves to this new society.

Migrant business people, migrant professionals and refugees arrive in their thousands each year hoping to start a new and decent life. Each of these groups has to meet different requirements in fulfilling their expectations. Migrants come from different racial, social, economic and linguistic backgrounds, so they have diverse needs and aspirations to fulfil in Australia.

Accessing employment and business opportunities in Australia for those migrants and refugees over 45 years of age is a serious challenge they have to deal with. Many migrants, especially if they are refugees at this stage of their lives, will go through incredible difficulties until some of them find a job, while others finish in the queues of social security.

Refugees and those who arrive in Australia through the Family Reunion Program at a mature age are the most disadvantaged, because they have to start to learn English and new trade skills to have access in the labour market and upgrade their general working skills. While learning how to find a job, the time flies and they are in their 50s, making it even more difficult to find a job.

SOCIAL ISSUES

Migrants and refugees have to face many barriers which at different levels affect the effectiveness of their strategies to find a job or start a new business. Among these barriers faced by these newcomers are the following:

- 1 - English language - This is a major problem with significant implications for migrants' written and oral communication, particularly when migrants and refugees come from countries whose native language shares nothing in common with the English language such as Asian, African or Eastern European languages. A strong accent is another problem which in many cases prevents migrant taking jobs.
- 2- Cultural Barriers - Being a mature age migrant or refugee, cultural barriers pose a very serious threat to the possibility of finding work. Different religious beliefs, different ways of thinking and behaving and having different attitudes make their lives, at times, very traumatic. **The job selection procedures for finding a job** and the red tape involved in starting a new business in this society are new experiences for these mature age newcomers. **Many will have difficulty familiarising** themselves with the legal, accounting and industrial rules and regulations.
- 3 - Refugees with Torture and Trauma Backgrounds - Those refugees who come from war-ravaged countries have special needs which require the assistance of specialised health organisations and professionals. Many

refugees are highly skilled professionals and technicians, but the lasting nature of their traumas haunts their new lives in Australia, compounding the normal difficulties of settlement in a different society.

- 4 - Overseas Skills and Qualifications Recognition - This process, in many cases, takes years before there is proper assessment or recognition. This is another serious problem migrants and refugees face in Australia. For many mature age newcomers this barrier means the end of their dreams to work in Australia as professionals or qualified technicians. Even when there is a shortage of qualified professionals already in Australia, eg. medical doctors, the possession of overseas qualifications will not usually assist the non-English speaking background migrant who has to prove themselves all over again. There is also a bias against overseas-qualified migrants in many professional bodies.
- 5 - Lack of Australian work experience - Australian employers usually look for new staff with some work experience in this society. In this way, new arrivals, even though they may have had relevant experience overseas, will be disadvantaged in this important step to find a job. Not having work experience means that these new, mature aged workers will miss out on potential work and training opportunities.
- 6 - Racism - This is another major barrier faced by migrants in finding a job or starting a new business. In many cases racism deprives migrants of training and education opportunities. Discrimination in accessing employment certainly exists on the basis of ethnicity, cultural customs and unrealistic English language requirements.
- 7- Learning new procedures to establish a new business - Taking into account all the barriers mentioned above, mature aged migrants face significant difficulties in learning new procedures to establish a new business. The NEIS program is very useful in helping migrants to establish a business. However, the issues mentioned previously are always potential problems, particularly the language problem, and difficulties associated with marketing procedures to find the right sort of business to establish. Similarly, issues related to taxation and accountability pose particular problems for people from migrant backgrounds.

Many unemployed mature aged migrants do not use the services available to improve their job hunting opportunities. Reasons for this include lack of information, poor grasp of English and lack of confidence, they are not aware of vacancy advertising strategies used in this country and how to obtain relevant information. Even in the case when they find a job, language and cultural barriers can restrict their access to training opportunities, limit the awareness of rights and awards and reduce the understanding of directions from supervisors.

The social issues pointed out here are only one side of the problem, because older workers in general have felt the consequences of pervasive discrimination in the labour market. According to my experience, when I used to work supporting older migrants in finding a job, I usually had to deal with employers who refused to take them because of their age without taking into consideration their rich experience in different fields of work.

This situation creates a lot of trauma and frustration among these older unemployed workers and their families. I have found that many mature aged migrant workers are keen to share their experience and skills in the work place. Most employers are not aware of the positive attitudes of older workers, and they prefer young staff in the belief that they learn more quickly in the workplace. In many cases, employers are wrong.

ECONOMIC ISSUES

Recently arrived migrants with university degrees go through long periods of integrating themselves in Australia. In many cases they have to wait years before their qualifications are recognised, if they are recognised at all. They then have to start the protracted process of seeking employment. Many of these people come to Australia from the middle class in their own countries and some bring capital to invest here, but they are not immune from the hardships of starting a new business in Australia.

In many cases these mature aged newcomers have to study English to improve their ability to communicate effectively orally and in writing. Studying English or any other language at this stage of life is very hard. During this period, their financial situation plays a major role in any future planning. Most middle aged professional migrants and business people fund themselves for their daily expenditures. Because of the lengthy delays experienced in accessing other sources of income, these newcomers reduce their household budgets by deleting leisure and social activities leading to increased difficulty for all family members in integrating into Australian society. Depression and frustration can result as well as a sense of alienation from the wider community.

It is even more difficult for refugees to fund their own skills development programs including the costs of transport, materials, books and so on. It almost always take a lengthy period for these migrants to find any sort of work and the work they find is most likely to be casual and insecure. They tend to be concentrated in industries, occupations and geographical areas most affected by economic recession such as factory laborers, mining, cattle and agricultural industries or temporary jobs such as picking fruit. These job seekers are less mobile in occupation and industry, and geographically, than other workers and their skills tend to be out of date. Added to these disadvantages there is employer bias against older workers: they may be considered less productive than younger workers, because of reduced capacity and perceived inadaptability. Employers tend to be reluctant to invest in training older workers, because their working life is relatively limited compared with younger workers.

In the case of those who come as refugees, they usually arrive in Australia after long periods of staying in refugees camps, or being political prisoners or victims of torture and trauma. For these new Australians it is more difficult to start a new life in Australia. Usually they have no skills, they cannot speak or write in English and they are starting to live in a new society with different values and culture. Most of these people have different sorts of traumas and their self-esteem is very low. Most of this people will spend a few years before they can familiarise to this society, and during this time most of them will live with financial support from the government welfare system.

The economic hardships of these mature aged immigrants are reinforced by myths spread about them, such as:

- * Older workers are less productive than younger workers.
- * Older workers are absent more often due to illness associated with age. They generally are less healthy than younger workers.
- * Older workers don't contribute. They are just "putting in time" until retirement.
- * With aging comes a natural decline in physical strength, stamina, judgment, and ability to perform.
- * Older workers cost more to employ because their salaries and benefit costs (predominantly health insurance) are higher.
- * Older workers are rigid and inflexible. They don't learn new technologies or readily accept new methods.

INDUSTRIAL ISSUES

As I said previously, many mature aged migrant workers have to spend a long time applying for jobs or seeking to start a business in Australia. During this period they lose many of their skills or their skills may become irrelevant.

With technological developments well advanced in industry, trade and service fields, newcomers - especially refugees - are disadvantaged.' Industrial issues of particular challenge to middle aged migrants, especially those of refugee background, include: new developments in computer technology and continuous improvements in other industries, and new legislative developments in many occupational fields. Industrial relations issues are frequently modified and, in any case, will be different from those of their countries of origin. Adapting to these difference is a serious challenge for older aged migrants.

The productivity of older workers compared with others is related to their physical and mental ability, experience and training, attendance records, accident records, and adaptability to change. Technological changes can also affect their productivity. These disadvantages are compounded by current Government reforms, as privatised employment agencies (as opposed to the CES) will target the most profitable unemployed to provide them with assistance. Middle aged, migrant workers are not seen as profitable customers for these businesses for all the reasons outlined above which make finding employment for them more problematic than for younger, Anglo background workers. The Government needs to re-assess their policies to make them more humane and more likely to be successful for the disadvantaged in our society.

Dionisio Camacho
P O Box 467
Mt Gravatt QLD 4122

THE SECRETARY
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND
WORK PLACE RELATIONS.

SUITE R1 116, PARLIAMENT HOUSE
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/madam,

I am happy to contribute with this modest report on you enquire.

Yours sincerely

Dionisio Camacho

P 0 Box 467
Mt Gravatt QLD 4122

19/04/1999